“The People, Yes – Carl Sandburg”

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Bruce Southworth,  
Senior Minister, at The Community Church of New York  
Unitarian Universalist, on Sunday, October 14, 2012

READINGS

In his volume THE PEOPLE, YES, Carl Sandburg meditates upon human nature, and sometimes asks questions like Socrates, here reflecting his Social Democrat convictions:

In the night and the mist  
the voices meet  
as the clash of steel on steel  
Over the rights of possession and control and the points:  
what is mine? what is yours?  
and who says so?  

(37, p. 481)

The heart is always a pervasive theme, as when he observes:

Here is a thing my heart wishes the world had more of:  
I heard it in the air of one night when I listened  
To a mother singing softly to a child restless and angry in the darkness.

(COMPLETE POEMS, p. 62)

The final reading comes from the preface to Sandburg’s THE COMPLETE POEMS.

At the age of six, as my fingers first found how to shape the alphabet, I decided to become a person of letters. At the age of ten I had scrawled letters on slates, on paper, on boxes and walls and I formed an ambition to become a sign-painter. At twenty I was an American soldier in Puerto Rico writing letters printed on the home town paper. At twenty-one I went to West Point, being a classmate of Douglas MacArthur and Ulysses S. Grant III - for two weeks - returning home after passing in spelling, geography, history, failing in arithmetic and grammar. At twenty-three I edited a college paper and wrote many a paragraph that after a lapse of fifty years still seems funny, the same applying to the college yearbook I edited the following year. Across several years I wrote many odd pieces - two slim books - not worth later reprint. In a six-year period came four books of poetry having a variety of faults, no other person more keenly aware of their accomplishments and shortcomings than myself. In the two books for children, in this period, are a few cornland tales that go on traveling, one about “The Two

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Skyscrapers Who Decided to Have a Child." At fifty I had published a two-volume biography and THE AMERICAN SONGBAG, and there was puzzlement as to whether I was a poet, a biographer, a wandering troubadour with a guitar, a midwest Hans Christian Andersen, or a historian of current events whose newspaper reporting was gathered into a book THE CHICAGO RACE RIOTS. At fifty-one wrote America's first biography of a photographer. At sixty-one came a four-volume biography, bringing doctoral degrees at Harvard, Yale, New York University, Wesleyan, Lafayette, Lincoln Memorial, Syracuse, Rollins, Dartmouth - Augustana and Uppsala at Stockholm. I am still studying verbs and the mystery of how they connect with nouns. I am more suspicious of adjectives than at any other time in all my born days. I have forgotten the meaning of twenty or thirty of my poems written thirty or forty years ago. I still favor several simple poems published long ago which continue to have an appeal for simple people. I have written by different methods and in a wide miscellany of moods and have seldom been afraid to travel in lands and seas where I met fresh scenes and new songs. All my life I have been trying to learn to read, to see and hear, and to write. At sixty-five I began my first novel, and the five years lacking a month I took to finish it, I was still traveling, still a seeker. I should like to think that as I go on writing there will be sentences truly alive, with verbs quivering, with nouns giving color and echoes. It could be, in the grace of God, I shall live to be eighty-nine, as did Hokusai, and speaking my farewell to earthly scenes, I might paraphrase: "If God had let me live five years longer I should have been a writer." (xxx-xxxi)

Carl Sandburg died at age 89… “still traveling, still a seeker.”

"The People, Yes – Carl Sandburg"
(A review of the Life and Work of Carl Sandburg)

Once upon a time, years ago, I had the opportunity to visit the home of Carl Sandburg in Flat Rock, North Carolina in the Blue Ridge Mountains. I was with a group of Unitarian Universalist ministers at a nearby conference center, and we took delight in the tour through the house, which is maintained just as it was at the time of Sandburg’s death in 1967.

Our guide gave us the "poetry tour", reciting verse as well as describing the house and Sandburg’s life. We learned that Sandburg enjoyed warm beer although we could not discover the brand. Also, the home of Lincoln’s biographer had once been a confederate leader’s home. I noticed on a bookshelf on the third floor that there was an old Sunday New York Times wrapped in brown paper, unopened from delivery day. Scrawled in Sandburg’s hand were these words: "NY (Sunday) Times, Aug 7 1949. Nobody opens Everybody sees, nobody cares, a newspaper not demonstrably stupid, yet incorrigibly stodgy."
Through a corridor beside a stairwell, we came upon a room with huge picture windows, and my expectations were not disappointed as the guide began reciting,

I was foolish about windows.
The house was an old one and the windows were small.
I asked a carpenter to come and open the walls and put in bigger windows.
“The bigger the window the more it costs,” he said.
“The bigger the cheaper,” I said.
So he tore off siding and plaster and laths And put in a big window and bigger windows.
I was hungry for windows...
One neighbor said, “If you keep on you’ll be able to see everything there is.”
I answered, "That'll be all right, that'll be classy enough for me!"

("Foolish About Windows")

That was Sandburg and his life. He embraced life fully, expansively, hungrily. He wrestled with it in its ordinary detail, and his conclusion is a liberating devotion to Life itself in all its fullness, complexity and mystery.

I have long been struck by Sandburg’s definition of poetry as the "achievement of the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits." I have long felt that this is the essence of religious living: To bring together natural beauty (the hyacinth) and human necessity (the biscuit/food.) Religious living engages the whole person in creating a life that satisfies the hunger of the spirit (the flowers for the soul) and the hunger of the stomach (the flour for bread.)

For Sandburg, the commonplace shows just how charged with meaning Life is, if we see widely enough and hungrily. So this morning, I share with you some of the discoveries of this hard-headed but tender-hearted soul.

Sandburg knew about our difficulties and asks:

What is there for us two
to split fifty-fifty
to go halvers on?
    A Bible, a deck of cards?
a farm, a frying pan?
a porch, front steps to sit on?
How can we be pals
    when you speak English

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and I speak English
and you never understand me
and I never understand you?
("Fifty-Fifty")

Deep in the soul, where has he been and where does he emerge?

If I should pass the tomb of Jonah
I would stop there and sit for a while;
Because I was swallowed one time deep in the dark
And came out alive after all.
("Losers")

Sandburg wrestles with life just as Jacob wrestled with his angel, and because of his wrestling, also discovers blessings. His themes are the human ones of wonder, mystery, hope and despair, love and loneliness and ultimately a profound commitment to humanity and to Life itself in its beauty and in its commonplace requirements.

The reading this morning gave a brief summary of Carl Sandburg's accomplishments, and I want to expand on this a little. Born in 1878 in Galesburg, Illinois to Swedish immigrant parents, he dropped out of school in eighth grade taking upon himself a series of jobs as a newsboy, porter, bootblack, water boy for horses, milkman, an ice cutter and janitor. At the age of 19 in 1897, he headed west as a hobo on the rails and got as far as Pike's Peak before turning back. He did odd jobs, waited on tables and simply panhandled on this trip west and back. In 1898, he joined the army to help fight the Spanish American War, but only got as far as Puerto Rico and saw no action.

He returned to Galesburg where he enrolled in Lombard College, which was founded by the Universalists. He tells of reading Universalist tracts and pamphlets in the attic of the chapel where he had a job as the school's bell-ringer. Although he never formally joined a Unitarian or Universalist congregation, he was a sympathetic fellow traveler, and his family asked a colleague of mine to conduct his funeral.

He also left a bequest to the nearby Asheville, North Carolina UU church, which enabled them to build an addition to their building.

At Lombard, he took the courses that interested him and ignored graduation requirements. He left short of earning a degree and returned to riding the rails and - then back to Galesburg for a few years where he authored a small pamphlet with a press run of only fifty copies.

He worked at journalism with some success for a few years. He moved to Chicago and on to Milwaukee where he helped organize the Social Democratic party and even served as secretary to the Mayor when the Social Democrat candidate won
the election. At that time, he was working as a journalist and editor for a number of socialist newspapers.

In 1908, he met and married his wife Paula, a schoolteacher, a convert to socialism and a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Chicago. When they married, they agreed that if either of them ever felt it was not working, they would simply dissolve the marriage. They enjoyed each other's company for nearly 60 years of marriage that included three daughters and later herds of champion goats, which Paula raised. (I met some of that line of goats during my visit to their home.)

