Walt Whitman was gay. That was one of the first things I heard when I picked up *Leaves of Grass* and began my study of Whitman. Honestly, it was hard to get that out of my mind. While it wasn’t readily apparent in all of his works and there are some notable exceptions, like his work on “Children of Adam,” there were also some large contenders to back up the assertion that Whitman was gay, namely his Calamus poems. After I read Calamus through for the first time, I finally understood all of the talk about Whitman’s sexuality because there were definitely a few sections that seemed very homoerotic. However, upon further study and consideration, I began to change my mind. The more I read over Calamus the less I saw these poems as some big “coming out” for Whitman, and the more I saw in them a truer expression of non-sexualized love between men. While there might be homosexual overtones, I don’t think that was Whitman’s overarching intent. I would argue that in order to express the depth of same-sex love, Whitman uses images of intimacy (touching, caressing, holding hands, etc.) that signal deep affection in the man-woman relationship as a way to underscore that he doesn’t otherwise have a unique language for the depth of love homosocial “comrades” experience.

Love itself seems to be an elusive element to describe. Much like asking someone to describe the color orange or what salt tastes like, describing love isn’t something that can be done with a simple definition. How do you know when you’re in love? We’ve all heard the answer, “When you know you know.” Cliché right, or is
it? The more I’ve thought about that simple phrase, “When you know you know,” in regards to Calamus the more profound I’ve found it to be. Love is so above our own ability to describe that any attempt to give a simple definition or put a name on it would defeat the purpose, I think Whitman understood that. Instead of viewing Calamus through a homoerotic lens, as it often is, I want to view the poems as an attempt to describe love through some of the only means that we know how, mutual experience.

In attempting to discuss the work as a whole it’s important to start at the beginning and look at Whitman’s motivation for writing. Whitman closes the first poem in Calamus with, “I proceed, for all who are, or have been, young men,/ To tell the secret of my nights and days./ To celebrate the need of comrades” (Whitman 342). I believe this is a key statement through which we need to view not only the first poem but also the work as a whole. Whitman clearly explains his intent in writing the poems, and he doesn’t mention any kind of homoerotic love. While some might like to infer that the secret of his night and days is his homosexual feelings. Rather Whitman has come to recognize the sensitivity of the topic that he is about to approach and it’s not something that people talk about openly. This topic that Whitman is about to proceed with is not that of romantic lovers, but rather the need of comrades. His use of comrades here is key to understanding the whole text and I believe it was very deliberate. If Whitman had wanted to write about lovers he would have said that. He wasn’t shy in using the word, it’s mentioned three times in the second poem, “Scented Herbage of My Breast,” and at least a dozen more times
through the rest of the poems. Whitman deliberately said he would celebrate the need of comrades and not lovers because that was his overarching goal.

Understandably it can be a little difficult to make this shift in perspectives when looking at Calamus; the homoerotic mind-frame has been drilled into most readers before they ever open the book. “Whoever you are holding me now in hand” (344). New readers come across phrases like this and immediately envision two men holding hands and link it to all of the feelings associated with homosexual love. I don’t think this reading is fair for Whitman’s work. Readers who come with that homoerotic mind-frame are primed to pick up those phrases and see them as blatantly “gay.” I’d like to help you see how Whitman, who was indeed talking about manly attachment and the love and affection that two men can share, did not intend it to be openly homosexual or homoerotic.

The best way to change our perspective is to understand the meaning of some of the words Whitman uses and why. In English we have a fairly narrow understanding of the word love. When talking about the intimate feelings that people share, we use the word love. Whether that is the love of friends, love of family, love of significant others, or love of spouses, the word is the same. This lack of depth gives us a fairly narrow understanding of the different types of love that people can share. In Greek there are four different words to describe love that can help us when analyzing Whitman’s text, *agápe*, *éros*, *philia*, and *storge*. Each of the Greek words denotes a very specific element of a loving relationship. *Agápe* represents charity or brotherly love. It is the love that God has for men and that men should have for God. *Éros* is the classical romantic or erotic love that primarily
relates to sexual passion. Philia describes most often the love of friends; it denotes, regards, and is usually shared between equals. Lastly storge signifies the love that parents have for children. Reading Calamus with this Greek understanding of love in mind can help dispel the homoerotic stereotype that might otherwise permeate the text.

My guess is that most readers who come to Calamus and read through the poems immediately begin to see the relationships that Whitman is describing from an éros perspective. They see Whitman talking about “thrusting me beneath your clothing” (346) and immediately connect that to homoerotic éros love. By changing the kind of love we link Calamus to, we can more accurately get to Whitman’s underlying purpose in writing. Remember once again that he set out to celebrate the need of comrades, not lovers. Comrade comes from the French word camarade, which means friend. Viewing the poems from an éros perspective skews Whitman’s works to mean something that he might not have intended. If Whitman set out to talk about comrades, or friends, and the role they play in our lives, it would make much more sense to view the love that he speaks of through an agápe lens.

