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*Sunday November 9, 2014*

## **The words, the pen, the silences**

**By Jim Taylor**

**November 11, this coming Tuesday, is celebrated around the world as Remembrance Day (also Armistice Day and Veterans Day) to mark the end of the first war to end all wars. Until the next war, that is.**

**The timing for the morning's moment of silence was poetically chosen – the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month. It was not, in reality, the end of the war. World War I didn't officially end until the following year, on June 28, when the signing of the vengeful Treaty of Versailles in Paris virtually guaranteed a second war to end all wars 20 years later.**

**But at 11:00 a.m., on November 11, 1918, the guns stopped firing. The bombs stopped falling. The bullets stopped flying.**

**An eerie silence spread across the devastation of the Western Front.**

### **Familiar words**

**On Tuesday morning, people around the world will gather to pay tribute to those who died in military service. They will wear poppies on their lapels. Because of a poem penned by a Canadian, Lt. Col. John McCrae, in the back of an ambulance, the day after leading the burial service for a friend who died in the killing fields of Ypres.**

**Noting how rapidly poppies sprang up in the charnel soil of Belgium, McCrae scribbled the lines that will be recited, or sung, around the world on Tuesday morning,**

***In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.  
We are the Dead. Short days ago***

*We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields  
Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.*

## **Inspired images**

Few equally memorable poems came out of World War II. Except, perhaps, one oft-quoted at services for pilots and flyers. By some coincidence, it too has a Canadian connection. John Gillespie Magee Jr., said the words came to him piloting a Spitfire in the Royal Canadian Air Force, while his own country still straddled the fence of dubious neutrality. *High Flight* says, in part:

*Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings...  
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue  
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace  
Where never lark or even eagle flew --  
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod  
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,  
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.*

Were there any comparable poems coming out of subsequent wars in Korea, Vietnam, Bosnian, Iraq, and Afghanistan. If there were, I can't think of them.

## **Different perceptions**

And I think there's a reason. These two – like most poems of the period – were written by hand. On paper. With ink.

Since then, we have become slaves, first to the typewriter, then to the computer keyboard. To borrow metaphors appropriate to Remembrance Day, the new technologies have replaced hand-to-hand conflict with the rapid fire of machine guns, the loneliness of laser-guided missiles.

Do you remember Leroy Anderson's Typewriter Song, his brilliant and possibly satirical ode to a mechanical marvel? Listen to the rat-tat-tat of keys

**striking their target. Don't they sound like a hail of bullets? And perhaps like Hemingway's prose?**

**Knowing the direction this column might take, I deliberately wrote my first draft by hand. It does make a difference. Using a pencil, I am more in touch – literally -- with my text.**

**Something about handwriting -- the rhythmic rise and fall of ascenders and descenders, the shapes of letters circular and jagged, of vertical and horizontal strokes – lends itself to lyricism.**

**On a keyboard, every letter has the same value: click!**

## **Meaningful silences**

**Machines also expect you to drive full speed ahead to the horizon. The pen pauses, lifts off, gives time to roiling thoughts to marshal themselves into so sort of disciplined formation.**

**Handwriting allows for pensive pauses, like the rests between notes.**

**"I have been gazing into the fire, daydreaming," Rev. Merrill Wilson wrote from the trenches on November 3, 1917, to his pregnant wife back home in New Brunswick. His careful prose captured the minutiae of a soldier's life in a way that official reports never can, never will.**

**Because the silences matter as much as the words.**

**Think of the silence of concentration in an exam room. The yearning silence of "XOXOX" that ends a love letter. The silence of communion, soul to soul.**

**And, at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month, the silence as the guns ceased firing.**

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## **YOUR TURN**

**Two deliberate attacks on Canadian Forces personnel, in the weeks before Remembrance Day, have had a depressing effect on the country. Last week's column tried to see some hope within the gloom.**

**Tom Watson picked up on the idea that good deeds can have ripple effects, just as bad deeds often do: "Great column! It reminds me of the quote: 'It's**

**better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.’ There seems to be lots of ‘cursing the darkness’ afoot. Hats off to those among us who choose instead to light a candle. And thanks to you for shedding the light that you do.”**

**Mark Bedford also sent along a parallel quotation, saying that my reference to ripples “reminded me of the quote that I have used quite frequently: ‘*You can count the seeds in an apple --but you cannot count the apples in a seed.*’ The quote came to mind because I have been invited to take the 100th anniversary service for Oak Bay United Church in Victoria on November 16th. I plan to use the quote as a theme for that day.”**

**A third relevant quotation came from Dale Perkins, who had attended the ‘Rising Hope’ conference the previous weekend in Chilliwack. Dale wrote, “This item on the cover of the program might be good to share, from Reinhold Neibuhr: ‘Nothing that is worth doing can be done in our life time; therefore we are saved by HOPE. Nothing that is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by FAITH. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by LOVE.’”**

**Laurna Tallman wrote, “Thank you for this affirming message. The sheer volume of discouraging information is intimidating. We can and do make a difference and we can enlarge our influence. An encouraging word on climate change arrived on my Facebook page reinforcing a local flyer for solar panels that came in the mail last week. Three families on our road are going to look into that possibility as we have land the government might rent for that purpose. When you open your mind to the possibility for change, in situations but more especially in people, the likelihood for change grows exponentially. That's another word for faith, isn't it?”**

**Jean Mosher sent congratulations: “Again, you hit the nail, not only on its head, but sent repercussions all over the board the nail was hit into. I seldom write about things that impress me, but this one has really impressed, I'm sure, a great many readers.”**

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TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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#### PROMOTION STUFF...

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Other sources worth pursuing:

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslieGod" page, [www.seemsliegod.org](http://www.seemsliegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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