

## **Remembering.**

Every year we remember.

People go through trauma, people go through life-changing events, people share experiences that have an enormous impact on them for the rest of their lives.

Our families are affected, and the whole world has a part in that experience.

It's important we mark it. It's important that we try to make sense of it and that we recognise the parts people have played in trying to do their best whatever the outcome.

But isn't it time we stopped just looking back for remembering is also about the future.

Today we are sowing the seeds of what we will be 'remembering' tomorrow.....

Is remembering alone, the best we can do for them?

To say "yes Johnny Smith, we know what you did,

We know you lived, how you died, and we're here again to say so."

At Remembrance we have the attention of so many groups, the media, the public, and most importantly a window in time where so many young people are encouraged to think about war.

Memories should lead us to ask:

What can we do to help prevent this?

What are we doing NOW to make war *more* likely in future?

What are we doing NOW to make war *less* likely in future?

These are hard questions and I believe we avoid asking them, because then we'll have to answer them, and I guess the answers may not be that comfortable to live with.

They may require us to take far more responsibility for the type of future we want, and that 's not necessarily easy – we may have to give a little, to change, to alter our ways, our attitudes, our expectations . To acknowledge that we can no longer afford to base our own security on the insecurity of others.

No – we'd rather not bother with that right now,

We'd rather just keep looking back thank you,

We can put the past away neatly after Remembrance

and just carry on as normal.

And I think that's what we do.

But I think it's time Remembrance itself served as a reminder to us – a reminder that we could all be doing far more to address the causes of war, and to work harder at the alternatives to war.

The world is a very different place to what it was when Remembrance ceremonies began, even from a few decades ago.

## **War today is a very different game.**

I'm sure you're all aware of the reversal in casualty figs since the beginning of WW1 when 10 per cent of deaths due to war were civilian.

Whereas today, nine out of ten deaths due to war are civilian, half of those children.

Yet it does not serve our political masters to inform us that its so much rarer today for a soldier to get killed in a war, than it is for a child.

How many school children are made aware of this true cost of modern war?

How many are aware that school kids just like them are more likely to be killed, than people in uniform?

So when we stand there remembering I think that's a fact we need to take on board. But almost all our children stand there totally unaware of this.

In 30 years time we'll be reading out another list of names –

Thousands more deaths, remembered.

As if remembering makes it alright.

Oh dear. Is that the best we can do?

Is that the best way to repay them?

What about using those memories to motivate us, inspire us, move us, to take a different path? – to instil this urgency into our youngsters?

its an opportunity that I believe is criminal to waste.

Whoever we are in this room, we each have a responsibility to them to show them, equip them, guide them, give them tools and the benefit of what knowledge we have, to reduce – not increase – the likelihood of endless wars.

We must use this chance once a year, when they are so focussed on war

We know so much about the causes of wars, other ways of solving conflict which do not involve killing. So much research, knowledge, experience that is not being drawn on, funded, resourced, tried, developed and we should be ashamed of ourselves that we are letting this go.

Year after year we have this captive audience - a whole month or so.

War saturation.

'Waging war' saturation that is.

What about 'preventing war' saturation?

We need to remember that we are making the past TODAY.

We have the future with us - in their schools doing their Remembrance projects,

at our ceremonies, the future is beginning to flourish around us,

but we offer this future nothing but the same old mistakes..

The Royal British Legion is very keen to interest youngsters more in its work.

So we must show them how they have a part to play – how war is not something that just happens to soldiers, war happens to all of us.

Children taking part in Remembrance parades, children wearing their red poppies – what are they learning from all this? They learn all about bombs and trenches, weapons and dead bodies. Do they know why the

United Nations is so important? Do they know about the roots of conflict? Do they know about international laws? Are they as aware of non-violent conflict resolution what this involves, how it works?

I'd say they are not – and shame on us all.

Their red poppies tell them how so many suffered trying to make the world safer.