These words from "Caboose Thoughts" capture his joy, and I find these lines among the most exuberant of all love poems!

I knew a hotel girl in Des Moines.
She had eyes; I saw her and said to myself
The sun rises and the sun sets in her eyes.
I was her steady and her heart went pit-a-pat.
We took away the money for a prize waltz at a Brotherhood dance.
She had eyes; she was safe as the bridge over the Mississippi at Burlington
    I married her.

They moved on to Chicago where he pursued journalism and his poetry with his first volume published in 1916. The title poem "Chicago" with its "Hog Butcher of the World" invocation is typical of his concrete, descriptive, evocative imagery.

Wonderful short, lyric poems also in that first volume included:

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over the harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

("Fog")

The brutality of war is a constant theme in Sandburg's life, and in 1914 with World War I, he wrote:

Under the sun
Are sixteen million men,
Chosen for shining teeth,
Sharp eyes, hard legs,
And a running of young warm blood in their wrists.
And a red juice runs on the green grass
and a red juice soaks the dark soil.
And the sixteen million are killing ... killing and killing.
("Killers")

He reported on the race riots in Chicago, and the collected articles became a book in 1919. He had a fervent concern for Justice and at one point he declared,

It is something to face the sun and know you are free...
To go one day of your life among all men with clean hands.
("Clean Hands")

A life of character and basic goodness, of clean hands and simple virtues, was part of Carl Sandburg's vision.

In the 1920, he published his first collection of folk songs, which helped inspire interest in American folk music.

The third of his four-volume biography of Lincoln – nearly 2 million words – received the Pulitzer Prize in 1939.

His collected poems received a Pulitzer Prize in 1951, and he addressed a joint session of Congress on the 150th anniversary of Lincoln’s birth. He continued his writing and even assisted with the screenplay for “The Greatest Story Ever Told.”

Sandburg is a moralist, and there are simple short poems like:

The single clenched fist lifted and ready
Or the open asking hand held out and
waiting
Choose:
For we meet by one or the other!
("Choose")

Because he is so honest and because he has a sense of humor, it is easy to accept his interspersed advice-giving. For example, in his THE PEOPLE, YES, he includes this vignette:

"The number 42 will win this raffle, that's my number." And when he won they asked him whether he guessed the number or had a system. He said he had a system, "I took up the old family album and there on page 7 was my grandfather and my grandmother both on page 7. I said to myself this is easy for 7 times 7 is the number that will win and 7 times 7 is 42." (Complete Poems, 493)
Sandburg is a believer in Life and its richness and he is a believer in humanity; he believes in reason. He writes,

I have seen  
The old gods go  
And the new gods come.

Day by day  
And year by year  
The idols fall  
And the idols rise.

Today  

I worship the hammer.  
(1910) (The Hammer)

His faith in humanity and Life is forthright when he declares,

I am credulous about the destiny of man  
and I believe more than I can ever prove.

His faith in the People is indomitable, and he writes in THE PEOPLE, YES,

The people will live on.  
The learning and blundering people will live on.  
They will be tricked and sold and again sold  
And go back to the nourishing earth for rootholds,  
The people so peculiar in renewal and comeback,  
You can’t laugh off their capacity to take it.  
(107, p. 615)

He concludes this epic saying,

Time is a great teacher…  
In the darkness with a great bundle of grief  
the people march.  
In the night, and overhead a shovel of  
stars for keeps, the people march:  
"Where to? what next?"

This is the same work that smiles on human nature with love and acceptance of our peculiarities. He writes about the man who asserts, "I never made a mistake in grammar but once in my life and as soon as I done it I seen it." (p. 538)
In looking at Carl Sandburg's poetry, his wrestling with life and trying to help us bring some order out of chaos, the concerns for the people, for justice, for simple virtues, and for human dignity amidst human silliness and pain are clear. There is in his poetry a brooding optimism and a sense of the struggle between life and death that emerges in a religious view at home with our mortality.

He advises us:

Time says hush.
   By the gong of time you live.
   Listen and you hear time saying you were silent
   long before you came to life and you will again be silent long after you leave it,
   why not be a little silent now?
   Hush yourself, noisy little man.

