The World at Peace with Itself: Remembrance Day Event

Melbourne 11 November 2018

**Remembrance Day Reflection**

It could be said that we remember so that we can connect. The connecting informs our being. If you picked up a small sprig of rosemary as you came in, you may now notice that its oils have been transferred to the skin of your fingers. As you inhale its scent, its matter becomes part of you, just a little.

And the memory, the remembering, which it signifies is also part of each of us: the 100 years since World War I ended; 80 years since Kristallnacht; the contact wars with Indigenous people in Australia in the past 230 years – so little acknowledged; the more recent wars in which Australians have been directly involved: World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the so called Cold War, Iraq, Afghanistan; and the cruel treatment of asylum seekers in detention, especially offshore; the many ways in which war and climate intersect through fossil fuel – particularly the oil – trade; violent incidents in our cities; the uncounted otherkind conscripted to human wars; arsenals of nuclear weapons and materials; the ways all these have shaped our recent history and culture; the intersections of race, class, ethnicity, sex, gender, religion, in our responses to each other in our society … And the loss of family in our ancestries …

All these things inhabit us today.

I invite you to remember two things for a moment now, taking once again a traditional one minute silence, that many kept at 11am today:

* First, your own connection to this day: November 11, Remembrance Day. For example, my mother’s father and mother each lost a brother in World War I.
* Second, a moment when you were turned toward seeking peace, perhaps it was toward pacifism, or non-violence, anti-conscription, or other movement toward peace, justice, and ecological wholeness. For me, as a teenager in the early 70s, it was witnessing, at a distance I admit, the Moratoria protesting the Vietnam War and reading around that time the poetry of Wilfred Owen.

I invite you to remember.

[Silence for 1 minute.]

I will conclude with a poem by Wilfred Owen that I have always remembered from those teenage years. Wilfred Owen wrote poetry as a soldier during World War I and died shortly before it ended, ‘killed in action’. While ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ was important to me, the uncanny encounter in ‘Strange Meeting’ has stayed with me. I invite you to hear in this, not only the imagined human encounter but the way in the trenches, Earth itself is enlisted in human warfare, as now through the mining of uranium and in many other ways.

**‘Strange Meeting’ by Wilfred Owen**

It seemed that out of battle I escaped

Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped

Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,

Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.

Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared

With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,

Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.

And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,

By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

With a thousand pains that visions’ face was grained;

Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,

And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.

“Strange friend,” I said, “here is no cause to mourn.”

“None,” said the other, “save the undone years,

The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,

Was my life also; I went hunting wild

After the wildest beauty in the world,

Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,

But mocks the steady running of the hour,

And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.

For of my glee might many men have laughed,

And of my weeping something had been left,

Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,

The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

Now men will go content with what we spoiled,

Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.

They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.

None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.

Courage was mine, and I had mystery,

Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:

To miss the march of this retreating world

Into vain citadels that are not walled.

Then, when much blood has clogged their chariot-wheels,

I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,

Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.

I would have poured by spirit without stint

But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.

Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned

Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.

I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.

Let us sleep now. …”

*Let us not sleep now!*

Anne Elvey, 11 November 2018