

**“Global Unitarianism” a sermon on Remembrance Day and the  
International Council of Unitarians and Universalists**

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Is Remembrance Day about honouring sacrifice or glorifying war? That was the question host Doug Main posed on Friday. With a young Mennonite pastor I was part of a two person panel on CTS network's "Top Story" It's a religion focused network on Shaw channel 51. My answer was immediate. There is no glorying in war on Remembrance Day. I have been to many cenotaph ceremonies large and small over the years. They have all been characterized by a sombreness as the aging veterans stood with far away looks remembering the friends and comrades they left behind on battlefields. When we talk of peace and war, we are talking the politics of nations. When we speak of Remembrance Day we are speaking of the stories of individual men and women sucked up in the national issue. But their stories and their sacrifices are deeply personal. Whether one agrees with war or not, I think most can agree that war exacts a terrible toll on the participants, soldier and civilian alike. Look at the faces around the cenotaph and know that the living were changed just as much as the dead. The goal of Remembrance Day is to honour those stories and those sacrifices in hopes that no more young men and women will ever have to make them again.

In recent years I have noticed that historians in print and on video, have been working to include the stories from all sides in war. As often as not you will hear the Japanese soldier's view as in the film "Letters From Iwo Jima", or the Viet Cong soldier's experience in documentaries about the Na Trang valley. What a great step forward that is, for it is only when we begin to hear the stories of sacrifice and suffering, of courage and bravery from the other side can we begin to grasp the frustrating futility and the tremendous cost of war. A few weeks ago I watched Ken Burns' multipart PBS film on World War Two. It told many evocative American stories from the frontlines and the home front. But at the end of the many hours came a single graphic that moved me to tears. In the last 'good war' 60 million people died. Only a small percentage of those were in uniform.

On this Remembrance Day I honour those who heeded the call of nation willingly or not to serve as soldiers, as peacekeepers, as support persons. And I honour the lives of those always unwillingly caught in the middle of wars. The old spiritual says, "I ain't gonna study war no more," but if we don't pause now and then and study those far away looks and tear streaked faces at the cenotaph, surely we are destined to make war again and again. 'Lest we forget' is a motto honouring the dead, but it also is a call to keep the lessons of history before us.

We may never be able to end war, but ceremonies such as Remembrance Day, and exploring the impact of war on 'the other side' may at least help us commit to trying every course of action short of war to resolve difference.

In fact, on Friday, I taped three panel discussions for 'Top Story'. Compared to the issues of family violence and Remembrance Day, the last conversation seemed almost silly: Are Facebook and the Internet good things or are they destroying society? I had been back from the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists meetings for less than 36 hours. I had spent the better part of a week with Unitarians from 22 nations representing six continents. I now sit on an Executive Committee whose members come from Canada, the U.S., Spain, England, Wales, Australia, South Africa and India. We have funds to meet only once a year. Without Internet technology, we simply could not function in any meaningful way.

And when you can meet and break bread with people who share your faith, who become as real to you as your brother or sister or spouse or child, how can you possibly demonize them enough to make war on them? I watch the Transylvanian Bishop oppose what North Americans would see as a trivial change to nominating procedures. Why? Because this measure would give too great a weight to a pre-selected slate of nominees, an anxious prospect for a man who lived most of his life under one party communism. When I ask the Indonesian delegates about the state of their homeland and I am told that theirs is a nation with fires burning underground, both in the restless volcanoes and in the political turmoil, how can I do anything but empathize? When I speak with a trained social worker from Nigeria who has two little girls just like me, but who cannot find work, how can I be anything but grateful for the luck that caused me to be born here in a land of plenty? How can I not want to help these people in any effective way I can?

But make no mistake. These were not sad or depressed folks looking for a handout. In fact, they were delightful humour-filled spark plugs who brought joy and music to our proceedings. And they brought their understanding of our shared Unitarian faith.

Our religion grows in many places around the world, but because the history and cultures are so different, because the time and place of their birthing are so different, the expressions of Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism are very different as well. At first I found that challenging, but then I found the common link. On the Saturday morning of the conference I was tasked to work with New Zealand minister Derek McCullough, another chef, by the way, to offer a brief morning worship. Together we assembled a service about similarities and differences. Derek left me the task of offering this homily:

Two years ago I attended my first ICUU conference in Montserrat, Spain. I was nervous. It was all very new. I knew I would encounter expressions of Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism very different from my own. I would meet people who had firmer and more definite beliefs than mine. I am a Canadian, and being definite is a little foreign to us. In a CBC Radio contest to come up with a phrase to describe something as truly Canadian – like the phrase “As American as apple pie,” we elected, “As Canadian as possible under the circumstances.” Add to that I am a Unitarian Canadian. We describe our church mostly by what we don’t believe: “Well, we’re not ...this or that.” Some of us don’t even know how to say what we do believe.

So how would I fare in a place where there was such diversity – in geography, in cultures, in statements of faith? I was nervous.

To my delight, I found a community where learning from one another was more important than talking, where there was honest inquiry into others’ views and beliefs. And as I participated in more and more conversations, as I attended Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist worship in flavours from around the world, I discovered a common thread. Earlier in this meeting, Rev. Istvan Kovacs of Transylvania spoke of how the energizing sap comes to us rising from the roots of our past, but how that sap is made new and is transformed by the sunlight of the present into the growth of new leaves and branches.

\*We Unitarians around the world share a pursuit of free inquiry in whatever culture the church exists.

\*We share a pursuit of the deeper personal spiritual understanding of Unitarianism in the world.

\*We share a commitment to living a personal understanding of Unitarianism in the world, by which I mean we all respond to the call for social justice in a way that is appropriate for our homelands.

\*And finally, we share a passion for creating meaningful communities of love and mutual support.

In my view, these are the core root values that I found at Montserrat meetings, the core root values that link our different expressions of the Unitarian and Universalist ideals around the globe. That realization moved me deeply.

When my New Zealand worship partner Rev. Derek McCullough and I shared the Chalice Lighting, we observed that we come from very far apart in the world and yet that we shared a common historical link to ancestors in the United Kingdom.

As I look around the room at the different faces, as I listen to the many native languages and accents, I am struck by our amazing diversity. And yet, I still feel, as I listen more deeply, that these roots of Unitarianism are the common tie, the common tradition. Each of us is a beautiful leaf, a beautiful variant, a unique expression of those core root values.

I suppose that the real value of my experience at the ICUU meetings is a little like the goal of Remembrance Day. Each of us has lives filled with good things and challenge in different measure. Sometimes there is so much going on, that we never get a chance to lift our heads up and look around beyond the edge of our lives, we never get a chance to see our lives from a different perspective. On Remembrance Day I usually ponder what my life would have been like had I lived through war. I am again humbled with gratitude for my good fortune that I have never faced that reality. At ICUU I wonder what it would be like to believe in free religion while living under communism or dictatorship or in a racial or ethnic minority or in stunning poverty. I am again humbled by my good fortune. And I am stretched as I realize I have far more to learn from my co-religionists than I have to teach them.