

Speech given for Remembrance Day 2010 at St Mathew-in-the City, Auckland by guest speaker Gaylene Preston ONZM.

LEST WE FORGET

Your Excellency the Right Honourable Sir Anand Satyanand and Lady Susan Satyanand, the Minister of Defence, Wayne Mapp, Mayor Len Brown, Australian Consul General, Michael Crawford, Veterans, Ladies and Gentlemen; it is a real honour for me to be invited to this beautiful building to speak on this Remembrance Day set aside to remember the 11th of November 1918 – the end of the ‘War to end all Wars.

War Stories. I don’t know when I started collecting them. I was born in 1947 and I grew up in the shadow of another war. During the ‘Peace.’ Back then, to me as a small child, there were three times – before the war, after the war, and a secret time, during the war – it was a silence so loud to my little ears that it seemed more a place. “Oh that was during the war,” then the silence.....”

I liked to draw - colour in - and I liked to do it on the floor. That was when I first heard stories around my mother’s skirts. Sitting under the kitchen table while the women talked above me, never about the battles or the bombs. Always about the relationships dislocated and forced apart, or worse, forced together again because of that time called ‘during the war.’

The men’s stories were very different. Not only in context, but in the telling. They were recounted loudly with a beer in one hand and a rollie in the other – amid eruptions of laughter. Army yarns for public consumption. Terrible tales with a punch line. Sometimes the voices would become serious and a small silence would fill the room, but not for long. The show must go on.

Lest We Forget.

Everyone was trying to, I realise now. Desperately seeking that amnesia that blocks out painful thoughts of waste and futility, and honours mythology. Because we won. It must have been worth it. So my generation grew up in the bright white light of the peace time. The fifties. Security, conformity and everyone living the same happily ever after with the shadow largely unacknowledged, certainly as far as us kids were concerned.

I suppose it's hard to own a war as a first hand event, when it didn't happen here. When you live in a little piece of pink on the edge of the British Empire where hardly a shot was fired. No apocalypse here. No Blitz. No blood and carnage in the streets. Just romantic photos on the mantle piece of young soldiers who never came back, who never had funerals, and who stayed forever young encased in the black and white reality of an Egyptian photographer's studio portrait.

And those who did come back often could only confront their terror in their nightmares. No demobbing, no therapy, no 'lets talk it over.' Sissy stuff. Just roll your sleeves up and work it off.

But down among the women the war was acknowledged as an on-going event. It was the reason why a neighbour never married, or couldn't have babies, or another's husband drank. Why a father rejected his son, why a husband couldn't be loving.

So in a way, growing up in this blessed time of picnics, and equality for all, and social security from the cradle to the grave – all things my parents' generation put in place for the peacetime. We were a protected generation. We were given education, opportunity and confidence to oppose war. And we did. In some numbers. It's young people who get asked to fight them and enough of us across the Western World refused to fight in Vietnam and as young men and women managed to find a

shared honourable mythology in NOT fighting. We put flowers down the barrels of the guns.

I didn't want to know about the terrible shadow that we walked alongside, until I had a child of my own. Then I wanted to know. Hard to find out. The men didn't want to talk about it and what they did want to talk about they didn't want recorded! The women just maintained they weren't there. "I wasn't at the war, ask your Aunty's sister in law, she was a nurse in Cairo."

Oral histories are viewed with caution by some historians and are considered by some to be too personal and idiosyncratic to be taken seriously. This is because human memory is coloured by emotion to the point of being mysteriously irrational. But it is the pure vivid originality of oral histories that I love. Personal stories are often about moments. That's how human memory works. We don't remember days, we remember moments. This makes oral histories always surprising and sometimes even puzzling, particularly when exploring one event lived by several people. One person says this, another says that to the extent that the listener might wonder if the two tale tellers were even in the same place at the same time. But if there are enough stories told by enough people, a three-dimensional picture emerges and it all starts to add up to more than the sum of its' parts. Complex, colourful and full. What I call a story net.

Lest we forget. Memory. Moments. Films are made of moments, so I started at home. I asked my father,
"What did you do in the War Dad?"
"Nothing much. Just turned up."
"So what are those medals for?"
"Turning up. They give em out with the rations."

