

Remembering and remembrance

By John Siebert

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Remembering concerns what we each experience directly and can recall as memories: that boyhood homerun that won the game, the first time you met that special person. It all comes back—the sights, the sounds, the temperature. We can even have memories about great memories, as we recall those special moments and act in response.

Remembrance, as opposed to remembering, is the commemoration of an important event by a group, small or large, which instructs and creates shared understanding and commitment.

As we meet on the 11th day of the 11th month during the 11th hour, our minds turn to remembering, but, more accurately, we are prodded to engage in remembrance.

Most of us do not remember World War I. What we know about it we learn from storytelling, reading history books, from public displays of poppies and ceremonies, from reciting “In Flanders Fields the poppies grow, between the crosses row on row” in elementary school. I remember being chosen in grade 6 at Vineland Public School to recite the poem from memory at the Remembrance Day assembly in the gym.

What we do on Remembrance Day with our neighbours is engage in a publicly sanctioned national event. It can have personal elements. Some can recall grandfathers, uncles, maybe great-aunts who served in that war, so the public remembrance and personal memories can begin to merge.

In a tucked-away corner in a field in northern France there is a monument at Vimy Ridge. It was created by Canadians to mark a bloody battle in 1917 in which Canadian soldiers died en masse on the way to defeating the Germans for control of a patch of ground.

The Vimy Memorial is spectacular. If you read the novel *The Stone Carvers* by Jane Urquhart, you get a sense of how much trouble, cost, and initiative were required to raise the white towers of stone with the carved figures embodying the virtues.

In a beautiful prose poem, delivered as a speech, Director of the Canadian War Museum Dean F. Oliver (2012) speaks about Vimy as place, battle, and memory. Oliver refers to the pivotal role of Vimy in Canada’s emerging sense of its own nationhood, as not just a colonial appendage to the British Empire.

“Vimy sits at or near the very centre of whatever national historical psyche Canadians might reasonably be said to possess.” He also asks if the memory of Vimy has been used and abused: “Is Vimy a cheap spur to emotionalism? Is it a cue to pass the hat for history? Is Vimy a bumper sticker rejoinder to presumably dim and ungrateful contemporaries?”

As a place, Vimy hosted an epic battle, a historical and tragic accident. It had no previous military history, no fortifications; it wasn’t at the strategic crossroads of empire or even trade and commerce. Before the battle maybe 2,500 people lived in two small villages in rolling farmland. All that was there was irrevocably changed with the battle in 1917. Today it is a parkland with a soaring stone memorial—a site of war tourism.

Vimy was an event on April 9, 1917, a battle in the First World War. It was not really decisive, except that the Canadian units took the ridge from the German enemy in one quick day of fighting. The weather was wet and cold with snow. The troops were dirty in their trenches, suffering diseases, with vermin small and large scampering over them and infesting their clothes.

It is estimated that 3,600 Canadians died and 6,400 were injured there. For some, the despair and carnage of war are summed up in the battle at Vimy. But that is not the case for everyone. Oliver writes: “For others, it is the nation incarnate, through fire and brimstone birthed at the very edge of hell.”

With the battle won Vimy instantly passed into the realms of memory, faith, and celebration—of recollection, imagery, myth, and remembrance. “Vimy became a shorthand narrative for the war itself. It still is.” But Oliver also asks, “How, and for whom? Does Vimy crowd out other narratives?” Canada’s government broke laws and punished people who didn’t agree with the mythmaking. “Wartime Canada sought to legislate the boundaries of patriotism and ostracize dissent, punishing those who resisted or who questioned too vigorously the grounds for the assumption of dissent.”

We are fortunate to live in Canada, a country that is self-critical and changes. We can agree with Oliver to “speak of heroes and feel no shame; but question the record and fear no retribution.”

In the midst of the routine, day-to-day work at Project Ploughshares I sometimes stumble across insightful work by others who are trying to make sense of the world of guns, bombs, and war. In 2011 David Rieff wrote an article in *Harper’s Magazine* in advance of the tenth anniversary of the attack on 9/11. September 9, 2001: most of us likely have firsthand memories of that day—where we were and what we were doing when the planes descended on their targets.

Rieff recites what is written on the brass plaque at the lower Manhattan site where the twin towers of the World Trade Center once stood:

May the lives remembered, the deeds recognized, and the spirit reawakened be eternal beacons, which reaffirm respect for life, strengthen our resolve to preserve freedom, and inspire an end to hatred, ignorance and intolerance.

Unexceptional sentiments, writes Rieff. A time of remembrance, such as a funeral, is not a time for subtle historical revisionism, critical analysis, sharp rejoinder. It is a time for solidarity, deference, and piety.

Remembrance of this tragic event, which seared a nation, is a time for respectful recounting of the losses—personal for the family and friends of those who died—and for the broader notion of striving to live without these vicious attacks on the calm and mundane of everyday living.

But Rieff also points to the unseen guest at occasions of remembrance, and the fact that remembrance can have a downside. In the plaque's platitudes is the phrase, "strengthen our resolve to preserve freedom." This is not innocent piety. It is a call to action. It is a contemporary political claim on the nation. "The ghost at the banquet of all public commemoration is always politics—above all, the mobilization of national solidarity." The essence of nationalism is that it can create support for collective action.

And such collective remembrance and action are not always wise or welcome.

Remembrance doesn't usher in "closure," a psychological term that can be, according to Rieff, a malign and corrosive fantasy. Remembrance can nourish illusions about how long we human beings can remember; potentially grave political and historical consequences can be nurtured by remembrance.

Rieff quotes Ecclesiastes 1:11, "There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to happen, among those who come after;" to make the point that there is no telling how long 9/11 will live in infamy in our minds and hearts, and that it may be saner and more healthy for the body politic to get on with forgetting than to dwell on remembrance.

At some point, historical travesties slip from stirring passions to being debating points, to being calendar blips, to being—for all intents and purposes—forgotten.

Consider Pearl Harbor, Rieff says to his fellow Americans. On December 7, 1941 there was an outrage, "a day that will live in infamy" according to President Roosevelt. Ten years later that date would be recalled with angry public denunciations. Fifty years later, Rieff asks, who would refuse to buy a Toyota because of Pearl Harbor?

Wars end, usually through negotiation and compromise. People move on. Old enemies become new trading partners. It can take years—or decades. The length of time can be determined by how much and how long people focus on revenge or exacting vengeance through processes of remembrance and action. Keep churning up the memories and you can prolong the period of getting to yes—that is, to peace.

Rieff delicately suggests that we consider cutting to the chase. The so-called war on terror will never end with what's left of al-Qaeda in the dock or an acquiescing peace agreement signed at Tora Bora by Taliban leaders. Strategic forgetting may actually be preferable to remembrance if it speeds the process of reconciliation. "Then the peace that must come eventually might actually come sooner."

References

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Rieff, David. 2011. After 9/11: The limits of remembrance. *Harper's Magazine*, August.