

Sermon: *Five Bucks is Five Bucks* – Rev. Norm Horofker first delivered Nov. 9, 2014

I thought for some time, before I selected the reading* that you just heard. That poem was written by Curtis D. Bennett a poet who served in the US air force during the Vietnam War. It is not an easy poem to hear. It names without any apology the myth of the glory of death in wartime! Some will no doubt say that it has no place at a Remembrance Day service. As the last line of the poem says...”For if this myth were proved untrue, How could we ever face ourselves? How could we ever...be so cruel?”

I was expecting that I would read that poem rather than Margaret, our service leader. But when I asked her about it she emailed me this response: “I ignored Remembrance Day for years, thinking of it as a glorification of war. Now I look at it as recognition that people did die in those awful ways, described in that poem, at our bidding, and we need to remember that, and them. I am so thankful that neither my brother, husband nor son have had to be involved in that sort of fight. That is what I also think of on Remembrance Day.”

In today’s service, I find myself trying to weave together a number of themes. First, a message for Remembrance Day. Second, a message that will encourage you to support this beloved congregation during our pledge drive. Third, a continuation of the month’s theme of Deep Listening.

Today is a time when Canada is reeling from the killing of two of its soldiers by individuals reacting to our foreign policy. I woke up last Monday to news on the radio that Canada had dropped its first bombs in Iraq. The news in the professional manner of a CBC broadcast, still had the tone of celebration. In the lead up to another November 11, I grieve our relationship to war. I long for a national leader who will announce the use of Canadian military force with a heavy heart, proclaiming that it is a sad day and an event of which he or she is not proud, an action that was perhaps necessary but in no way an action to celebrate.

What is forgotten in many of the Remembrance Day services is the fact that Remembrance Day, intended as a day to honour those who serve in our military also commemorates a covenant with the dead. A covenant best expressed in the phrase, Never Again. A covenant wherein we the survivors commit to strive to do everything in our power to prevent war. I am not trying to make a plea for pacifism this morning. I am instead making a plea for a place in our increasing secular society where issues of morality and the basis of our deepest sense of values can be explored and challenged, a place where you can grow spiritually, where you can connect with, identify with, have a relationship with all the amazing aspects of the universe where we find ourselves. A Unitarian Universalist congregation is such a place. A place where you can expect to have your assumptions challenged, even your assumptions about how we honour our military service men and women.

We need a place where we are expected to listen to the questions that the universe is asking us and where we are challenged to make a decision to **give meaning** in the midst of what can seem like chaos. A Unitarian Universalist Congregation, like this one, is a place where it is assumed that the transformation of the world begins with the work of each one of us seeking to transform ourselves and our role in the world. In this congregation we strive to put our experience of life into the context of a spiritual journey and to reflect on all that that means.

As your minister, I have been privileged to witness how that journey plays out. I have seen members of this congregation again and again reach out to support one another in times of need whether that is during sickness, bereavement, loss, or sadness. I have also been a part of the celebration of life’s joy and the triumphs within this community. The portion of our service that we call “Joys and Concerns” is the centrepiece of the service in many ways. More important than the sermon because it is a reflection of how we are living our lives, hopefully in some way shaped by our experience together.

This congregation is a place where we come to get our spiritual batteries recharged so that we may go out and do the work that we feel called to do, to bring more love and more justice into the world. I am proud, beyond my ability to express it here, in the way that so many in this congregation take action beyond the walls of this building to bring about a vision of a more just and more sustainable world. In a world where diversity is becoming ever more granular, where our neighbour and our co-worker and our fellow congregant may come from a very different cultural background we need strong UU congregations. We need places like UUCH where we celebrate that diversity, where we strive to honour and to learn from one another, even when our world views and spiritual interpretations may be very different. We have a message that is right for the times, and we need to commit to share it with as many people as we can.

I am not making the claim that we are without faults and flaws as a spiritual community. We are a very human project and like all human endeavours we can fall short of our aspirations. But what a gift we have been given to have this place, these friends, this religious tradition to work with and to help us to strive to be all that we want to become. We are a covenantal community. When you join this congregation, you do not sign a contract but you make a commitment to live in harmony, to respect one another and to support the work of the congregation **to the extent that you are able** with your time, with your personal commitment, with your pledge of emotional support one to another, and with your money. I hope you think of the annual pledge campaign as a wonderful opportunity. It is a time to talk to others about what this congregation means to you. How this congregation is a significant part of your plan to give meaning to your life, to connect and identify with the amazing gift of life that we have been given. It is also a time to share your vision for our future, where you would like to see us improving and growing stronger. Once a year you are asked to think deeply about what this congregation means to you, how important it is to you and how much you want its message to go out into the larger community.

