

**Bowling Alone for Peace**  
**Rev. Diane Rollert**  
**The Unitarian Church of Montreal, 8 November 2009**

Oh what a time we have had trying to find the right place to install the World War I memorial plaque. Did it belong in the front hallway? Did it belong in the Memorial Corner in the Sanctuary? Did it need to be stored until some future date? I remember a poignant moment, when one of our Wardens said to me, "Why are we so upset about this?"

The plaque had been commissioned by the congregation shortly after the First World War. It bears these words, words you heard earlier:

*In memory of the members of this church who served in the war  
Aug. 1914 : Nov. 1918  
this tablet is erected by a grateful congregation:  
All service ranks the same with God.  
With God there is no last nor first.*

From what anyone can remember, it hung above a doorway that led from the sanctuary into the fellowship hall (Channing Hall) in our former church building on Sherbrooke and Simpson Street. Somehow, the plaque had survived the fire that destroyed the church in 1987. It was an excellent example of the ornate woodwork of its time, but it had seen better days. The writing had nearly faded away, and the wooden filigree on top was broken in many places. So, it sat in the corner of a storage closet in the basement of this (the new) church and it gathered dust.

Our Wardens are a small committee of wise elders who tend to the institutional memory of the church. When memorial gifts are given to the church, they are responsible for the disbursement of funds and the placement of artefacts. A year or so ago, the Wardens uncovered the World War I memorial plaque as they were finalizing the restoration and installation of another plaque that also had lived in disrepair and storage in that same closet for many years after the fire. It was a monumental tablet of bronze that had been a gift from the Unitarians in Boston in commemoration of the first meeting of the general conference of Unitarians in Canada in 1917.

Oh, the history we had hidden in our closets. Oh, the challenges we have faced naming and claiming our history. We are a congregation in transformation, much like the city that surrounds us today. Back in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Church of the Messiah, as we were known then, was made up almost entirely of the English-speaking financially powerful of Montreal and their employees. Today we are a vastly different community, yet roots are roots.

I've told you this story before, but it bears telling again. During the time leading up to the First World War our former church building – really a gothic cathedral – held a prominent position in the Golden Square Mile. While its members upheld freedom from dogma, it was a politically and socially conservative congregation at odds with its relatively new

American minister, Frederick Griffin. In 1917, when the United States entered the First World War, years after Canada had, Griffin spoke out against it, but the majority of the congregation supported the war effort.

When the biennial conference of Unitarians came to meet in Montreal for the first time, Griffin hoped that by marking the 100-year anniversary of peace between the US and Britain (we were still part of the British Empire then), he would be able to push through an anti-war resolution at the conference. Remember that there were anti-recruitment riots going on in Montreal in 1917. The debate over conscription was deeply dividing Anglophones and Francophones. Griffin and his fellow Unitarian peace activists lost the debate during the continental conference, thanks to an impassioned speech by former US President (and Unitarian) William Howard Taft. There were many who said, at the time, that Taft saved the Unitarians from disgrace.

Now that the World War I plaque has been installed above the bronze plaque, I see how well they fit as bookends to a moment in our history. One represents Griffin's hopes for peace in the face of World War I. The other commemorates those who lost their lives in that very same war. It, too, represents a dream of peace, erected at a time when there was hope that the First World War was the war to end all wars.

Isn't it funny how history seems to repeat itself? Here I am, like Frederick Griffin, a fairly new minister from the US, who got caught in the middle of an impassioned debate about war and peace. The World War I plaque became an emotional touchstone here as we tried to find its rightful place. My position was clear. The plaque deserved a place of honour, but I didn't want to see it in our Memorial Corner in the back of this sanctuary. To me that corner is perfect with its sparse, Zen-like beauty. Years ago, the Montreal Fire Department, and the families of the two firemen who died in the 1987 fire, had joined members here in a dedication of that corner. The one burnt angel and the small glass plaque dedicated to the firemen are a simple, stark testament to that moment. A large World War I plaque that had been designed to hang in a cathedral would have overshadowed the focus of the corner.

There were those who wanted to see the plaque hung somewhere in the sanctuary and others who didn't want to see it hung at all. I have to stress that the differences of opinion did not fall neatly into a generational divide. Yes, there were those who had served or come of age during World War II who felt the plaque deserved a prominent position. Then there were those of the very same generation who said they wished never to see a war memorial again. "Why not create a new peace plaque?" they asked. One older member remembered her father serving in World War I. "I hate those memories," she said. "Don't put the plaque up." One younger member spoke of her father's military career. "Unitarians don't have enough respect for the military. The plaque needs to be seen."

The discussions mirrored the challenges we face each Remembrance Day. Do we honour only those who served? Do we take time to remember all the civilians who die in war? Do we add a white poppy to the red poppies to remind us that we must work for peace? Unlike the Quakers, we don't take a denominational stand when it comes to pacifism. Our feelings about war and peace are a matter of personal conscience.

But there was more to the emotions surrounding the plaque. It wasn't just about our feelings about the military or about peace activism. It was about the connections we are losing to the past. Each year as our veterans carry the memorial wreath into the sanctuary, we can't help but mark the passage of time. None of us is getting any younger, as they say.

