

Reading and Remembrance 2006: Holocaust and Anti-Racism Education

Executive Summary

The provincial Project Reading and Remembrance, run by the charitable arts organization, the Durham West Arts Centre, provides materials and motivation for Ontario teachers to set aside time for school children to read about veterans and, the values they protected. The voluntary project, reaching into all corners of the province, compliments the commemorative activities of Remembrance Day, adding a participatory component that encourages reading and reflection for each child. The ultimate goal is to foster the importance of reading to remember. Within the next 20-30 years, we will lose the remaining World War II veterans who modelled the defence of Canada's democratic values. By then, hopefully, there will be a new generation of young Canadians who grew up reading different types of writings about the importance of defending democratic values—a generation willing to take up the torch of remembrance to pass on to the generation after them.

Before we begin, ask yourself:

1. Who is responsible for teaching Canada's children, who come from all corners of the globe, the importance of defending democratic values?
2. How do we best engage young people in productive dialogue about Canada's democratic values and their defence? What are Canada's democratic values?
3. What parts may all educators from teachers, to school secretaries, to parents and relatives play in encouraging reading and remembrance?
4. Where do formal and informal educators find the resources to stimulate reading to remember and an interest in history?
5. Why have we let the importance of Remembrance Day decline in our society?

We will return to these questions, but, before we do: take a moment of silence (60 seconds) to reflect on the following sayings. (Don't read out who said these things; that is for the curious to pursue.)

- Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. (Lord Acton, 19th century)
- Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. (George Santayana 20th century).
- No man is an island. (John Donne, 17th century)
- Never again! (20th century post-Holocaust saying)
- To know the good is to do it. (Socrates 4th century B.C.)

These thoughts spanning over 2000 years underpin Reading and Remembrance.

Background

The Durham West Arts Centre (DWAC) started operating a small charitable arts organization in 2004. The Vision of the Centre is to create and manage a performing and visual arts centre in west Durham. Durham is to the immediate east of Toronto, has a population of approximately 600,000 and requires an arts centre specifically dedicated to the performing arts.

DWAC has spent two years building the infrastructure, profile and capacity to be the organization to create that centre. DWAC participated in the 2005 provincial Group of Seven exhibition organized by the Ontario Association of Art Galleries and the Art Gallery of Ontario with a show and book titled *The Thomsons of Durham: Tom Thomson's Family Heritage*. DWAC organized exhibitions, book, CD and magazine launches, dance and music performances, lectures, a Readathon that involved 9,000 school children, bus tours, multicultural celebrations and fundraisers. Much of this history is documented on DWAC's popular website at www.dwac.ca

Reading and Remembrance 2005 was inspired by "The Year of the Veteran". DWAC's provincial project was meant to honour veterans by having school children simultaneously read "In Flanders Fields". The DWAC website provided materials and links for teachers to gather

appropriate reading activities. Schools that signed up received a reward poster thanks to the generous sponsorship of Veterans Affairs Canada and Ontario Power Generation.

Approximately 30,000 students in 110 schools participated in 2005. The Lieutenant Governor of Ontario took part in Kincardine Ontario. The project was such a resounding success that DWAC decided to make it an annual project.

Why continue? The lessons of Reading and Remembrance 2005

Although I try to be ALWAYS POSITIVE, the sad facts are:

- History and Social Studies do not occupy enough time in our school curricula for young people to gain an understanding of Canada's history and the histories of the various countries of origin of Canada's immigrant populations from earliest times to the present.
- In the very generous attempts of Canadians to be inclusive and to avoid controversy, it is not always clear to young people that there are specific Canadian democratic principles—such as the separation of church and state, equality of the sexes, freedom of religion.
- Because of the diversity of our population and the issues that various groups of newcomers have faced and face, individuals and groups tend to prioritize contemporary issues above those of remembering the past. This focus on current social issues fails to appreciate that the values reflected in Remembrance Day and Reading and Remembrance are the very values that will advance the today's causes.

Because of the paucity of History and Social Studies in schools, the failure of Canadians generally to speak up for Canadian democratic values and the need to solve present social issues through a better understanding of the past, there is still work to be done with Reading and Remembrance.

Before we advance further, let's reflect.