But we are failing our children by ending the story there.

If we really cared about the memories of the war dead – if we really cared as we claim to – we would not be doing so little to prevent others being added to their number.

We would be helping young people learn from our mistakes. Are we too proud for that?

For example, many people warned that the punitive terms for Germany after WW1 would lead to another war in 20 years time. They were ignored. But they were right.

Why don't we use white *and* red poppies in our wreaths?

Those two poppies are not in competition, they belong together.

a poppy that looks back, a poppy that looks forward....

poppies that are saying this happened, this mattered, we remember this,

and because it happened and because it mattered,

we are making a promise to you, who lie under the red poppies

This white poppy is signifying our promise to work all we can together, for a world that doesn't repeat what you went through.

We must include a promise to those we remember to try and move on from killing, from mass slaughter, from ignoring this world's dangers, injustices, and pains until they blow up in our faces –

Perhaps negative associations with the white poppy, because of past insensitive actions, will make this too hard for some.

Perhaps we could TOGETHER create a new symbol, a poppy of a different colour – but whatever we choose to grow alongside the red poppy in our lapels and on our posters, the meaning will be the same - *prevent war*.

Lots of people I talk to are cynical, pessimistic they say I'm wasting my time.

That it's unrealistic to think we can prevent – or even abolish – war

I say it is unrealistic to carry on the way we are.

It is unrealistic to think we will survive if we continue to wage war.

There is always SOMETHING we can do, and we must never believe otherwise, or we're sunk.

- *and we must especially be careful not to pass this attitude on to our children!!*

To say there's nothing we can do is escaping our responsibility to even try.

I suggest people say that because it lets them off trying to do anything, to making the effort.

- Shame on them! To stand in front of our future - our youngsters - and say that is shameful.

“This is as good as it gets, don't bother trying.”

Yet this is the message Remembrance tends to give – “*War is inevitable, it will keep on happening.*”

Some of you may have heard this saying – I don't know its source –

“*Our ideals are like the stars. We may never reach them, but we can chart our course by them.*”

We are happy to have ideals for other things:

I expect many of us here have experienced a loved one suffering from or dying from cancer. Do you think we'll ever find a cure?

Do you believe it's worth trying?

Do you think we should just give up because it's taking so long and costs so much?

The RBL's sec gen Ian Townsend says there are no more ardent peacemakers than those who have experienced war.

So, those who have witnessed the horrors of cancer often work tirelessly to help cancer victims or cancer research.

The family of a friend who died of cancer generously donates to Cancer Research in her memory.

Remembering the horrors of an experience must surely be a prime motivator for prevention of that experience being repeated.

Yet we fail to do this with war.

It can be helpful to see a parallel here.

Our pain, our anger, our sorrow can be channelled into making further war less – not more – likely.

THE RBL does vital work supporting families affected by war. This role must remain.

But it's only part of caring for the memory of those who have been killed.

A WW2 veteran was quoted at the recent ceremonies in London, to celebrate Japan's surrender in WW2:

*"Now we've had this anniversary we shouldn't be dwelling on the past as much as concentrating on how we can use today to improve the future."*

The RBL says "The way to peace is remembrance of past sacrifice."

Is it? Is remembering alone – enough?

No doubt those soldiers who have been killed in Iraq were once lining up as children at Remembrance parades. Did their mere remembering, year after year, prevent war?

I make no apologies for saying again - our young people are the descendents of those whose names are on our war memorials.

Let's make sure every year, when we read those names, we send forth those descendents with a belief that they can make a difference, *equip them to do things differently*.

It is time Remembrance incorporated this. It has never been more vital.

We must try. We may fail. Our children may fail. But every time we go to war, we have failed.

Dear johnny, lying there under the red poppies.

Will you thank us for adding the names of your children's children, on the memorial alongside yours?

Will you thank us for killing the children they have made friends with, in other countries?

Is that really the best we can do to honour your memory?