The New Criterion

Dispatch June 18, 2020 01:05 pm

“Please release me”

by Timothy Jacobson

That opening lyric from Eddie Miller’s 1949 torch song “Release Me” came to mind this past Sunday, sidetracking the hymns that I might have been singing in church but no longer may on account of our governor’s anti-aerosol prohibitions on group vocalizing. If not quite pagan, “Release Me” is not a particularly pious ballad. He or she (depending on the crooner) goes on about a relationship gone stale to which the obvious answer is not working harder at it, or even putting up with it, but “release me and let me love again,” with someone else, of course. It is a sentiment that grew into its moment, the Sixties and Seventies, when partner-switching came into vogue and Engelbert Humperdinck turned it into a blockbuster single, though Patti Page hadn’t done too badly with it in the Fifties. Had the song been released in the spring of 2020, a different meaning would be attached to it, which would have nothing to do with loving, losing, and switching.

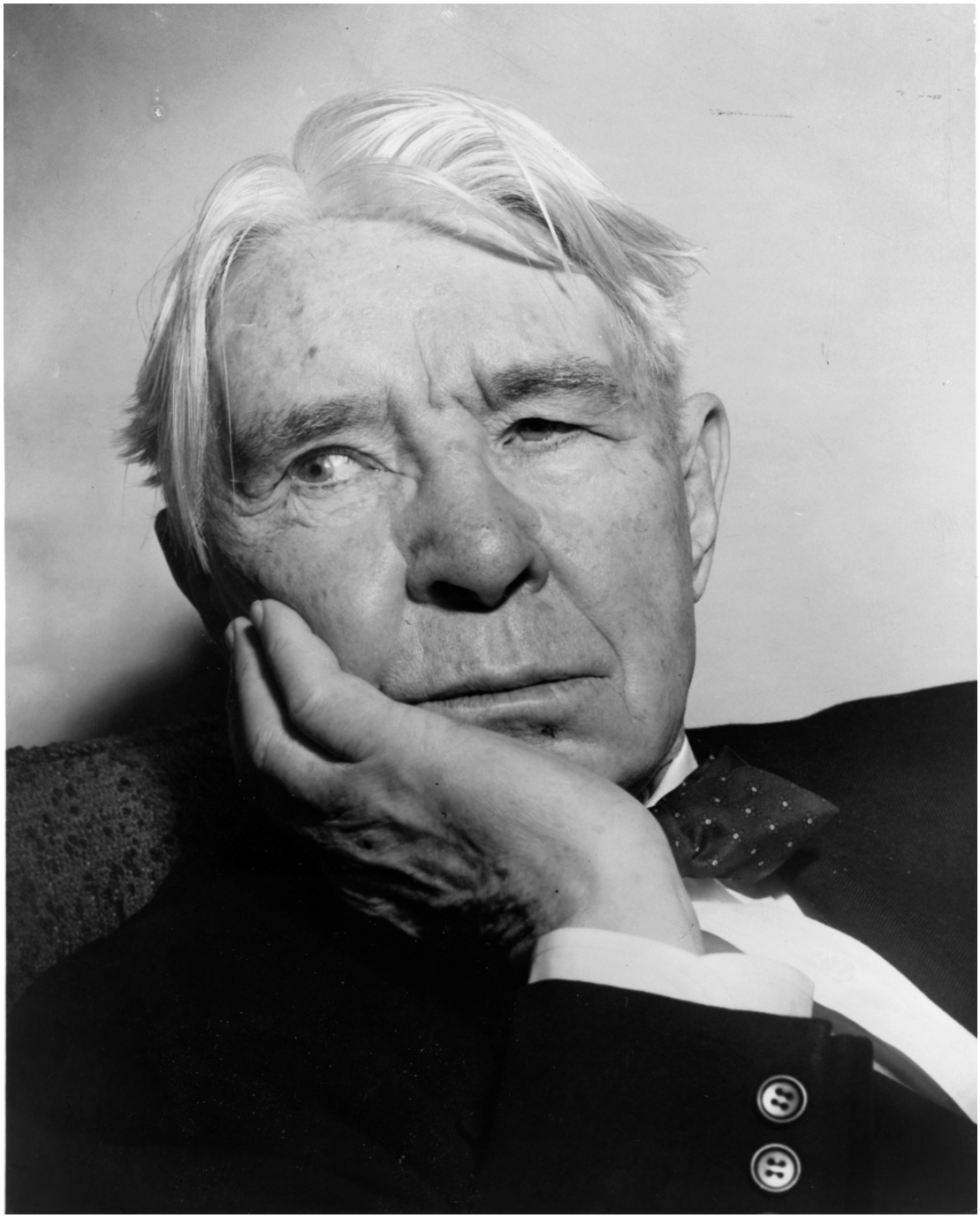
We are all by now experts on “phases.” Time was when the word “phase” made us think of the moon. Or we used it as a euphemism for that awkward period one’s teenage daughter was going through. Now the bureaucrats are telling us what it really means. Much, but not all, of America has now ventured forth into “Phase Two” of pandemic management, which means—well, you can read the clinical details on any state health department website. In my reddish part of the world, Phase Two has been greeted with the ho-hum of people who are pretty much carrying on with life without supervision anyway. In blueish pockets however, where the citizenry is more docile, Phase Two seems to have triggered a spring of seriously pent-up demand for getting out of the house. I know this because of an event I could not attend.

