

**Summoning the Divine Memorial Day Meditation (May 31, 2021)  
Walt Whitman, *Vigil Strange I Kept One Night***

Here is an extraordinary poem by Walt Whitman. Notice that the poem is a Vigil; that is significant since a Vigil is held on the eve of a Holy event. For Whitman, this is not a poem of mourning even though the subject is death. Whitman is honoring the devotion of Civil War soldiers on both sides who gave their lives. He is also remembering all who have died. The older soldier says to the dead boy: we will “surely” meet again. As the sun rises, the soldier completes the burial of his comrade. And, though the poem doesn’t tell us what happens next, we know that the speaker has miraculously been reassured and walks away at peace knowing that he will meet this risen boy again.

May we also decorate and remember the figurative or actual graves of all the loved ones we have lost. The tenor of the Whitman poem is one of hope and faith in an eternal life.



**Whitman, an accomplished American poet, was born on May 31, 1819; he died in 1892.**

Like his parents, Whitman followed the radical ideas of Quaker Elias Hicks., who considered Jesus to be the Son of God because of Jesus’ complete obedience to *the Inner Light*. Hicks advised his followers to “shake off an all traditional views that thou hast imbibed from external evidence, and turn thy mind to the *Light Within* as thy only true teacher. Wait patiently for its instruction and it will teach thee more than men or books can do.” Hicks’ insistence that “the fullness of the godhead dwelt in every blade of grass” contributed to Whitman’s title for his masterpiece: *Leaves of Grass*.

As Whitman matured, he insisted that every individual should freely pursue any religious conviction. Says Whitman, “man’s only duty on earth is to enjoy life to the fullest extent, guided only by the ‘Deity-planted’ intuitions of one’s own soul.” According to Whitman, the merging of fully-expressed Self and fully developed Soul was the path to transcendent divinity.

**Link to Garrison Keillor reading Whitman’s *Vigil Strange I Kept One Night* (1864)**  
<https://www.garrisonkeillor.com/radio/twa-the-writers-almanac-for-may-31-2021/>

1. Vigil strange I kept on the field one night,  
When you, my son and my comrade, dropt at my side that day,  
One look I but gave, which your dear eyes return'd,  
with a look I shall never forget;  
One touch of your hand to mine, O boy,  
reach'd up as you lay on the ground;  
Then onward I sped in the battle, the even-contested battle;  
Till late in the night reliev'd, to the place at last again I made my way;  
Found you in death so cold, dear comrade – found your body, son of responding kisses  
(never again on earth responding;)

2. Bared your Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet, there in the fragrant silent night – curious the scene – cool blew the moderate night wind;

Long there and then in vigil I stood, dimly around me the battle-field spreading;  
Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet, there in the fragrant silent night;  
But not a tear fell, nor even a long-drawn sigh – Long, long I gazed;  
Then on the earth partially reclining, sat by your side, leaning my chin in my hands;  
Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours with you, dearest comrade – Not a  
tear, not a word;

Vigil of silence, love and death – vigil for you, my son and my soldier,  
As onward silently stars aloft, eastward new ones upward stole;  
Vigil final for you, brave boy, (I could not save you, swift was your death,  
I faithfully loved you and cared for you living – I think we shall surely meet again;)  
Till at latest lingering of the night, indeed just as the dawn appear'd,

3. My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop'd well his form,  
Folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully over head, and carefully under feet;  
And there and then, and bathed by the rising sun, my son in his grave, in his rude-dug  
grave I deposited; Ending my vigil strange with that – vigil of night and battle-field  
dim;  
Vigil for boy of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding;)  
Vigil for comrade swiftly slain – vigil I never forget, how as day brighten'd,  
I rose from the chill ground, and folded my soldier well in his blanket,  
And buried him where he fell.

**Discussion.** I divided *Virgil Strange* into 3 sections to help your through thereading.. However. Whitman published the verse as one long poem with no breaks. Each line flows into the next as we move toward the burial act that completes the Vigil. The poem's speaker refers to the fallen solider as his "son," but that is about the young soldier's age.

In the first section of the poem, the two regard one another. Says the older soldier: "One look I but gave, which your dear eyes return'd, with a look I shall never forget; One touch of your hand to mine, O boy, reach'd up as you lay on the ground." The older soldier goes forth battle. When he returns, he finds his young comrade has died. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> section, we witness the older soldier speaking to the dead boy. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> section, the older soldier ceases speaking to his dead young comrade and begins speaking to us. As the Sun (Son) rises and the Vigil concludes, he buries the youth in the boy's blanket and then shares his insights with us.