

Remembrance Sunday

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
11 November 2012

“The Lighthouse” – Testimony by Nancy Lee

At the tip of the Gaspé Peninsula, where the St. Lawrence River meets the Gulf of St. Lawrence, there is a lighthouse. It is well situated: the currents are tricky, the fog is frequent, and the rocky cliff is 20 stories high.

This lighthouse has special meaning for me. My great-grandfather was the lighthouse keeper for many years. My grandmother was born there in 1876.

As a child, I loved to listen to her stories about what it was like to live in a lighthouse. She was the oldest of three daughters. When she was ten, her mother died in childbirth. In the absence of a mother, she helped raise her younger sisters. In the absence of a son, she helped her father with the light. In foggy weather, she shot off a cannon every 20 minutes to warn sailors away from the cliff.

As a child, I thought she had a fairytale childhood. As an adult, I appreciate the hardships of her life. What resonates with me now is her strong sense of duty and responsibility, which I have inherited from my father, her son.

Let me tell you how I came to be at First Unitarian. It was a sense of duty that brought me here—a duty to myself.

When I turned 50, I did some soul-searching. I decided that I needed to pay attention to my spiritual life. I also needed a new community because the only people I knew were my colleagues at work. And I wanted to start to give back, to volunteer.

I knew instinctively that what I needed was to be a practicing Unitarian. I had discovered the Unitarian church as a university student in Ottawa. I have considered myself a Unitarian all my adult life, but it was only when I began to think about my future that I felt the need for this place. I joined this congregation a month after my 50th birthday.

A few years later, I took early retirement from my management position at Toronto Public Library, and this congregation became a mainstay in my life.

At First Unitarian, I have satisfied my need for spiritual growth, community, and volunteering in ways that have surpassed my expectations.

Here, I have the time, the challenge, and the encouragement to grow spiritually. I derive strength, self-knowledge, and inspiration from Sunday services and weekday programs. I have also found role models here, who motivate me to be my best self.

Here, I have found a caring community. I have widened my circle through social gatherings, programs, and volunteering. We come together in times of crisis to demonstrate concern for each other and the wider world.

And here, I have found ways to serve that are meaningful for me: preparing meals for Out of the Cold, building a school in Guatemala, building a house for Habitat for Humanity. I am proud of all the ways people here live out their convictions through social action.

I have also found that I can use my administrative skills effectively by volunteering right here, by serving on committees and chairing important projects. I am grateful for the trust the congregation has placed in me.

Volunteering at First had another huge benefit for me. That is how I met my husband, Terry. We were married by Shawn in this room three years ago.

After 18 years as a member, I feel a responsibility to help provide the resources First needs, not just to carry on, but to *thrive*. I play my part by giving of my time and talents, and through my financial contribution. I do this as a duty to myself and as a responsibility to you, the members and friends of this congregation. It is like a family obligation, the way my grandmother looked after her family.

I also want First Unitarian to be a beacon for others out there who haven't found us yet. I want us to be a strong, vibrant force in the community. It meant so much to me to have this place to come to when I needed it. I feel a duty to keep our light shining for future members who I may never meet, as my grandmother felt a duty to strangers in ships at sea off the coast of Gaspé.

My grandmother died 50 years ago at the age of 85. The lighthouse is still there—now automatic, unstaffed, a tourist attraction in Forillon National Park—but still a beacon to ships at sea and a light in my heart.

Reflection

“Curses” by Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

The backs of our \$10 bills still in circulation today showcase the words:

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

With a fitting tribute to an army friend, who was killed in battle at the beginning of the Great War, Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae begins his description of the scene he sees upon burying his fellow fallen. His scene has been declared by his comrades as a faithful description of the early days in the War, with the stark contrast between the eerily quiet crosses, the gentle cries of the birds, and the jarring barks of gunfire still raging as the soldiers commemorate their dead.

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.*

And with that swift lamentation, McCrae quickly mourns the massacre before his eyes, even as he celebrates the simple sacred pleasures of life. And in mourning this untimely death, with unfinished business, he puts forth the task.

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

It is the directive in the last stanza that throws me off: “Take up the quarrel with the foe”. It is a burdensome command; one that requires serious questions from anyone taking that task on. Questions such as: What quarrel is this? Who is the foe? And would the dead in Flanders fields really have wanted their remaining colleagues to keep up the quarrel? Would the dead in Flanders fields have wanted *us* to take up that quarrel?

These questions take a more urgent tone when we consider the consequences that entail failing to take up this quarrel—whatever it is—with whoever it is:

“If ye break faith with us who die, we shall not sleep”

Haunting words that speak a dire warning... almost like a curse, with a warning that failure to follow through will result in the impending reiterated presence of the dead among our midst.

