

## **Flanders Fields November 10, 2019**

*Thought to ponder at the beginning:* All the people of all the nations which had fought in the First World War were silent during the eleventh minute of the eleventh hour of Armistice Day, which was the eleventh day of the eleventh month. It was during that minute in nineteen hundred and eighteen, that millions upon millions of human beings stopped butchering one another. I have talked to old men who were on battlefields during that minute. They have told me in one way or another that the sudden silence was the Voice of God. – Kurt Vonnegut

### **It Is I Who Must Begin, Victor Havel**

It is I who must begin.  
Once I begin, once I try --  
    here and now,  
    right where I am,  
    not excusing myself  
    by saying things  
would be easier elsewhere,  
without grand speeches and  
    ostentatious gestures,  
but all the more persistently  
    -- to live in harmony  
with the "voice of Being," as I  
understand it within myself  
    -- as soon as I begin that,  
    I suddenly discover,  
    to my surprise, that  
I am neither the only one,  
    nor the first,  
nor the most important one  
    to have set out  
    upon that road.

Whether all is really lost  
or not depends entirely on  
whether or not I am lost.

**Sermon**

Flanders Fields

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I am quite taken with the “thought to ponder” on your order of worship: *All the people of all the nations which had fought in the First World War were silent during the eleventh minute of the eleventh hour of Armistice Day, which was the eleventh day of the eleventh month. It was during that minute in nineteen hundred and eighteen, that millions upon millions of human beings*

*stopped butchering one another. I have talked to old men who were on battlefields during that minute. They have told me in one way or another that the sudden silence was the Voice of God.*  
– Kurt Vonnegut

I had never given much thought about that moment when the guns stopped until last year, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Armistice Day. I have been thinking about it ever since, imagining what the moment must have been like.

I love that Kurt Vonnegut describes the silence on the battlefields as the voice of God. Because I know that sometimes, in some lives, there are moments when the clouds part and the sun's rays shine unencumbered. Times when, after periods of struggle and suffering, pure relief comes. Times of absolute confusion when suddenly clarity and wisdom arrive. Times when human beings come to their senses and turn toward goodness, open-heartedness, kindness, understanding, love. Times when the guns – whether literal or metaphorical – cease to fire. And so I try to imagine that exact moment when World War I ended.

Some people who were there have described it, of course. Last year, at the century anniversary of Armistice Day, the *Washington Post* published an article by Michael E. Ruane called, “The Day the Guns Fell Silent”:

*Sgt. Robert Cude remembered that the bugle call, “Stand Fast” — cease fire — sounded across the foggy landscape of the British lines that morning.*

*The American motorcycle courier Leon George Roth noted that in the sudden quiet, he could hear his watch ticking.*

*Near the Moselle River in northeastern France, recording equipment that had been tracking the thunder of artillery flat-lined...*

*It was the end of four years of unimaginable calamity. Men and women were killed on an industrial scale with poison gas, machine guns and flamethrowers. Combat became mechanized, and machines helped consume much of a generation of young men, including more than 100,000 Americans.*

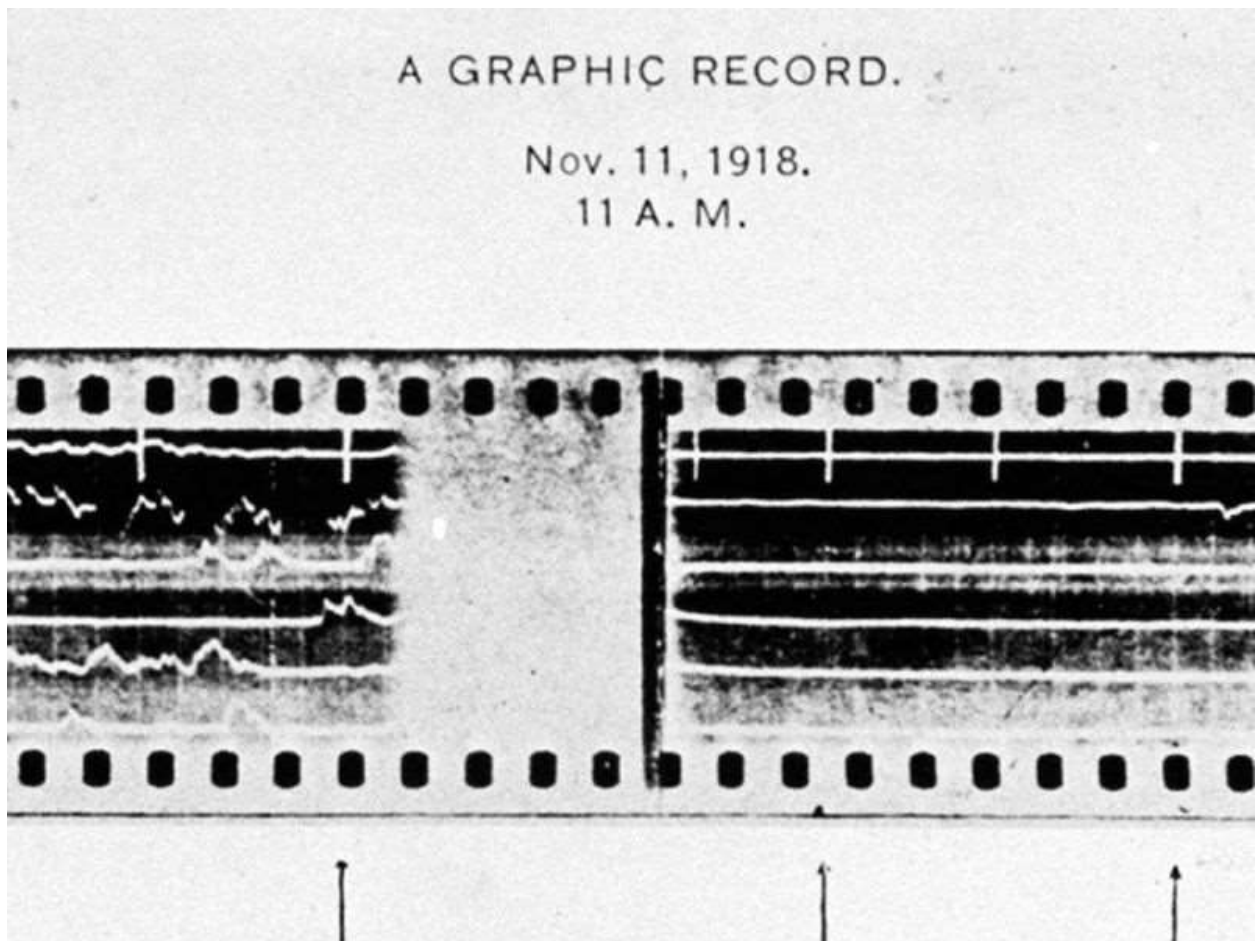
*The conflict was so devastating that it was called “the war to end all wars.” Surely nothing like it could ever happen again. But it left a legacy of grievance and disorder, and historians now see it as Act I of the two-part tragedy that culminated in World War II and still echoes today.*

*But in 1918, soldiers knew only that the war was over. “No more horrors,” British Lt. Col. William Murray wrote. “No more mud and misery. Just everlasting peace.”*

*The battle-weary French Cpl. Louis Barthas wrote: “How many times had we thought about this blessed day. ... How many times had we peered into the mysterious future, looking for this star of salvation.”*

How many times, indeed, both then and now, has humanity looked for such a star of salvation? For the soldiers in the trenches, salvation came by way of silence. Because that silence was so momentous, I wish we still called November 11 Armistice Day. I wish November 11 were a day of peace. I wish our attention could be drawn, year after year, to a silence Kurt Vonnegut calls the voice of God. By changing the name of the observance to Veterans' Day, we have forgotten that amazing moment. I want to hear that silence – then and now.