- If not us, who, is going to speak up for Canada's democratic values?
- Who would prevent the spread of something as ultra-conservative and nationalistic as the Nazi movement was if something similar were to arise in Canada today? Are you sure someone would stop it?
- What are the two greatest influences on the development of teenage values? Are Canadian democratic values safe given these influences?

Reading and Remembrance 2006

Once DWAC had committed to year two, we could have continued with the popular focus on "In Flanders Fields". However, Steven Albin of the Federal Department of Justice had contacted me about the possibility of doing something jointly with the Holocaust Education Week Committee programs of the GTA. The HEW Committee offers the most comprehensive Holocaust Education program in North America. Although Canada's veterans did not know the extent of Hitler's atrocities when they signed up for World War II, a great many of them saw the horrors of what happened when they liberated WWII concentration camps. These horrors made clear to them the need to defend democratic values. Since the DWAC website had attracted 50,000 hits in November 2005, I decided that Reading and Remembrance 2006 could focus on Holocaust and Anti-Racism education to spread further the message of protecting Canada's democratic values.

As an educator with 33 years of experience, I knew:

- Anti-Racism is about encouraging young people of diverse backgrounds to appreciate the need to work together on issues of integrating into Canadian society; and
- Holocaust Education could embrace an understanding of the genocidal killings in the Ukraine, Yugoslavia, Darfur and the other killing fields of the 20 and 21st centuries thus leading to a better understanding of world history.

Thus it was that there were new sub-themes for 2006 and there will be new ones for each subsequent year of the project. We are considering "Women and War" for 2007.

The materials for each year are archived on the website and as the years progress, teachers may select from a broader spectrum of materials.

We asked Toronto's Holocaust Education Centre to find a holocaust survivor with a tattoo so that he/she could be photographed reading to children. This image was to be the 2006 'reward' poster. We took this photo at a Jewish Daycare Centre. This process put us in touch with Magda Hilf and also led to a contact with survivor Edith Gelbard who is the subject of Kathy Kacer's book "Hiding Edith". Edith will read in a Pickering school on Nov. 10th. More resources and contacts keep coming forward.

Other than the new themes, we added another feature this year. Having seen the wonderful effect of Lieutenant Governor Bartleman's presence in Kincardine, we reached out to MPs, mayors and other dignitaries. When children see public figures spending time with them to read it validates the whole process of reading. We have had moderate success with this approach.

What still needs to be done and what you can do

- We need more material on the web-reading sources such as poems, excerpts from books, short articles. Just as Wikipedia is made up by amateurs contributing towards the broadening of knowledge, we need volunteers scouting and submitting materials for Reading and Remembrance. This material could be contributed all year long so that it is readied with pre-, during and post-reading activities. These materials may go backwards into the archives and forward towards new themes.
- Right now we rely on reaching teachers through Directors of Education to spread the news of the project. We need to generate parent/public pressure. Parents and members of the public need to ask their children's teachers what they are doing for Reading and Remembrance-starting in September.
- Parents and educational workers should look to purchase an appropriate book or two to donate to the school library. There is a great body of children's literature devoted to World War I and II. It would be great to have a committee of volunteers putting together a "Recommended Reading" book list for Reading and Remembrance.
- Parents and educational workers should be on the lookout for veterans, writers and public figures who will volunteer to go and read with children.

There is much to do and room for you to do it.

Now to consider some of the points raised:

1. We cannot rely on the school curricula to deal with a broad spectrum of history. YOU are responsible for educating young people about Remembrance.
2. With care, Canada's democratic values may be defined in homes, scout and guide groups, schools and other service clubs. It's an important exercise for all Canadians to define Canada's democratic values.
3. With help, DWAC will continue to provide more resources each year.
4. When families and educators take up the cause of Reading and Remembrance, Remembrance Day will become more important with each passing year.
5. When the greatest influences on teenagers are peers and the media, values education becomes very important. The Socratic saying that, "To know the good is to do it", may not work when teenagers don't know the good. We need to work with teenagers on 'the good'.
6. All societies, even the most democratic, may fall under the sway of a powerful charismatic leader who, once in power, begins to trample that democracy. Literature and experience both demonstrate that this is true. People too often just 'go along' and 'nice Canadians' are most vulnerable to just go along.

Conclusions

- Canadian society still allows plenty of room for individuals to make a difference.
- There is such a thing as Canadian values.
- We need Reading and Remembrance.

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