Over the next week or two you will have that chance. I hope you will be generous. Generous because you can see how this congregation fills a central need in your life and in the life of our larger community.

I will conclude with a story that has a weak link to the First World War, that speaks to how our perspective on money can distort our priorities, that illustrates how every pledge, no matter the size, helps, and that speaks to our need to listen and be heard.

After the First World War, young pilots returned from the war with a love of flying and a mastery of the controls of the simple flying machines of that time. Some eked out a living barnstorming, literally working from farmer's fields next to the barns, taking the curious and brave up for a ride in their airplane. The life of a barnstorming pilot was exciting but not very financially rewarding and they had to work hard at times to get customers.

One such pilot was working out of a farmer's field when an older couple approached him to see what a flight would cost. The pilot offered them a two for one price of five dollars. The husband looked at his wife and said, "I don't know...I mean five bucks is five bucks". And after considering the cost they turned to walk away.

"Hold on there a minute", the pilot said. "I know that you would really enjoy this. I mean all of my customers find it totally thrilling, they are screaming and yelling and can't stop talking about the flight. I tell ya what. I will offer you a special deal. If you go on this flight and can keep quiet, not making a noise during the flight, I will refund your five dollars." The couple looked at each other and agreed that this sounded like a fair deal.

And so they climbed into the back of the plane and soon were high over the farm fields. The pilot now began a series of manoeuvres learned in dog fights over the fields of France and Germany. He intended to give the couple a thrill and provoke the hoots and hollers that he was expecting. He pulled the plane into a steep climb, then dove straight down toward the earth, pulling up at the last minute. But there was no response from the back seat. This was going to require some real aerobatics, so he did his best barrel rolls, loop de loop and flying upside down. Nothing... not a peep from the couple behind him.

Finally he gave up and brought the plane down for a landing next to the barn. He turned around to look at the couple, partly in frustration for their frugality and partly in admiration. But when he looked back the wife was there but her husband was not. "What happened" he asked. "Where is your husband?" "Well, I am afraid that he fell out of the plane during the first flip" she said. "Holy cow" said the pilot..." why didn't you say something?"

"Well" the wife replied, "five bucks is five bucks."

If this community did not exist there would be a big hole in our lives. And if we set out to fill that hole without the benefit of all that previous generations of Universalists and Unitarians have done for us in Halifax, we would find it a daunting task indeed. When contacted by your canvass team member if you think we are doing a good job here at UUCH, and if you can afford to increase your pledge, please do so...after all every additional five bucks is five bucks toward a good cause.

May it be so, Amen

***Reading:** *Keeping the Distance* by Curtis D. Bennett

Beneath this earth young warriors sleep
Forever more, forever more,

And for what myth was it they died,
Who sent them here forever?
To bury them, so far away
From farm and village, hearth and soil?

We dare not ask of why or how,
We dare not think too hard of them!
We need not question of ourselves,
Of how we let them go so far,

So we may keep our distance safe
Can paint their pictures in our mind
Of how they sacrificed their lives;
Of how they died so willingly,
On land that did not give them birth,

Noblesse Oblige, they sleep the earth.

We know they did not wail or scream,
Nor cry nor piss their pants in fear!,

They did not spill their crimson guts
Through gaping wounds of steel-sliced flesh,
Or stare in numbness at their blood
That pulsed and squirted, stained the soil.

We know they did not weep for mother,
Nor curse their fate nor bawl in pain,
Or seek to find their missing limbs,
While dragging stumps through fiery ground,

Or smelled their own flesh, burning stench!
Nor whimpered soft through blood blind eyes,
As whistling breath through gaping throats
Shot out their life in scarlet spurts.

We do not wish them here at home
To find eternal, lasting sleep,
No, better stay in foreign lands,
Where they sacrificed their life,

No, t'is better they remain unseen,
To keep their distance and our dream
To keep them heroes, sight unseen,

For sure, they died as noble men,
Not terror-stricken sons and boys,

For if this myth were proved untrue,
How could we ever face ourselves?
How could we ever...be so cruel?