

Reflections/Readings for Remembrance Day

Remembrance Day provides an occasion to set aside our daily routines to focus on those who have fought and continue to defend human rights and democracy. How do we honour those who have fallen, those who served and those who continue to serve? One answer is that we honour them by reading about them and their causes and by remembering the sacrifices they've made and are making.

A quotation about sacrifice by Albert Pine states, "What we do for ourselves dies with us. What we do for others and the world remains and is immortal." And thus, they are immortal, those who have sacrificed their lives in the defence of values that Canadians hold dear.

In John McRae's poem "In Flanders Fields" these newly dead speak directly to us, "We are the dead," they say. "Short days ago we lived." In the second stanza they exhort us to take the torch that signifies the values for which they fought. If we do not hold their values high, "We shall not sleep," they tell us. We should not disappoint those who made the ultimate sacrifice, but, instead we should take up their torch. Let them sleep!

The theme of the following readings reflects some of the values that the torch symbolizes. The readings also reflect the dangers of standing silently by and not taking up the torch.

First They Came for the Jews

First they came for the Jews
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me
and there was no one left
to speak out for me.

Pastor Martin Niemöller, 1945

We are all one human race, interconnected and interdependent. Politics that are not based on moral considerations are, at the end of the day, not practical politics at all. It is out of these considerations that I beg you to permit me to repeat here what I said, exactly eight years ago, in a speech to the German Bundestag: I come from a people that gave the ten commandments to the world. Let us agree that we need three more, and they are these: thou shalt not be a perpetrator; thou shalt not be a victim; and thou shalt never, but never, be a bystander. Professor Yehuda Bauer, Jan 27, 2006 at the United Nations

No man is an island, entire of itself
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main
if a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were,
as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were
any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind
and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls
it tolls for thee.

John Donne 1572-1631, Meditation XVII

If the rights of one single human are dimmed, does all humanity fall under a shadow? Can a gesture by one nation stir change oceans away? Will we ever be able to promise human rights for all, once and for all? When it comes to the simple matter of human kind's basic rights, there are no simple questions, no wrong ones, and never enough. Canadian Museum of Human Rights, October 6, 2006.

Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it. It is time to read, reflect and remember so that the dead might sleep knowing that we carry their torch, that their values are protected and that the lessons of history are not forgotten.

Teacher's Notes:

There are separate materials on the website for "First They Came", Professor Bauer's speech and the quotation from the Canadian Museum of Human Rights (It's called "A Spark in Canada to Illuminate the World").

The John Donne piece is filled with famous sayings: No man is an island; any man's death diminishes me and never send to know for whom the bell tolls. How do they all say the same thing yet with a different twist each time? How is the message the same as "The Hangman"?

And finally, what are the many questions that we should ask about the simple matter of human kind's basic rights?