A natural question to ask is, “if he set out to describe the love that friends or comrades can share, why then does he couch it in such romantic and sexual ways?” As I mentioned before, trying to answer that question is like trying to describe the color orange or what salt tastes like. Describing a color is impossible without relating it to another color. The same could be said for describing the love of comrades. Whitman’s best chance at helping others understand how sweet and special this love can be is in relating it to something that everyone does understand,
romantic love or éros. And so we find Whitman talking about the love of comrades in words such as, “Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,/ With the comrade’s long-dwelling kiss, or the new/ husband’s kiss” (345). While it might initially seem strange to couch this love of comrades or agápe in romantic terms it does quickly help us to understand how special this is. God himself described the relationship between man and woman not only as good, but as “very good” and Whitman is trying saying the same about the love that comrades can share (Genesis 1:31).

It’s difficult for many to view this kind of love as anything other than homosexual. I think that the group who might have the greatest difficulty with this idea is those who haven’t experienced it themselves. Whitman understood this as well, and, once again, it’s why he tried to couch the love in romantic terms, to try and help others understand. Part of the lingering issue here is that relating comradeship to romantic love and naming it almost ruins it. The connection that men can share is something that works best when not spoken of openly. The love is there, it’s enjoyed, but it works best when not spoken of. In another attempt to help others understand this intimate love comrades share Whitman relates it to athletes.

I think most men who have participated in any kind of athletic sport would readily acknowledge the feelings of intimacy they have for other members of their team, “Resolved to sing no songs to-day but those of manly attachment,/ Projecting them along that substantial life,/ Bequeathing, hence, types of athletic love” (341). Not intimacy of the sexual kind, but the truer definition of that word which signifies closeness, togetherness, affinity, familiarity, and friendship. Yet you would find very few men who would openly discuss these feelings and the love they have for their
fellow comrades. Thought not openly discussed, the actions of many men in sports are evidence enough of the deep and abiding love that Whitman is speaking of in Calamus. Affection in sports doesn’t only take the form of a casual high five or chest bump, one of the most common forms of nonverbal behavior among male athletes is the butt slap. Though admittedly harmless and benign, the butt slap is definitely a more intimate form of touching in sports that can be seen as evidence of the love shared by these athletes. Butt slapping isn’t merely coincidental either— a 2001 study on Nonverbal Behavior found that “on a molecular level, butt slaps produce oxytocin, the hormone that generates feelings of trust. In other words, there’s a scientific connection between flicking ass and kicking ass” (Fleming). This intimate form of touching that athletes participating in actually builds trust. This physical touching then is key to the athletes developing this intimate relationship, the love of comrades.

Athletics aren’t the only venue where men develop these feelings of intimacy and share the love of comrades. I myself have felt and developed these feelings in a religious setting. As a young LDS boy, I was sent to serve a mission in South Africa where, for two years, I was surrounded almost entirely by other men. During my time there, I developed a deep appreciation, love, and, yes, even an intimate relationship with some of the men that I was serving with. This would be a good time to bring back the Greek words for love. The intimate relationship I developed with these men was strictly along the lines of agápe and not éros. This love wasn’t sexual in any way, but it was still extremely powerful and extremely moving for me. Christianity as a whole is heavily reliant upon the love of comrades or agápe love.
Christ sent the original Apostles out to preach two by two, and I don’t think that was a coincidence. I truly believe that the love and intimacy that two men can develop and share is something that can even transcend the romantic love a man can share with a woman. The true love of comrades is something the can transcend even this life. Jeffrey Holland, a modern apostle of the Latter-day Saint church, welcomed two new members into his quorum with this statement,

On behalf of my Brethren in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, may I be the first to welcome Elders Dieter Uchtdorf and David Bednar to their new callings and the sweet association that lies ahead of them. When the original Twelve were called in this dispensation, they were told that their appointment was “calculated to create for you an affection for each other, stronger than death.”

There’s a lot of power and depth in this statement from Holland. Coming from a man who for the past 25 years has been serving in a position where he interacts with other men on a very intimate level daily, I find it very instructive that he describes that relationship as a “sweet association” that will create “an affection… stronger than death.”

While serving a mission I also was able to learn about other cultures and how they express love. In America we have a fairly narrow-minded definition of where the line is in expressing love to those of the same sex. However in Africa those American stigmas aren’t present and men routinely show their love and affection to other men in ways that would clearly be seen as homosexual. For example among black South Africans it’s completely normal for men to hold hands. It’s not
uncommon to be in a black town and see two black men strolling down the street hand in hand. They don’t see it as homosexual in the slightest degree; the expression for them is a way to show intimacy and love towards another man in a non-sexualized way. The Afrikaans culture in South Africa takes things even a little further where “kissing between friends and relatives of both genders is also another way of greeting” (Buzz South Africa). In one particular city in which we served we had Afrikaans neighbors. When the father returned from work in the evenings the young son, who was probably around 10, would quickly run outside to his father’s truck and standing on his tippy toes to receive a big kiss on the lips from his father. Whitman in Calamus is trying to express what some of these other cultures have long understood, that physical touching and intimacy can be sweet and proper way to express love, and it doesn’t have to be homoerotic in the slightest degree.

In the end, detractors will always want to point at Calamus as a work that is strictly homoerotic, but, in doing, I believe they miss out on much of the deeper meaning. As Whitman outlines in the end of his first poem, he set out to celebrate the need of comrades. By using the only reference of love that most of us have available, romantic love, Whitman is able to show us just how sweet, powerful, and immensely intimate the love between two men, or comrades, can be.
Works Cited