These are troublesome, disturbing words that make my mouth twist in a distasteful, disagreeable curl. It is this curse to be haunted into taking up a non-descript quarrel with a non-descript foe—lest the dead refuse to sleep—that give me difficulty in appreciating the words of Lieutenant Colonel McCrae.

On the \$10 bill, these words are framed by the doves of peace, just as they are flanked by the poppies of remembrance. It is not the framing of a curse. A curse, after all, sounds like a dire spell to cast upon others... especially if it is on its own and without higher purpose. But a well-intended curse is seldom lonesome or without purpose. As a warning these incantations can be parts of a larger blessing.

I find myself wondering whether McCrae is giving this curse, or simply naming the curse that is already there: giving light to the lives and deaths of people who have already sacrificed that which is precious to them and whose same sacrifice inevitably keeps coming back to us in the world we have inherited: ghosts that still haunt us from a world past that forms the foundations of our world present.

If the directive—the task—that was put forth by McCrae on behalf of his kindred warriors were to keep an enduring witness to us today, it cannot be the same individual quarrel that buried his friend in Flanders fields... we cannot keep fighting World War I.

Yet World War I and its successors are part of the legacy that has made our communities—locally and planet-wide—what they are today. A community that has been handed down spectres—broken and benign—of a past that continues to resonate every time we look at the borders of a map. Phantoms that pose the same deeper questions come election time, when we cast our ballots, and when our leaders consider the question of force at home and abroad.

My friends, I believe that the only quarrel we can take on is the largest one there is, the same one we take on when we covenant, with each other and with all, every week. To challenge the teachings of hate, with a doctrine of love; exorcizing the demons of distorting speech through a sacramental quest for truth; casting our prayer to dwell together in peace, through service confronting the confinement of misunderstanding, by seeking knowledge in freedom, so that we may serve life.

In doing so, the very ghosts that haunt us can be the same spirits that guide us in the tasks that daunt us. The offerings and sacrifices of our predecessors, given sometimes willingly and other times otherwise, are the blessings that endure with us in the task eternal. The dead that once felt dawn and saw sunset glow, loved and were loved, continue to stand side by side with the living that do the same in carrying out a greater purpose. Carrying out the tasks that promise to extend beyond our lifetime. And when we cannot take it on any longer, then from failing hands we'll throw the torch.

May it be ours, yours, and theirs, to hold up high.
Blessed be.

Reflection

Rev. Shawn Newton

It remains one of the most difficult letters I've ever had to write.

It was the spring of 2003, and I wrote to both of my brothers to tell them that I was protesting the war they had just signed on to fight.

I explained that I couldn't, in good conscience,
carry protest signs on Boston Common
and write fiery letters to my representatives in Congress,
without first telling the two of them why
I was adamantly and actively opposed
to the war looming in Iraq.

I felt, with many of you, a deep moral obligation to protest a war that time has proven to have been fundamentally unjust.

That letter was so hard for me to write because military service has long been a rite of passage—a sacred duty among all the men of my family,

likely going back to the American Civil War, if not beyond.

It is a tradition I would not keep, and did not keep.

Instead, as a teenager, to my family's dismay,
I parked my Volkswagen Rabbit in the driveway
emblazoned with bumper stickers that read:
"Arms are for hugging" and "It'll be a great day
when our schools have all the money they need
and the Air Force has to hold a bake-sale to buy a bomber."

(I didn't know at the time, but that last quote
was by the Unitarian minister, Robert Fulghum.)

As I came of age, I was clear in my opposition to war.
My childhood and youth had been steeped
in the Cold War imagery of nuclear annihilation.

I wondered endlessly why the leaders of the world
could not see what was so very plain:
that war has no winners,
and that violence brings only more violence.

When the Gulf War broke out in January 1991,
I was 21 years old and unexpectedly out of university.

If there was to be a draft, I was obviously a prime candidate.

I immediately looked into what would be required
for me to register as a conscientious objector—
this was before realizing that as a gay man at the time,
the military would have objected to me just as much as I did toward it.

In the end, there was no draft.
The U.S. involvement in the Gulf War
was over within a matter of weeks.

But, my abhorrence of war remained—and does still down to this day.

I am, though, now twice the age I was
when I first confronted the possibility of being drafted into the military.

And while I would still like to think myself a pacifist—
as one deeply committed to non-violence—
my outlook has grown a great deal more complicated over the years.

