

Presentation to Armistice Day Assembly – Woodward Middle School
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It was the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. For over four long years, the guns had roared almost without stop and millions of soldiers and thousands of civilians had died. They had died on land, on sea, and in the air. They died for a few inches of mud, they died for the mistakes of others, and some died for nothing at all. They fought desperately against young men very much like themselves. They fought on Sundays and on Easter and on Christmas and all the days in between. They fought for the best of reasons and the worst of reasons. They fought for so long they forgot why they started fighting in the first place. This war was the most terrible war the world had ever seen. Whole villages were emptied of their young men, and a whole generation of women was left alone to mourn them. This war was so terrible that some soldiers died and were never found at all, and others were found so broken and disfigured that they could not be identified and thus became the unknown soldiers. It was a war of surpassing violence and destruction. It was a war that introduced too many new and vicious weapons – the first weapons of mass destruction the world had ever known. It was a true world at war.

The war had started almost joyously. Filled with great patriotism, the young men marched off to what they knew would be a short and wonderful war. No one expected a long war. It would grand, it would be glorious, it would be short, it would be almost painless. Each side knew it was right; each side knew God was with them. All sides were so very wrong. But once begun so casually, the war took on its own energy, and developed a life of its own. It would not be denied so easily. Once we let slip the dogs of war, it becomes so very hard to stop the violence. Each death called out for revenge; each insult demanded a reply. The countries ended up locked in a terrible cycle of combat, unable to find a way out.

And yet, on a November day so long ago, the guns actually stopped. Soldiers stood up cautiously at first as if they could not believe the horror was over. Soldiers who, until minutes before, had been sworn to seek each others' deaths now stood up and slowly walked toward each other and then shook hands, embraced one another and looked their enemy in the eye and nodded to each other as if to say, yes, I know what you know. On the land and in the sky and on the sea, men who had worked hard to kill each other now waved to each other and some stood shoulder to shoulder and cared for each other in their collective misery for they were all tired and lonely. Some how, in some equally mysterious fashion, the war to end all wars had itself come to an end. It was Armistice Day, 1918.

Why do we celebrate such a day? What does this day have to do with us almost a century later? It is not as though we have never experienced another war. Twenty years after the first Armistice Day, the same countries were fighting another world war. We are still fighting wars today. Perhaps we will always be fighting wars somewhere in our world.

So why do we celebrate such a day? Why should anyone remember that day so long ago?

We remember because we must remind ourselves that we can stop violence if we choose to do so. We are human beings and we are prone to anger and hatred and violence it seems. And yet, we know that if we choose to do so, we can stop the violence; we can change even the most difficult and hard parts of our lives. We are far more than our worst side; we are capable of great tolerance, of great cooperation, of great love. We remember Armistice Day because it is a day in which we stopped doing ugly and harmful things to each other and began to heal ourselves. We remember Armistice Day not only as a day in which war ended but also as a day in which peace began. We remember Armistice Day because it is a day we regained our collective humanity. We remember Armistice Day to help us with our own hatreds and angers. Our own wars will, we pray, have their Armistice Day very soon. And perhaps, some day in the distant future, your grand-children will gather at an assembly in their middle school and an old man will tell them amazing stories of a time when people made wars on each other. And those young people will turn to each other and ask themselves whether it is possible to imagine such a dark time, such a terrible world in which human beings actually tried to kill each other because someone told them to do so. I do not expect to ever see that day come; I pray that some of you will see such a day. It would be a lovely thought to think that we will arrive at a place where we will never celebrate another Armistice Day because there will be no arms to worry about; there will be no veterans of wars to remember because there will be no war no more.

For today, though, we must remember Armistice Day. Not only for the loss of all those who died and for those who mourned them but also for the power that resides in all of us to stop doing violence. To re-member is to make things connect again; to re-member is to put broken things back into repair. And so we remember today both our human capacity for violence and our human capacity to forgive. We remember why we took up arms in the first place and how we put down our arms as well. We remember we are capable of making peace. Blessed are the peacemakers and blessed are we when we remember. Thank you for listening.