Time hushes all.
   The gong of time rang for you to come out of a hush and you were born.
   The gong of time will ring for you to go back to the same hush you came from.
   Winners and losers, the weak and the strong, those who say little and try to say it well, and those who babble and prattle their lives away, Time hushes all.

("The Gong of Time")

Even so, he believes. He believes:

It's going to come out all right - do you know?
The sun, the birds, the grass, they know.
They get along - and we'll get along.  ("Caboose Thoughts")

His early socialist ideals remain with him as he attributes many of our contemporary problems to what he calls "fat-dripping prosperity" with vast differences between the haves and the have-nots.

His vision is of the beloved community. His vision is grand and deep. His conviction about human ability remains. He writes toward the end of his life: "I have spent as strenuous life as any man surviving three wars and two major depressions, but never, not for a moment, did I lose faith in America's future. Time and time again, I saw the faces of her men and women torn and shaken in turmoil, chaos and storm. In each
major crisis, I have seen despair on the faces of some of the foremost strugglers, but their ideas always won. Their visions always came through."

And that is certainly a part of our religious task - to keep alive the visions of the humanly possible with a conviction about human worth and dignity and our capacity to grow. He encourages us saying:

Be water birds, be air birds  
Be these purple tumblers you are. ("Purple Martins")

We are called to be ourselves, and in coming to grips with ourselves, we discover our human contradictions, but also our strengths. It is in the living itself that we must glory.

We too can be in dark places and come out alive after all just like Jonah.

Hyacinths and Biscuits!: the religious life is about pulling the disparate elements of life together, synthesizing what enters into our lives and weaving a pattern that goes beyond survival ~ biscuits, bread, food ~ to nurture the human spirit - hyacinths, flowers, beauty.

Hyacinths and biscuits ~ synthesizing the two shapes a life of enduring value.

In closing, I want to end with three brief excerpts about the ordinary, commonplace world about us, which is charged with beauty and meaning if we see and hear. They linger with me as does so much of Carl Sandburg's work. His wisdom helps me master some of the chaos and strengthens me in my wrestling.

In "Autumn Movement", he writes:

I cried over beautiful things knowing no beautiful thing lasts.

The field of cornflower yellow is a scarf at the neck of the copper sun-burned woman, the mother of the year, the taker of seeds.

The northwest wind comes and the yellow is torn full of new holes, new beautiful things come in the first spit of snow on the northwest wind, and the old things go, not one lasts.

Then in a poem titled "For an Old Woman" dedicated to his mother, he recalls our human magnificence, which may grace the world:

Looking on the open  
Glow of a full-golden moon  
In the drowsy, almost noiseless
Dream-watch peace of midnight
In a prairie town, she
Touched me with her lips and hands
and babbled softly she would
Listen till the sound of my footsteps
Was gone.

I kissed my hand to the dim shape
Standing in the shadows under the porch
Looking good-by to her boy
And I keep a picture
Of one shaft of moonlight
Trembling near her face
Telling of wishes farther than love or death,
The infinite love of an old woman
Keeping a hope for her boy.

Did you see the full moon a couple of weeks ago – so round and luminescent peeking through clouds in the cool sky? These words of Sandburg bless me still:

Your whitelight flashes the frost tonight
Moon of the purple and silent west.
Remember me one of your lovers of dreams.
(“Whitelight”)

MEDITATION AND PRAYER

OUR PRAYER OF THANKS - Carl Sandburg

For the gladness here where the sun is shining at evening on the weeds at the river,
Our prayer of thanks.

For the laughter of children who tumble barefooted and bareheaded in the summer grass,
Our prayer of thanks.

For the sunset and the stars, the women and the ... arms that hold us,
Our prayer of thanks.

God,
If you are deaf and blind, if this is all lost to you,
God, if the dead in their coffins amid the silver handles on the edge of town, or the reckless dead of war days thrown unknown in pits, if
these dead are forever deaf and blind and lost,
Our prayer of thanks.

God,
The game is all your way, the secrets and the signals and the system; and
so for the break of the game and the first play and the last.
Our prayer of thanks.