15 November 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

Memory is hazardous. We journey through time. It's as though we've boarded a ship leaving the shoreline. The buildings ringing the harbour begin to shrink. Looking back, we have to squint to see them. The coastline recedes. Finally, even the tallest spire sinks below the horizon. What we once saw in 'real time' we now see only in memory.

First-hand experiences can't be had anymore. They've slipped into memory, and memory has turned them into stories. To sustain our vanished vision of the harbour, we recount to each other what the harbour was like, how we once lived in that place, the noteworthy events we witnessed, and the remarkable people we knew there.

Then a new generation is born. "Tell us of that distant time and place," they say. They imbibe these stories, these memories that are not theirs. But they re-imagine them in their own way, to make them fit the life *they* now live.

Some of these stories don't 'speak' to them. They no longer ask to hear them. They're soon forgotten. Others they embellish, the better to capture what *does* speak to them. Others they embroider to suit the story *they* want to tell about life in the harbour long ago. Some stories are deemed hurtful. They're censored and bowdlerised. Others are completely made up.

All too soon, the last eyewitness dies. More time passes, relentlessly. Finally, the last person to have known the last eyewitness dies. No one has a first-hand memory of those who had first-hand experience. All that's left are stories – embellished, embroidered, censored, forgotten, and fabricated.

Remembrance of Things Past

I'm old enough to have known some veterans of the Great War. One spent the war pedaling a bicycle down the roads and lanes of Picardy, delivering messages behind the lines. Another was put in charge of horses. Did you know that eight million horses were killed in the Great War? Another veteran was gassed at Loos and damaged forever in body and mind.

I knew a woman whose father assisted Lord Beaverbrook when he served His Majesty's Government during the Great War. She remembered Zeppelin raids over London.

Every veteran of that war is dead now. And only a handful are left from World War II.

As an adolescent, I played the trombone, ineptly but enjoyably, in a 'town band' (do they exist anymore?). I shared the music stand with a man who'd donned a uniform when he was scarcely older than I was. He was deposited on a beach in northern France in August 1942 to carry out an ill-conceived attack on Dieppe. That was a dark, dark day for his regiment. Half of them were slaughtered in minutes. He spent the rest of his war in a prison camp.

The number of Holocaust survivors is dwindling too. The mother of a Jewish friend in High School died recently. She'd spent the war hidden in a home in Amsterdam. As a girl, she'd been to a birthday party with Ann Frank.

There used to be a jeweller on Ontario Street in Stratford. I once asked him to replace a watch strap. He right away rolled up his sleeve to perform this service for me, revealing the number tattooed on his arm at Auschwitz.

All too soon, every participant and every eyewitness of these horrors will have died. And in a few more decades, those with first-hand memories of those with first-hand experience will all be dead too, me included. Only a few select stories will survive, memories of other people's memories, embellished, embroidered, expurgated, forgotten, and fabricated.

A Call to Remembrance

Another Remembrance Day has come and gone. But we're as far from the Armistice of 1918 as its first witnesses were from the War of 1812. Just what is it we're remembering on Remembrance Day?

There was a time when it felt like its observance would fade away. My generation were rather casual about it. We'd never lived in a time of war.

The prospect of nuclear war gave us vivid nightmares, that's true, but the wars our fathers and our father's fathers fought felt like ancient history. What did they have to do with us? The appalling legacy of Viet Nam, campaigns for nuclear disarmament, and the strange machinations of the Cold War coloured all our thoughts about war. 'Peaceniks' were cool.

So, when I entered the University of Toronto in 1980, the crowd at the Soldiers' Tower at Hart House were rather sparse at 11 a.m. on Remembrance Day. When I returned in 1996 to teach there, the crowd was thick. Why? Maybe it was the 'yellow ribbon' campaigns, the Iraq War(s), the skirmishes in

Afghanistan, and (of course) '9/11'. It began to feel as though the whole world was on a permanent 'war footing'.

But who was the enemy? Never mind, it was cool to be hawkish now. It still feels that way, only more. Perhaps that's why, more than ever, we want to gather at the cenotaph.

But what *is* it we remember? I think about this a lot.

The Glory and the Horror

Helen Hughes gave me a lovely gift a few weeks ago. It's a little book of poems published in 1918. It's inscribed by its first owner: "Geo. F. Clingan, Lieut. 260 Batt'in, C.E.F.(S), Salmon Arm, B.C."

The poems were penned by Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy, an eccentric Church of England clergyman. But what am I saying? They're all eccentric. Studdert-Kennedy was a Chaplain, a 'Padre' who spent the Great War deep in its trenches. He befriended and comforted thousands of soldiers, not just with prayer and sacrament, but with friendship and cigarettes. They called him 'Woodbine Willie'.