Well, it turns out we can *sort-of* hear the silence that descended at 11 a.m. on November 11, 1918. There were no audio recordings of it. But the British army had devised a means of detecting the precise location of German snipers by taking a series of photographs simultaneously from several locations equidistant from each other. By measuring where the fire flash showed on each film and plotting out the distances from cameras to fire, they could figure out where to aim their weapons. The visual recording of that moment, the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month, *does* exist.



On the left hand side of the film, the bumps on the lines denote the flashes of weaponry being fired. The flat line on the right denotes the silence. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/listen-moment-guns-fell-silent-ending-world-war-i-180970772/>

Modern technology has added sound to that film to simulate the sound of silence, the sound of the voice of God. (You can hear it by clicking on the above link.) At first, you hear heavy artillery firing. The sounds of war become more sporadic, then cease altogether. After a few moments of silence, you can hear birds singing. Apparently the voice of God includes bird song.

Here's one thing I have been imagining for the last few days: Those birds were singing before the ceasefire, too, only the thunderous artillery made their songs inaudible. Maybe we need to hush our noise to hear the voice of God.

Today I might not have preached about Veterans's Day but for two things. First, last August, when Stephanie Bernier returned from a vacation to France, she shared with me how moving her trip to Normandy had been. She and I planned then to do this service together, but, with the recent death of her son, Ben, Stephanie wisely decided to save her thoughts on this for another time. (I have her permission to share a few of her observations.)

Stephanie visited the American cemetery in Normandy where the dead from that famous, horrific World War II D-Day battle were buried. She told me that what moved her, as she walked through the vast graveyard there, was, first, the enormity of the losses. Row upon row of graves. Over 6000 graves. And that was just the American cemetery and just one battle. What are we human beings doing when we create that level of violence and death?

Then Stephanie started to study the names and religious symbols on the grave markers. The names represented all ethnic groups and nationalities and every religion – the sons of immigrants laid beside sons from American families who had been in the U. S. for generations. Sons of wealthy families; sons of poor families buried together. All the graves marked broken dreams and lives from every sector of life cut short.

The armed forces do draw together young people from all walks of life, it's true – especially during times when a draft is in effect. The majority of those soldiers who died in Normandy in World War II were drafted. Outside of our public education system, I cannot think of another American institution that cuts down societal barriers in such a way. True, the very wealthy can escape public schools, and they can develop bone spurs and flat feet to avoid the draft, too. But, by and large, the armed forces can be a great equalizer.

However.

However, I feel we owe it to that gathered band of young people, who represent so many different sectors of our culture, to ensure that their service is to the good. And this concern leads me to the second reason I chose to speak about Armistice Day this morning. I am not convinced our military deployments are always to the good. In fact, I believe often they are not. If we are

going to ask young people to put their lives on the line, we owe it to them – and to our own sense of morals and ethics – to be certain we ask them to risk their lives for the right reasons.

I am pacifistic in my views. I try to speak, write, and behave non-violently. I believe non-violence is a worthy goal, one I wish were more broadly shared among nations and also among individuals. But I am not convinced pacifism *always* works. I am grateful, for example, that our soldiers were there during World War II. Nazism had to be stopped. Fascism had to be stopped. Could they have been stopped non-violently earlier on with the right words, the right agreements, the right deeds? Maybe. Probably. But when Nazism and Fascism had swung so fully and viciously out of control, well, I am glad the military was there to step in. I say that with an uneasy heart; that is my truth, but it is a truth that pains me.

For me, peace itself is not the end goal. Peace with justice is. Peace without justice is not true peace, because it means at least one party has merely agreed to bear their oppression quietly.

