

“Take Courage”

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Reading

“The End and the Beginning” – Wisława Szymborska

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 takes years.
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.

Reflection

I don't know about you, but I find that last bit
of Szyborska's poem quite haunting.

The idea—the image—
that while some are cleaning up from the last war,
tidying up from devastation and destruction,
others grow tired of the tedium of the work.

Over time others arrive on the scene

with less and less knowledge
of what brought about the war in the first place.

And less interest.

To the point that ignorance becomes dangerously bliss.

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

That image captures for me everything there is, I think,
to say about Remembrance Day.

That with the passing years
we are called to remember, “lest we forget.”

That we bear a solemn obligation to hold on to the stories,
lest we live out their horrors, again and again.

Given how long we humans have studied war,
it seems clear enough
that the forgetting of the hard lessons learned
is a perennial human struggle.

But we forget at our own peril.

It saddens me to say that I believe we are living
in an increasingly dangerous and forgetful world.

While the decades following the great wars of the 20th century
saw a certain flourishing of peace and prosperity
for many people on our planet,
we now are witnessing the alarming rise of authoritarian governments
and a renewed proliferation of nuclear weapons—
just as the impact of climate change is causing
severe disruption and dislocation of people around the globe.

On top of these concerning conditions,

under the monetized influence of social media,
we are living more and more in polarized echo chambers
where we typically only take in viewpoints
that reflect and reinforce our own.

And so it behooves us in our day
to remember the past—
to study the study of war
that we might ultimately study peace.

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I know that many of us, myself included,
let out a great sigh of relief
yesterday around lunch time
when the winner of the U.S. election was announced.

As cathartic as that was,
and as hopeful as I am about our neighbour
turning back from the brink,
I'm mindful that the divisions between people remain,
in some ways as deeply entrenched as ever.

And should we be seduced into thinking this reality
is neatly contained on the other side of the border,
we would do well to recognize the degree to which
similar seeds of division and distrust have taken root in recent years
in Canada, in Ontario, and in Toronto, too.

I know the outcomes of federal, provincial, and municipal elections
in recent years have left many of us scratching our heads,
wondering just who are these people that voted for so-and-so.

It is a fair question to ask—
especially if we can follow it up with genuine curiosity,
with a willingness to seek to understand
how it is that others can come to a view of the world
so very different from our own.

Now, I'll be the first to admit that this is really hard to do.

And I'll be the first to remind you that it is a mandate
at the centre of our faith as Unitarian Universalists.

Our affirmation of respect
for the inherent worth and dignity of every person is meaningless
if we are not committed to extending that respect
even to those we struggle to understand.

That's not to say that
we can't oppose with every fibre of our being
behaviour or policies or attitudes
we find objectionable, offensive, or dangerous.

But when we harden our hearts against those
whom we oppose, for whatever reason,
we venture on to a slippery slope of dehumanizing—
of denying the humanity of the other.

This is a point of critical caution that comes
through the study of the study of war:
that if we are to study peace,
we must truly live into our first principle
by recognizing the humanity of others,
even if they have seemingly lost sight of it themselves.

Now, it would be easy to imagine all of this
as the exclusive domain of nation states,
or political parties duking it out.

But the struggles of war and peace
are rooted in the work of every human heart—
in each of us, as we navigate our daily lives.

And so we must ask ourselves:

Do we truly remember?

Do we honour the humanity of those in our lives
who strain our patience,
who test our commitment to our principles?

Do we cultivate peace in the heart,
even when it seems impossibly hard?

Do we recognize that the choice between war and peace
is put to us with each day—
in how we act and in how we react?

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Thirteen years ago, as Bob and I
were packing up our lives in Boston to move to Toronto,
I was amazed at how much sorting and sifting and shedding
was involved.

One of the biggest chores for me
involved paring down my personal library.

Painful as it was, I parted with scores of books.

I donated a few to the city library,
some to the church I served,
and the rest I deposited in the large metal book bin
in the parking lot of our local supermarket.

On the morning I was heaving boxes of books into the bin,
I was startled by the tell-tale sounds
of screeching tires and scrunching metal.

Just a few metres away from where I stood, two SUVs collided.

Both drivers hopped out and instantly began yelling at the other.

Fingers wagged, and expletives filled the air.
Spouses were called, as well as the police.

While quietly continuing to empty my books into the bin,
I watched the scene unfold,
mostly because at that volume,
I couldn't help but be involved,
but also in case I was called upon

to testify in a court of law
if things got out of hand—
which certainly seemed possible.

The crowning moment came when, for insurance purposes,
the two drivers got around
to exchanging their contact information.

Each driver in a whirl of fury,
demanded the other hand over her address.

And, then, in an instant, everything changed.

They exchanged their documents,
and to the horror of each,
discovered that they not only lived on the very same street,
but only a few doors apart.

Their anger morphed into an awkward awareness,
as they slowly realized they were neighbours.

In that moment, they faced a choice
over whether to behold the humanity of the other.

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Susan Griffin, the feminist philosopher and playwright says that:

The moment I have defined another being as my enemy,
I lose part of myself...
I begin to exist in a closed system.
When anything goes wrong, I blame my enemy.
If I wake troubled, my enemy had led me to this feeling.
If I cannot sleep, it is because of my enemy.
Slowly all the power in my life begins to be located outside.
And my whole being is defined in relation to this outside force,
which becomes daily more monstrous, more evil....
The quality of my thought then is diminished.
My imagination grows small.
My self seems meager.

For my enemy has stolen all of these.

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If we are to truly study war no more,
we must recognize that war can take many forms—
that it comes in countless shapes and sizes.

And we must remember that if we are to truly study peace,
it begins by beholding everyone, even our enemies,
face to face, in the fullness of their humanity, as well as our own.