When he got a cancer diagnosis he finally agreed to be recorded on sound tape. And twenty years later I have made a film based on those ten little tapes. (*HOME BY CHRISTMAS* - the DVD is available in time for Christmas from selected outlets.)

But everything my father told me back then, made me realise that it was the women's stories that for me provided the frame that brought home the larger picture. They lived through it, they held the social fabric, sewed it together when it was rent asunder and 'soldiered on.' And yet they weren't really well represented in the official version – that big simplified story of World War Two that gets dusted off for public occasions. My intuition led to my working with Judith Fyfe and the NZ Oral History Centre at the Turnbull Library from 1992 to make a collection of women's memories of World War Two – there's about 80 or so three hour tapes held there in the National Library all meticulously annotated for future researchers to splash about in.

These accounts contributed to another film of mine, *WAR STORIES Our Mothers Never Told Us*. So I've been most fortunate to have been able to spend a certain amount of my adult life investigating that secret place called 'during the war' for myself and it has led to my thinking about how the personal and the public record is dislocated. While we have celebrated warriors, we have created a fault line. A big geological gash exists through our communal memory. We have rendered ourselves amnesiac.

For example, I want to share a story told to me in the film I made by Rita Graham. It is of a man, Campbell Paterson who worked with her husband Alan at a Queen Street bank. When the younger Alan was called up to serve in 1942 he refused to fight on the grounds of his Christian Pacifist principles and was therefore to be imprisoned for the duration of the war. It was the custom at the Queen Street branch to give men who had been called up to serve a send-off and a gold watch. Campbell Patterson requested that Alan be given the same respect as those who were leaving to fight. The bank manager was furious. Outraged. No send-off or gold watch for Alan Graham. He left the bank and went to serve his sentence under a cloud. But Campbell didn't forget Alan or Alan's family. Every week he

collected ten shillings mostly in threepences and sixpences from staff at the Queen St branch and put it in a bank account for Rita and Alan's young family until Alan returned when the war ended. It is this story of fortitude, tolerance, and persistence that to me is an inspirational memorial of human compassion during war and I am sure there have been many instances of this kind of human compassion. The Campbell Patterson factor. We can celebrate it Lest We Forget.

I've also been privileged to spend quality time watching hours and hours of archival footage from all over the world shot during World War Two. Again it is *moments* that are most vivid. One image is of ecstatic faces; people dancing in Cuba Street when the war was declared over. Complete strangers are doing the hokey-tokey into a bar, their joy expressed with complete abandon, secure in the certainty of a better future. This footage exists in beautifully exposed and archived 35mm film shot by the NZ National Film Unit for the Weekly Revue.

There is another vivid image sequence shot at the same time but in a different place. It was recorded in colour but not released to the public in its original form until very recently because at the time it was considered too disturbing for people to see. It is a long slow pan across the completely devastated city of Hiroshima just days after the atomic bomb was dropped. Miles of horrific shadows where buildings once stood, deathly quiet. A city inhabited by ghosts.

In my head I carry that film that I have never made. It is of these two sequences inter-cut on a never ending loop. Lest We Forget.

Yes, lets remember together all the hard to understand and difficult to carry human experience of war because this defiant and communal forgetfulness has created a shared memory gap where dangerous mythologies have thrived. Simplistic ideas of 'honour,' and 'glory,' and 'heroes,' and 'demons,' and

‘winning,’ and ‘losing,’ and ‘goodies,’ and ‘baddies,’ and
‘enemies,’ and ‘allies,’ and ‘Victory,’ have become irrefutable.
Our forgetfulness is overwhelming.

So lets remember all the mainly young men who have for far too
many centuries died in far too many bloody wars - Lest We
Forget;

And lets remember all the women and children whose lives are
cast asunder during times of dreadful upheaval and loss, and the
families never born because of war - Lest We Forget;

And lets remember those who refuse to fight and live every day
branded as cowards in communities grief stricken and in pain -
Lest We Forget;

And lets remember the Veterans of all wars, the Service men
and women who have returned to their homes and put bitterness
and hurt aside and built a society based on equality, tolerance
and compassion.

Lest We Forget.

E nga mana, e nga reo, e nga karangatanga o te motu. Tena
koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.