Over the mountain, one of the larger vineyards hosts polo, not exactly an everyman’s sport, but a great see-and-be-seen opportunity, easy to socialize to while quaffing a bottle or two of the vineyard’s product (no outside alcohol allowed, which is fair enough as there is no charge for admission). No reservations are taken, and though we arrived with our friends two hours before post time with our tent, table, and fancy vittles ready to go, the gate bouncer turned us away, politely. It was not, I presume, because we did not look the right sort, though our two European cars are not exactly current models. The spectator field was already packed to capacity; I am guessing 500 cars at least, which is well over 1,000–1,500 party-goers. We never glimpsed a pony or

got to reacquaint with that unmistakable “thwack” unique to the sport.

A perishable picnic requires a back-up venue, which we had in the form of a city park in the town just on the other side of the mountain. There, “release” for the First Sunday of Phase Two manifested itself differently: lower-pressure, more easy-going. Though the big, 1950s-era swimming pool and very up-to-date children’s playground remain shut for fear of contagion, the park itself has been open for business since the shutdowns began in March. It sits beside the South Fork of the Shenandoah River, a well-tread greensward of a place meant to be lolled-about in. The parking lot was not empty, but it is a large park that soaks up a crowd without crowding. Picnic tables, old-time steel barbecues, a ball diamond (open), and a gazebo constitute the infrastructure. No “event” beckoned, just a setting for conviviality with those you came with, or for solitude if that is what you preferred. Except for the squeals of children mucking about at the river’s edge and birdsong, quiet prevailed. Not much “distancing,” and no masks in evidence.

Next to us a Latino family, twenty or so strong it looked, set up shop at a grill and a couple of tables. Our polo-ready salmon had been poached at home. Their cooked-to-order feast looked and smelled better. The mother—not the daughters or the grandmother, mind you, but the mother—had charge of the cooking and stood for an hour, cheerfully feeding her family by the grill fired by the father with a full fifty-pound bag of charcoal. I thought I saw two of the older boys sneak a swig of beer disguised in coffee mugs (no alcohol in city parks), probably more to just say they’d done it than to actually enjoy it. Older sisters (or were they cousins?) took younger ones for a splash. Who here, I wondered, was thinking about viruses or the sins of 1619? They talked with one another, their mutual company sufficient for a good time. I do not know how they made their livings, but I would wager it had nothing to do with staring at a screen. Our group of friends (it is not a flattering comparison) were searching for release from the world of quarantine, our conversation full of well-read anxious chatter about the country’s grim situation. These people were just having an outing in the park. Might such outings even have been a habit for them?



The poet Carl Sandburg, 1955. Photo: Al Ravenna.

Quite possibly, and for a good hundred years or so, if Carl Sandburg in the *Chicago Poems* (1916) is to be believed. Entry number 299 in my *Oxford Book of American Verse* (1950 edition)—"Happiness"—is not a difficult poem, and is easy to sentimentalize. It is the sort of thing one is likely to have encountered first in high school and seldom thinks about later. I thought about it Sunday, though. The set-up, in which Sandburg's narrator first asks the world's bigshots about the meaning of happiness and then, frustrated, resorts to the plain people, is probably what brought it to mind just now. "I asked the professors who teach the meaning of life to tell me what is happiness" and executives too, "who boss the work of thousands of men." From his next line, one might deduce that bigshots back then were a smidgen humbler than nowadays: they shook their heads and smiled "as though I was trying to fool with them." Then comes the famous,

paintable answering scene, also on a Sunday afternoon alongside a river, the Des Plaines, just west of Chicago. The ethnicity of the subjects has changed, and though I could do without the final musical touch, it's the same crowd: "of Hungarians under the trees with their women and children and a keg of beer and an accordion."

Perhaps I sentimentalize still. But the riverside park bested the polo winery by a country mile and "released" us better than any couple of bottles could possibly have done. In entry number 298 in the *Oxford Book*, "Fish Crier," I notice now, but probably did not when young, the economy with which Sandburg expressed the same, spare, trust-the-people-closest-to-reality kind of faith. This time he employed a Jewish fishmonger at Chicago's old Maxwell Street Market: "His face is that of a man terribly glad to be selling fish, terribly glad that God made fish, and customers to whom he may call his wares from a pushcart."

After a too-long hiatus, release to call our wares and, come Sunday, to sit with friends and family by the river, seems to be not a lot to ask. Just don't ask the bigshots.

Timothy Jacobson (1948–2024) wrote from the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia.