

“If not now, when?”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Remembrance Sunday

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation.

In her poem, “The End and the Beginning,”
the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska, writes:

After every war
someone has to clean up.
Things won't
straighten themselves up, after all.

Someone has to push the rubble
to the side of the road,
so the corpse-filled wagons
can pass.

Someone has to get mired
in scum and ashes,
sofa springs,
splintered glass,
and bloody rags.

Someone has to drag in a girder
to prop up a wall.
Someone has to glaze a window,
rehang a door.

Photogenic it's not,
and [it] takes years.
[And after] all the cameras have left
for another war.

We'll need the bridges back,
and new railway stations.

Sleeves will go ragged
from rolling them up.

Someone, broom in hand,
still recalls the way it was.
Someone else listens
and nods with unsevered head.
But already there are those nearby
starting to mill about
who will find it dull.

From out of the bushes
sometimes someone still unearths
rusted-out arguments
and carries them to the garbage pile.

Those who knew
what was going on here
must make way for
those who know little.
And less than little.
And finally as little as nothing.

In the grass that has overgrown
causes and effects,
someone must be stretched out
blade of grass in his mouth
gazing at the clouds.

News of the end of World War I reached Toronto,
just before 3:00am, exactly 100 years ago today.¹

The various reporters for the Associated Press,
had just signed off for the night and gone to McConkey's,
at Yonge and Queen, for a very late dinner.

A lone operator was in the office when the news broke.

¹ For this history, I have drawn on the excellent piece by Katie Daubs in the *Toronto Star*, "Peace broke out, then all hell broke loose," 8 November 2018.

The tap-tap-tap of the telegraph announced
that the Armistice had been signed.

A messenger alerted the reporters at the restaurant.

They rose at once and rushed out,
but not before all getting stuck in the swinging door.

The reporter from *The Toronto Daily Star*
was the first one to get free.

The news quickly began to spread, by word of mouth,
and by the wave of noise that rippled away
from that telegraph machine across the city.

Waves of whooping and whistles,
of horns honking and bells pealing,
of people singing and clanging pots
roused Toronto from its slumber.

Ironically, this great cacophony was the herald of peace
in the middle of that autumn night.

Four long years of war had finally come to an end.

Toronto, a city of 500,000 at the time,
had sent 70,000 of its young people to war.
Just under 5,000 were killed in battle.

In fact, of the 428,000 Canadians who served in the war,
60,000 died, and 138,000 were wounded.
Together, almost half were killed or physically injured,
to say nothing of the moral wounds of war.

After such loss, and such sustained grief,
the people of this city were ready for a release.

But making matters worse,
some six weeks earlier, the Spanish flu had reached Toronto.

50,000 people contracted the virus.

1750 people died.

There was a real fear that the armistice celebrations
that brought people together in the streets
would result in more people falling ill.

But that didn't seem to deter many.

The most resolute residents of the city made their way downtown.

Businesses and banks were closed.
The courts announced a day of amnesty.
Flags waved and planes flew low overhead.
Bonfires burned.

And that afternoon, an already long-planned parade
to raise funds for the war effort,
had John Phillip Sousa and the U.S. Naval Band at the helm.

There was a surge of genuine joy, here and around the world.
People felt real hope, for the first time in a long time.
And they were sure the worst was behind them.

* * *

Also, exactly a hundred years ago today,
a telegraph was carried to the door of the Owen family,
at 69 Monkmoor Road, in Shrewsbury, Shropshire,
near the border between England and Wales.

As Mrs. Owen opened the telegraph,
the bells of nearby Shrewsbury Abbey rang out in joy.

And in spite of those surrounding celebrations,
the Owen family absorbed the unthinkable news
that their oldest son, Wilfred,
had been killed, one week before,
while crossing a canal in Northern France.

Wilfred Owen remains the most celebrated
of the English War Poets.

These poets, and Owen in particular,
departed from the poetic conventions of the time
that traditionally praised valour and the noble sacrifice of war.

Owen, in particular, wrote with an unapologetic realism
that left no question as to war's terrible toll.

His was no romanticized take;
he used brutally graphic detail
to describe the devouring machinery of war.

His "Anthem for a Doomed Youth"
still has the power to discomfit.

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, -
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds.

In his poem, "Futility," he pointedly asks:
"Was it for this the clay grew tall?"

Was it for *this*—for the devastations of war—
that clay—that we humans—grew tall?

Was it for this that we were born?

Was it for this that we came into being
and evolved as a sentient species upon this earth?

* * *

These are questions I have certainly asked,
and perhaps you have, too.

A few springtimes ago,
trekking outside of Paris,
Bob and I visited several of the beaches
up along the English Channel.

Looking out to sea, the calm cool waves washed in
upon the sandy beaches that stretch into the distance,
the horizon crowned by an almost endless pale blue sky.

Along the shore, children drew images with sticks in the sand,
dogs played fetch with their humans,
couples frolicked hand-in-hand along the water.

It was a glorious day to be in France,
but there was something unsettling about the whole scene.

On these same beaches, of course, some seven decades before,
thousands of young men were mowed down
by machine guns and exploding artillery shells.

These sands, once drenched in the carnage of war,
showed no sign of the massive armed forces
that met there in battle on D-Day.