That war made him incredibly sad and viciously angry. He wrote poems to keep madness at bay. He was not alone. The Great War produced a host of fine poets – Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Robert Graves, Edward Thomas, and many more. "My subject is War and the Pity of War," wrote Owen. "The poetry is in the pity."

None of their poems exalt war. None of them bask in its glory. If ever they do, they're being sarcastic. Their experience of war shattered the old narratives of 'heroism, valour, gallantry, and glory' in the way a constant bombardment of shells broke their comrades' bodies and shattered their troubled minds.

Paul Fussell's brilliant book, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, patiently recounts the dismantling of the old Edwardian 'certainties', the outworn notions of class, the moralistic notions of duty, the cringing deference to nobility, and the high diction that tries to make 'horror' sound 'glorious'. As I write these words, I've just flipped through that book once again. Here's a random morsel plucked from page 29:

"The innocent army fully attained the knowledge of good and evil at the Somme on July 1, 1916 [*note: 60,000 of 'our' soldiers died that day*]. That moment, one of the most interesting in the whole long history of human disillusion, can stand as a type of all the ironic actions of the war. What could remain of

confidence in Divine assistance once it was known that Haig [*Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig – my high school was named after him*] wrote his wife just before the attack: 'I feel that every step of my plan has been taken with the Divine help'?"

In a thousand ways, the Great War changed everything. Old ways of waging war were finally undone. Mechanised death was born. Civilians would pay the price. Old verities were thrown out. And the easy pieties of Christianity took a beating so brisk that they've never recovered. The Kaiser's men, too, assumed God was on their side, didn't they? *Gott mit uns!*

Woodbine Willie survived the war. He wrote many beautifully angry books and worked himself to death as a parish priest. He wanted to save broken people; he wanted to save society; and he wanted to redeem Christianity from the backlash of atheism it continued to cause by mouthing sickly pieties. He wanted to save himself too, I think, to heal the psychic afflictions triggered by war's true horror and fake glory.

One of his books, published in November 1919, is called *Lies*. I bought a copy for 50 pence thirty years ago in a grimy used book shop in England. (It was just the best kind of shop: a grumpy owner, dishevelled shelves, and an ancient cat that hissed when you passed by.) Here's a bit from page 15 of that book:

"I was always interested in military history. Yes, that's the word, interested. I was just interested because I knew nothing. Battles were just the movements on the chess-board of the world to me. I was as innocent, as fatuously, idiotically innocent as most young men of my generation. I carried the interesting facts into my first battle, and there they came to life, they roared and thundered, and cried like a child for mercy. They stood up before me like obscene spectres, beckoning with bloody hands, laughing like fiends at my little parochial religion, and my silly parochial God. I can remember running over an open space under shellfire trying madly to fit in the dates, and every shrieking shell kept yelling at me with foul oaths: Now do you understand, you miserable little parson with your petty shibboleths, this is W—A—R—War, and History is War – and this is what History means. How about gentle Jesus, God the Father, and the Peace of God – how about it?"

He wrote more books and poems, all of them plain spoken, all of them circling obsessively around his life's central questions. Why is there so much sordid suffering? Why do we bring it upon ourselves? Why must we tell so many lies about it? And why has God – if there be a God – made us this way? *Why does God not end all suffering?*

He came to see that the only possible answer that does not end in utter despair is something like this: Love must absorb Suffering and not inflict it. And this, it turns out, is what the cross is about after all. This is why an enormous act of Remembrance sits at the heart of Christian Faith: "Do this in Remembrance of Me."

I fear the return of the 'high' diction that wants to make 'horror' sound 'glorious'. I'm prone to speak in the opposite way, just to compensate. But the great lie we should all stop telling ourselves is really a lie of omission, a failure of memory, or perhaps it's a wilful forgetting.

"Lest we forget" you righteously insist? Alright. Then let's not forget *this*. Ever. Every soldier's death is predicated, not only upon their willingness to die, but first of all upon their willingness to kill. That is what we asked them to do: to kill for us. Some of the worst PTSD suffered by soldiers is caused, not by what was done to them, but by the ghastly business they were instructed to do. And they did it. Why don't we remember that?

Calling all Scriveners

You can't possibly have read this far. But if, perchance, you slogged all the way here, consider this little proposition, won't you? But first a cup of tea, maybe, to restore your now-exhausted spirit. I'll wait right here…

...Better now?

Our Church's newsletter, *Hark the Herald*, is planning its next publication in December. Its indefatigable editor, Marjorie Howell, is always looking for 'good copy' – that's editor-speak for 'a usable article'. Why not think about contributing one yourself? Not long – just a few hundred words would suffice.

Tell us a good story, or put into words something that's been on your mind for a long time, or tell us a tale from your pandemic life, or just tell us something about yourself. If all else fails, you could always write a limerick.

Email it to Marjorie by December 7 ("a day that will live in infamy"). Here's her address: scot65can@yahoo.ca

Yours in the faith,
Andrew