I think most of those young men there in Normandy on D-Day probably knew what they were fighting for. They also knew they had the support of their nation. I'm not sure that is true of our soldiers and seamen today. In fact, I am downright cynical as to the purposes of most wars. Nothing could make me more cynical than President Trump's recent betrayal of the Kurds in Syria – the Kurds, who – to quote the Washington Post – “*suffered 11,000 dead and 24,000 wounded in a war that we asked them to fight.*” [Emphasis added.]

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/for-us-soldiers-its-a-dagger-to-the-heart-to-abandon-the-kurds/2019/10/14/f0a1db60-ecf-11e9-89eb-ec56cd414732\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/for-us-soldiers-its-a-dagger-to-the-heart-to-abandon-the-kurds/2019/10/14/f0a1db60-ecf-11e9-89eb-ec56cd414732_story.html)

The bloodshed that followed in the wake of our withdrawal from Syria was horrific, as we all know. And our military who were there were horrified, ashamed, and demoralized.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/for-us-soldiers-its-a-dagger-to-the-heart-to-abandon-the-kurds/2019/10/14/f0a1db60-ecf-11e9-89eb-ec56cd414732\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/for-us-soldiers-its-a-dagger-to-the-heart-to-abandon-the-kurds/2019/10/14/f0a1db60-ecf-11e9-89eb-ec56cd414732_story.html)

No voice of God for them. Only the pain in their hearts as they retreated; only the shame and disgust of knowing what would surely follow in their wake. And all to suit a capricious, thoughtless, self-absorbed president who wanted to deflect attention away from the bad news his own actions were generating. That's how I see it.

If we are going to ask young people to put their lives on the line, we owe it to them – and to our own sense of morals and ethics – to be certain we ask them to risk their lives for the right reasons. They are living, breathing human beings. They are not pawns on somebody's chess board to move around at will. I am reminded of that famous quote of Bion of Borysthehes, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE Greek philosopher: “Boys throw stones at frogs in fun, but the frogs do not die in fun, but in earnest.”

Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow* puts war in the same cynical light that I feel it in my heart. Jayber, the barber in the fictitious town of Port William, KY, writes about a span of roughly 50 years in that town's history. He watches the boys go off to war ... and not come home. He

watches agribusiness gradually destroy the small farming town. From his standpoint, Port William would have thrived but for three things: The Economy, The War, and The News, which dealt principally with the first two.

*“The War, I thought, was just the single Hell that is always astir in the world, always going on in modest ways even when it has not broken out in full force. And the nations were always preparing funds of weapons and machines and people to be used up whenever the War did break out in full force, which meant that sooner or later it would.*

*Also, it seemed that The War and The Economy were more and more closely related. They were the Siamese twins of our age, dressed alike, joined head to head, ready at any moment to merge into a single, unified Siamese, when the crossed eyes of government should uncross. The War was good for The Economy. There was a certain airy, wordy kind of patriotism that added profit to its virtue. There was money in it...*

*“... the Economy was studying the purpose of The War, which is to purchase and not have. The customers of The War (all of us, that is) purchase life at a great cost and yet lose it.*

*“And the War was just as busily studying the purpose of The Economy, which is to cause people to purchase what they do not need or do not want, and to receive patiently what they do not expect.*

*“Having paid for life, we receive death... By now ... we have purchased how many shares in death? How many bombs, shells, mines, guns, grenades, poisons, anonymous murders, nameless sufferings, official secrets? But not the controlling share. Death cannot be marketed in controlling shares.” (pp. 273; 275-276.)*

How many bombs, shells, mines, guns, grenades, poisons, anonymous murders, nameless sufferings, official secrets? How many battleships, remotely operated drones, surveillance satellites, and more?

If we are going to ask young people to put their lives on the line, let's be certain we ask them to risk their lives for the right reasons. And, above all, let's hold that Armistice Day silence, that voice of God, the holy, sacred song of peace at the center of all our deliberations, decisions, and goals.

Let us be in silence...

...Amen.