Looking to lilacs and Walt Whitman to guide us through the pandemic |

By Dan Rodricks. May 7, 2020

The government's medical scientists say loss of smell is a symptom of the coronavirus, which by now has caused more than 73,000 deaths across the country. So this week I found comfort and reassurance in lilacs.

I sensed them even before I turned the corner and noticed their blossoms. Lilacs have a strong, familiar perfume that always reminds me of May, Mother's Day and long-gone grandmothers in thick heels and polka dot dresses, corsaged for church.

I was surprised by the fullness of the lilac bush in my yard; it seemed to have doubled in size since last spring. The color of the flowers, something like lavender, seemed more robust than I remembered.

The pandemic came upon us during the cold gray of late February and early March. That's when the dying started. Now it's spring, full of color and fragrance, fresh beauty and bird song, and the dying continues. It's a terrible thing to think about — and, in time, maybe we won't think about it — but I have a feeling we will always associate the virus and the misery it brought with the arrival of spring.

Walt Whitman offered that reflection in his elegy to Abraham Lincoln.

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,

And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,

I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,

Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,

And thought of him I love.

The poet told audiences that he heard the news of Lincoln's assassination when lilacs were in bloom in April 1865, just days after the end of the Civil War. The sight and aroma of the flowers always reminded Whitman of the tragedy.

I was drawn to his poem on the death of Lincoln because of lilacs, and because I have been thinking about deaths across the land these last few weeks, trying to grasp the scope of the misery it has caused my fellow Americans. And that leads me to thoughts about the course of the nation over the last few years, the way we were before the virus arrived — the stark political polarization, the permanence of income inequality, increasing rates of suicide, an opioid epidemic. Have we lost our way? What happened to the better country that was promised us?

"In existential crises, we look for historical grounding, and to markers in time for guidance," writes David W. Blight, historian and biographer of Frederick Douglass. "We may need state-of-the-art new vaccines, but we also need old wisdom. And in the quiet, if unbearable, tension caused by the realization that our society is structurally broken, we need the ancient voices."

I went to Whitman for some wisdom about a nation in trauma. Though profoundly sad and frightening, I make myself think about the pain and death the virus has caused others. I force myself to read news accounts of families that experienced deaths from the virus. I take moments for mourning. I consider it a civic duty.

This week, I think about Mother's Day, and how some will mourn mothers and grandmothers, mothers of cousins and neighbors, lost to the virus, their funerals unattended. Others will just wave at their mothers from a distance, and be thankful for that.

Some speak of the loss of life in statistics, as a factor in a calculation, a risk assessment. Some want to rush us along, even leap over mourning. "We have to get our country open again," the president insists. Words of empathy and sympathy elude him. Who speaks for the nation in mourning? Who speaks like the wise old poet?

In "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Whitman mourned a president, but he also seemed to be mourning a nation with hundreds of thousands dead from the war.

O powerful western fallen star!

The poet had been an Army nurse, had worked among the wounded and dying in Virginia and Washington during the Civil War. In mourning Lincoln, he mourned soldiers but more so those they left behind.

The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,

And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,

And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.

There are moments in the poem when Whitman does what Whitman does in much of his verse: He sings the praises of the big country, as if soaring over America, from "my own Manhattan with spires" to "the far-spreading prairies cover'd with grass and corn," from "throbbing streets" to "fields all busy with labor."

And then, back on the ground, he hears the song of a thrush, he smells lilacs, he sees a star in the western sky. Whitman attains "the sacred knowledge of death," what a scholar I turned to for help in my understanding of the poem called complete comprehension of death's place in the universal order.

That makes the poem sound more conclusive and consoling than perhaps Whitman intended. But read it and decide for yourself. You might see it as I did — a spiritual guide through the present crisis. No one should rush us through mourning. We are each on a journey, as Whitman was, from inconsolable sorrow — "O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul" — to some kind of solace.

Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves,

I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring.