

Reflection for Sunday, June 25, 2017
“TRUE PATRIOT LOVE” by Lisa Hicknell

True Patriot Love.

That’s how I feel about this Country.

That line from Canada’s national anthem refers to having a lasting affection for this country, to vigorously supporting it and to the willingness to defend it as necessary.

One of the greatest joys I have as a teacher of Canadian history, is that moment when I see the spark of true patriot love for this country ignited in a student. I’d like to say it happens for all students but some already come to me with true patriot love burning, others leave at the end of a semester without even so much as a smoulder, but when it happens, that moment when it ignites in my presence is pure magic.

This past April, I accompanied 12 Grand River Collegiate Institute students from grades 9-12, part of a 60 student contingent from the Waterloo Region District School Board, on a pilgrimage to Vimy Ridge in France to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the battle. Our trip faced many obstacles before even leaving for Vimy, but I was determined to make it happen because the Battle of Vimy Ridge is one of the reasons for my true patriot love.

The Battle of Vimy Ridge was fought between April 9 and 12 1917. As its name suggests, this was a piece of high ground on the Douai Plain in Northern France. Allied command was desperate to make a breakthrough after years of stalemate and slaughter on the Western Front and to do so they needed to take this high ground from the German forces. Considered to be impregnable by the Germans, the British and French had tried unsuccessfully to take it since October of 1914, losing over 150,000 troops in the process.

Recognizing that the old strategies weren’t working, and unable to come up with any new ideas, the Allied command turned to the Canadians. Those “untrained, rowdy colonials” as they were considered at the outbreak of war in 1914, were by 1916 known to be among the strongest and bravest fighting forces on the Western Front.

It’s not surprising the Canadians were not given much credit at the outset of the war. At 64 years old, you could say the nation was in its toddler years. Still very much tied to Mother Britain, yielding to her instructions and demands, yet wishing to experience a taste of independence. However, once the Canadians arrived at Vimy to take up this challenge this young nation revealed the qualities that would, and continue to lead it to achieve great things. As Prince Charles declared on the 100th anniversary of the battle, “[The Battle of Vimy Ridge] was Canada at its best” It was Canada at its best because it demonstrated the greatness that results when innovation, collaboration, and inclusivity intersect, three values that when all present would inspire just about anyone’s true patriot love for this country.

When thinking of innovation, one may reflect on the Canadarm or Blackberry, not on a battle. However innovation was key to the Canadian’s success at Vimy Ridge. The old battle strategies could no longer compete with advances in weaponry such as the machine gun and fast-firing field artillery. A new approach was needed, and that new approach can largely be attributed to the Canadians’ British Commanding Officer General Julian Byng and the man he was grooming to one day be his replacement, Canadian Major-General Arthur Currie. Both men believed in a more scientific approach to warfare than their more experienced counterparts and that approach made all

the difference at Vimy; the flash and sound of enemy fire was used to pinpoint the location of their guns, airplanes were used to take aerial photographs of enemy trench systems, soldiers were given more information regarding the battle plans than ever before allowing them to be both better prepared and have greater morale, soldiers practiced on a scaled replica of the complex German trench system on a daily basis, making Vimy the most rehearsed battle in history, and allowing for the near perfect execution of the precisely timed creeping barrage strategy that recognized the importance of capitalizing on the power of artillery in battle. The result of these innovative approaches to battle was that the Canadians accomplished in a single morning, what the British and French had not been able to do in months of failed attempts. Within four days, all objectives had been met and the Germans had been routed from the ridge.

Vimy also demonstrated Canadians' capacity to accomplish greatness when working collaboratively. At all previous battles in WWI, the divisions of the Canadian Expeditionary force were divided and absorbed into various British corps. However, at Vimy, for the very first time in history, all four divisions of the Canadian Corps, 100 000 men in total over the course of the battle, had the opportunity to plan, practice, and execute the strategy together. Men from all provinces and many backgrounds stood side by side atop the ridge and celebrated what they, these "untrained and rowdy colonials" had accomplished. Brigadier-General Alexander Ross later reflected, "It was Canada from Atlantic to Pacific on parade. I thought then . . . that in those few minutes I witnessed the birth of a nation." This decisive victory led many men who, despite living in Canada, still identified as being British, to viewing themselves as Canadian. Another veteran of Vimy reflected, "There was a feeling that we had mastered this job and that we were the finest troops on earth. This was where Canadian nationality first came together." For many veterans, this is where their true patriot love for Canada first began.

Finally, the Canadian Expeditionary force at Vimy, and in the war as a whole revealed the Canadians' potential for inclusivity. Canada in 1914 was not a tolerant or accepting place. On the West coast, Japanese-Canadians faced such severe racism at the enlistment offices they had to travel to Alberta to have any hope of joining up. Indigenous people wishing to take up arms for Canada were initially turned away until it was realized their traditional skills could be transferred to sniping and scouting, and Black Canadians were refused entry to the Corps, only admitted later as labourers to do the most undesirable jobs in a non-combat construction battalion. However, once on the Western Front, as historian Tim Cook has noted, these ideas of difference and inequality seemed to disappear. He reports that "they sang the same songs, they stood shoulder to shoulder, they dug trenches together. They went over the top together." They were brothers in arms, irrespective of the language they spoke, the colour of their skin, or their ethnic origins. Unfortunately these attitudes did not return home to Canada at the end of the war, but they did serve to show the potential of what could be accomplished when everyone was permitted to contribute their strengths to a final goal. It encouraged activism back home to fight for equal treatment and equal services. And while the fight has lasted longer for some than others, and in some cases continues to be fought, there is no doubt that Canada has made great gains in becoming a more inclusive and tolerant society. And like at Vimy, the more inclusive we become, the more we are able to accomplish.

Innovation, collaboration, inclusivity. "This was Canada at its best" and gave us a glimpse into all it could be. While Vimy Ridge may have been the first time that greatness resulted from the intersection of these three values, it certainly wasn't the last. It was them that resulted in Banting and Best's discovery of Insulin, Lester Pearson's development of UN Peacekeeping, and Tommy Douglas' development of Medicare, among others. All are moments that inspire Canadians' true patriot love for their country and all resulted from the combination of innovation, collaboration, and a belief in inclusivity.

On April 9, as my students and I approached the town of Arras on a shuttle bus and I first saw Walter Allward's incredible monument peak out above the trees on the ridge it literally took my breath away and brought me to tears. The tears continued as I witnessed how the citizens of Arras decorated their homes with Canadian flags and waved at us pilgrims as we traveled through the town. But the most moving aspect of the day for me was viewing it through my students' eyes. I watched them stand shoulder to shoulder with other Canadian and French citizens of all ages and backgrounds, singing God Save the Queen, O Canada, and Les Marseillaise. I watched them as 3598 pairs of boots were laid at the base of the monument, one pair to represent each of the men lost during the battle. I watched as they carefully selected a pair of those boots to bring home after the ceremony, as though the spirits of those men lost 100 years ago were speaking through them. I watched them as they listened to the Act of Remembrance be recited in English, French, and Algonquin in an attempt to recreate that sense of inclusivity that was present on the ridge in 1917. I listened as one student told me, "It was super cool to be a part of history at the 100th Anniversary. It was kinda like we were being brought back in time as witnesses to the sacrifice of those soldiers." Another student stated, "The feel of actually being there, making history and honouring our past, I felt happiness and excitement, and joy at hearing and seeing all these people come together to be there on that day" And finally a student told me "It was amazing to see everybody come together as one and show so much respect at the memorial." It was in these moments that I saw the spark of True Patriot Love ignited in those students. And it was magic.

To be clear, to have true patriot love for this country does not mean that one must love all aspects of this nation and its history unconditionally. I feel a great sense of sadness and shame when I reflect on the many individuals and groups who have been harmed and continue to be harmed by the actions, and in some cases inaction, of Canada's various levels of government. However, to have true patriot love DOES mean that I continue to set the bar high when it comes to my expectations for this nation. I will challenge it to be better. I have hope that change is not only possible, change is inevitable. As Canada approaches the 150th anniversary of Confederation, we still haven't met the potential of Canada at it's best that was revealed during the Battle of Vimy Ridge. However, if we invoke the values that led to greatness at Vimy, I am confident we'll get there. It is my hope that we can work collaboratively, to develop innovative ideas, that will allow us to be a truly equal, inclusive and accepting nation. Innovative ideas are essential to address the lingering impacts of Colonialism on Indigenous people and to set us on a new course for right relationship. Innovative ideas will lead us to create a society that is truly accessible for all, removing all physical, economic and social barriers to full participation in this civil society. Through innovation we will find ways to preserve and protect our environment for the seven generations to follow.

This Canada Day I will celebrate the great achievements of our past, but also reflect on where more work needs to be done and the role I can play in working with others to develop innovative ideas to bring about greater equality in this nation. It's my hope that other Canadians will take time to do this as well. After all, this is what true patriot love requires of us, and this great land deserves no less than our true patriot love.