There in the sand and the sun,
people strolled about with a casual air
that somehow seemed to dishonour this patch of ground
made holy through the horrors to which it had been witness.

I wanted to demand from those around me greater reverence—
a more sober recognition—
of the violence that had been wrought
upon that now sacred shore.

I wanted both those who had come to the beach to play
and those who had journeyed there as pilgrims

to bow down in respect for the great sacrifice of life
made on the ground beneath our feet.

I wanted all of us along the beach,
to take away from this landscape so littered with memory
a fresh resolve to spare humanity
the wrenching obligation of ever having to confront evil
with such violence again.

Today, high up on the cliffs overlooking the landing beaches
are the massive graveyards that hold the remains of a generation.

Barbara Kingsolver describes one of these cemeteries
with its graves reaching “from one horizon to the other,”
saying, “I remember looking it over
and thinking it was a forest of graves.

But the rows were like this,” she said,
“dizzying, diagonal, perfectly straight,
so it wasn't a forest [after all,] but an orchard of graves.
Nothing [at all] to do with nature,
unless you count human nature.”

It was in confronting this more sinister side of our nature,
our human capacity for such violence,
that made the whole experience that day in Normandy
so much more emotional than I had expected.

Standing there on the beach,
my eyes welled with tears
for the horrors that had played out underfoot –
for beaches become killing fields in the pursuit of peace.

But, my overwhelming sadness wasn't centred
on the merits of that particular war,
as much as it was my despair for our slowness
in learning from our gravest mistakes.

It's an unsettling feeling I've encountered in other places:
in the slave quarters of southern plantations;
walking through the showers and crematorium at Dachau;

standing before a statue of Saint Agnes
at the United Nations in New York—
a statue that had been blown face down
into the rubble of the Catholic cathedral in Nagasaki
as the atomic bomb exploded a kilometre away—
on one side the statue is well-preserved; on the other,
the surface horribly mottled by intense heat and radiation
serves as a stark reminder of our capacity for massive destruction.

These places, added to the names
of countless conflicts around the globe
form, for me, a geography of violence—
a view to the world that routinely leaves me to wonder
if we have learned anything about ourselves
and the history we sometimes seem so bent on repeating.

Which is why this day has become so important to me.

For it is only by remembering
that we will overcome our worst impulses towards war.

Remembering asks us to seek a better way.

Remembering implores us to take the path of peace.

Remembering invites us to see the possibility
that a better world rests in our hands.

In his book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*,
Stephen Pinker argues that violence has declined
in both the long and short run.

He makes the case that human history has moved
toward more peaceful cooperation, as we've embraced as guiding values:
reason, empathy, self-control and a stronger "moral sense".

I largely agree with him on this point.
Though I don't share his unbridled optimism.

I am less convinced of his vision of steady progress.
I am left questioning whether our species will reject violence,

especially as we move farther into late-capitalism, peak-oil,
and the slow-moving catastrophes of climate change.

The recent spate of authoritarian leaders coming to power
in various countries around the world
does little to instill confidence.

Last Sunday afternoon, I met with our Coming of Age class,
the group of young people, entering their teenage years,
who will be sitting with life's big questions in the coming months.
I took them into our archives downstairs,
as they were hoping to find the oldest thing in our congregation.

Not-so-incidentally, the oldest thing we have
are these 17th century brass candlesticks,
which were donated to First by Bill Johnston,
in honour of Betsy Presley, who, in the late 60's,
with other women at First Unitarian in Detroit,
created an underground railroad to help
young American draft resisters emigrate to Canada.

During his first weeks in Canada,
Bill was introduced by his hosts to this congregation,
which was welcoming of war resisters
and, in fact, had a number of them, at the time,
living downstairs in Shaw Hall as refugees of conscience.

The youth marveled at seeing the candlesticks up close.

But one of them spotted a framed statement of faith
from a much earlier era in our history.

In fact, this statement was quite popular in Unitarian congregations
in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

It says:

We believe in the Fatherhood of God,
The Brotherhood of Man,
The Leadership of Jesus,

Salvation by Character,
and The Progress of Mankind, onward and upward forever.

Set aside, if you can,
the dated theology and sexist language,
to focus on the last line:
The progress of humankind, “onward and upward forever.”

This was Unitarian optimism at its high-water mark.
It signaled a belief that in the dawning age,
human progress was inevitable.

That notion was severely challenged
by the bitter wars of the 20th century.

The Holocaust, the atomic bomb, and the threat of nuclear annihilation
undid much of our rosy estimation of human nature.

Which is, again, why today is so very important.

There is tremendous potential
for full human flourishing upon this planet.

But it is a choice—and one we often fail to make.

Our human nature is in need of regular reminders—
of what is at stake, and of what is possible—both good and bad.

As the poet Szyborska reminds us,
time erodes our collective memory.

Those who knew
what was going on here
must make way for
those who know little.
And less than little.
And finally as little as nothing.

Our work of remembering is an act of resistance.
And our deeply-needed, relentless appeal
to serve the better angels of our nature.

May we honour all of those, this day,
whose lives have been taken or touched by war.

May we honour their sacrifices
by committing ourselves to the work of peace.

May we honour their lives by taking up the call
to remember, today, and always.

Amen.