

Unwrapping the Gift of Life

Shannon Linden

Originally published by Kamloops This Week

“Life is a gift, and I try to respond with grace and courtesy.”

Maya Angelou

The morning started like most others. I stumbled downstairs, bleary-eyed but pretty sure it was my son sitting at the island, shoveling in cereal. He was chatting away, rattling off information I couldn't comprehend without my coffee. Something about the upcoming Remembrance Day assembly at school.

“I'm one of the MC's,” he said. “I've memorized In Flanders Fields.”

Nostalgia crept over me, pawing away at my heart before finding a warm place to curl up like a cuddly kitten. Suddenly I was twelve, standing before my school, reciting the poem that made such an impression upon me, I committed it to memory and unlike other memorabilia it chose to remain.

There in my grown up kitchen, history repeated itself as my twelve-year old son solemnly said the words of Dr. John McCrae, the Canadian physician and Lieutenant Colonel who wrote what has been deemed “the most popular poem produced by war.”

It is a privilege to celebrate Remembrance Day, honoring those who gave—and currently risk—their lives so that we might enjoy ours. Because that's what we're meant to do: enjoy.

Of course life is challenging. The forecast calls for showers of sorrow along with sunny days, but I like Agatha Christie's take on it all: “I like living. I have sometimes been wildly, despairingly, acutely miserable, racked with sorrow, but through it all I still know quite certainly that just to be alive is a grand thing.”

But what if someone thinks the grandest thing about life is death?

What if severe sadness soaks every fiber of one's being until the weight of living becomes too heavy to bear?

When I read about the young woman who recently leapt from the Peterson Creek Bridge, a different kind of nostalgia crashed over me, creating choppy waves of stormy memories. It was a long time ago, but my family was affected by a loved one's decision to end her life.

The kind of despair that comes with depression kills more people worldwide than armed combat. A cunning traveler, depression crosses cultures and bypasses borders.

Living in Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates, where bad news is kept under wraps the way the women's hair is hidden from view, even government-controlled media couldn't keep the darkness from casting its cold

shadow into the light of one hot day.

It started as a typical morning of teaching. Coddling a cup of coffee, I was convincing kids to line up, ready to move to the library, when my in-house phone rang. It was the teacher librarian.

“Don’t bring the kids down!” she said, a sob shaking her voice. “There’s been an accident.”

The school ordered a sort of lock-down. Blinds were drawn and children held captive in the classroom until the walkway beneath the new, three-story science building could be cleaned up.

It was rumored he had a difficult time reconciling his traditional beliefs with the more liberal views of the school—the case of a letter to the school’s editor declaring shorts inappropriate for female students cited as proof—but I’ll never know why a bright, fifteen-year old Indian boy took his own life.

The son of a physician liberal enough to send him to the American school in the first place, the cultural conflict would be confusing, but clearly the true fight was with himself.

Life is a gift and when loved ones leave us too soon—sometimes by choice, sometimes circumstance—it’s as though the wrapping remains and we are left to wonder why we were denied the chance to open up and enjoy the present.

Still, the proper thing to say when given a gift?

Thank-you—not only for our own lives—for those we share.



Photo Paul Linden