I've found myself at times a bundle of conflicted feelings
about the limits of non-violent action in the face of atrocities—
especially when it seems the only way to end senseless bloodletting
is by intervening to stop those who would continue to do horrific harm.

With great reluctance, I have come to accept
that there are moments when armed conflict
may, unfortunately, be the best of the bad options that remain
to bring about the quickest end to further carnage.

I share with you this morning
what feels to be my very personal wrestlings on all of this
because I have sensed a similar dis-ease
among many people in our congregation.

It hasn't been hard to calculate
over the six Novembers I've spent with you
that there are notably fewer poppies
worn in our congregation this time of year
than in the population at large.

Given that, I'm guessing there is some ambivalence among us;
I'm guessing that for several of us
Remembrance Day stirs up complicated feelings
about war and peace, about violence and pacifism.

To be sure, I have had people explain to me why they wear red poppies,
and I've had people tell me why they wear white poppies,
or no poppies at all.

Through these conversations, I have come to honour each perspective,
and found respect for everyone who has struggled
through the intense emotions these questions involve.

I think that's because I recognise
so much of each of those perspectives within myself.

And more and more, I'm coming to see
that perhaps that uncomfortable state of contradictions inside me
is just what Remembrance Day should be.

Indeed, it seems that is what it is for many of us—
a discomfiting mix of shared gratitude and grief
for a history that has too often been written in violence.

As a newcomer to Canada, I have tried very hard
to deepen my knowledge and understanding of this great country.

Bob and I have travelled a fair bit of it, from Victoria to St. John's.
I've read its history and endeavoured to engage
the unsettled questions that sit at its heart.

I've had a good many of my illusions stripped away
and been forced to see its sins and many short-comings.

Through it all, though,
I have fallen in love with Canada, over and over again,
and more deeply than I ever imagined possible.

And, I have grown proud of this country
and excited for what it might yet become.

When I have told my American friends
about my deepening affection for Canada, I have explained
that I would love for them to be here for Remembrance Day—
because it's the one day when I think I might best be able
to help them to understand, and to see what I have seen.

It is the day for me that holds up the greatest contrasts
between the American and Canadian identity and character.

It feels impossible to put into words.
The few that do come to mind
include sacrifice and peace-keeping, honour and duty,
gratitude, silence, humility, and an abiding unsettled ambivalence—
not indifference, mind you,
but rather an unresolved and complicated feeling

about the role Canada has been called upon to play in the pursuit of peace.

I realise some feel that Remembrance Day glorifies war.
Perhaps that is true on occasion,
but I confess I've seen little evidence of it.

Instead, I've mostly seen a country trying to repay a great debt of gratitude
to those who served and those who have died.

Over the past five years, in my quest to better understand all of this,
I've visited the barracks at Fort York
and the bluffs of Queenston Heights;
I've walked across the Plains of Abraham
and through the trenches still carved
into the northern fields of France at Vimy Ridge.

I've attended the Remembrance Day observance
at the National War Monument in Ottawa
and stood silently in the Memorial Chamber
within the Peace Tower on Parliament Hill,
reminded that the price of peace has often come at a terrible human cost.

What has most deeply moved me, though,
and taught me a great deal about the meaning of Remembrance Day
has come through my visits to Mary Martin
in the Veterans' Residence at Sunnybrook Hospital
over the past couple of years.

Mary, who was a longtime member of our congregation
and served as president many years ago, was there
because she served in World War II, as a physiotherapist for injured soldiers
who'd been brought back to Newfoundland to heal.

Mary's time out east on The Rock qualified as foreign service
because, at the time, Newfoundland hadn't yet joined Confederation.

When I learned that Mary had died yesterday afternoon,
I found gratitude for her life welling up within me—
as well as gratitude that she had been able
to live out the end of her life at Sunnybrook.

I say that because I've been repeatedly struck
by how very well the veterans are treated by the staff there.

It just seems, day in and day out,
that there's a palpable sense of respect in the air
for the women and men who live in that residence.

It is that same sense of respect in the air
that I feel acutely on November 11th
when the bustle of life in this country
comes to a standstill and silence is held.
I still find it the most remarkable thing to behold.

None of us can know what crosses every mind
in that moment of national meditation.

My hope is that those moments of shared silence
honour the great loss of life of both soldiers and civilians, alike.

That it summons respect
for those who've put themselves in harm's way for a greater good.

And that is stirs within us all
an abiding commitment to seek peace in our time
and the end to all war.

So may it be. Amen.

Benediction

May the peace that passes all understanding,
that peace which the world can neither give nor take away,
abide with us this day, and in all the days to come.