In recent years we have said goodbye to too many of our beloved veterans who had served in World War II. Those who carried the wreath today tell me that they worry about what will happen in future years when they are gone or too infirm to be present. "You will have to think of a new way to do this," they tell me. "You should start warning people now that the Remembrance Day ceremony is going to change." Things may change, but I have no doubt that there will be a younger generation who will step forward to carry the wreath in their memory. There is a younger generation that has already stepped forward to serve as peacekeepers and peacebuilders. Their numbers may not be great. Let us be thankful that we are not living through another World War. Their numbers may not be great, but they are here.

Those who lived and loved the old church carry the same worries as our veterans. Who will carry on the memory of the past when we are gone? Who will take care of the rich archives we have kept of our history? Who will tend to our heritage library? Artefacts from the past take on a deeper meaning as the clock ticks, and as generations shift their focus. Things won't be the same, but I believe the past will not be lost.

We will not be bowling alone for peace. Maybe you are familiar with Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone*. Written in 2000, and based on extensive data, Putnam drew the conclusion that Western culture was becoming increasingly disconnected. People were no longer actively engaged in social groups, be it political parties, religious institutions, or parent-teacher groups. We live more isolated lives, he said, thanks to computers, television, the way we work, and the way we socialize. Gone is the bowling league. Now we bowl alone.

I hear the fear that someone is going to drop the ball. Clergy consultants tell us that in the old days people had a greater sense of civic duty. They supported the work of their congregations because that's what you did. You pitched in. You were part of the community. Volunteerism has changed. Now we're too busy to be part of a community. We've all gone bowling alone. But I don't believe it.

Not too long ago, I conducted a memorial service for Muriel Duckworth, a renowned peace activist, former president of the Voice of Women, who stayed actively engaged in fighting for nuclear disarmament even through her twilight years. She was 100 years old when she died this August. Preparing for her memorial, we wondered how full the sanctuary would be. Would we need to open up the doors to Phoenix Hall? After all, she had been eulogized by the CBC. "But aren't those days of activism over?" someone asked me. Surely there wouldn't be such a large gathering for a woman who had died at the age of 100. Yet, this sanctuary was packed with people, young and old, whose lives had been touched by an amazing woman.

Muriel dedicated her life to service in the name of goodness and humanity. And it is funny, but her determination reminded me so much of the veterans I have known. Yes, they and Muriel knew civic duty, however they believed it was best to fight for peace.

In my heart of hearts, I am a pacifist and I hope that I will make as much of the next 47 years of my life as Muriel did. Yet I have so much respect for those who have served in the military. I appreciate what service has meant to Canadians. When I ask new recruits why they sign up, they tell me there is the economic pull, and the sense of adventure. But more than that, there is the community atmosphere, the being part of a family that really does something together.

As I prepared for our dedication of the WWI memorial plaque, I felt a need to get in touch with those commemorated here as they lived and breathed. I went through hundreds of pictures and read personal accounts. Why did they go? For duty, for adventure, to be a part of something that mattered; not very different from the recruits and reservists of today. So many did not come home.

I cannot think of a better way to honour them than to end by letting their voices speak. These are quotes taken from the book *Far From Home: Canadians in the First World War*, by Bill Freeman and Richard Nielsen, which drew from 600 interviews of WWI veterans, done by the CBC in 1964.

“There was nothing but mud, mud, mud and water and corruption. Blood everywhere, dead men everywhere. It couldn’t be handled.” Sergeant Candy, The Princess Pat’s

“My husband was too old so during the war we helped mostly with recruiting. We thought it was quite the right thing for the church to help. My husband’s Sunday School Class were in their teens. Most of them enlisted. We’d invite them to our house to have some music. One of the boys had a drum. Some of the other boys played and we encouraged them to enlist and be good boys – very good boys. I can never forgive myself.” Mrs. Lorne Browning, Arden, Ontario

“It’s amazing how you settled down. Just like moving into a new home. Each of you...you dug your gunpits, you made a dugout, you made yourself little knickknacks with a recessed biscuit tin in the wall where you kept your odds and ends. And it seemed permanent.” Fred Fish, 4<sup>th</sup> Division Artillery

“We just couldn’t believe it, and we went about our daily chores as if nothing had happened. It was quite some time before the news filtered through our benumbed minds that the war was over and we’d survived.” William Oglivie, 21<sup>st</sup> Canadian Field Artillery

“When I was sent to the front I did not expect to come back. I shook off the fear of death by looking death straight in the face. Having done that, you are set free....We were free to rise laughing above all trifling worries about life and the future; we had gained a great liberation! Everything around us felt so obvious and simple. It was not until it was over and the gates shut behind us that we understood it all; we had been in the enchanted wood.

Now we return to civilization; once more the weary load of a future will fall upon our shoulders. Behind us – lost beyond the call – lies our enchanted wood – the real wood, the real life.” Thomas Dinesen, Danish citizen serving in the 42<sup>nd</sup> (Royal Highlanders of Canada) Battalion.

Rest in peace, sons and daughters of the past. May we learn to live the real life, to enter the enchanted wood through the work and camaraderie we share. May we find it in a place called peace, and may your memory be the foundation of its creation.