

Commemoration for the Montreal Massacre Victims

BY URSULA FRANKLIN

The events in Montreal certainly and surely upset all of us deeply. As somebody who has taught for the last two decades in the Faculty of Applied Science and Engineering and who has tried to encourage young women to enter our profession, as somebody who is a pacifist and a feminist, the events in Montreal deeply trouble me. They trouble me because any one of these young women could have been one of my students; could have been someone I encouraged by saying: "Look, you can do it. It's a tough turf alright, but there are others. Nothing will change if we aren't there."

But these fourteen women are not there anymore. And many say what happened to them was an act of a madman, something more or less like a random printing error that had nothing to do with anything except the state of Marc Lepine's mind. I'm one of those who say, yes, it was the act of a madman, but it is not unrelated to what is going on around us. *That* people get mad may happen in any society, any place, every place. But *how* people get mad, *how* that escalation from prejudice, to hate, to violence occurs, what and who is hated, and how it is expressed, is not unrelated to the world around us. When a madman uses easily-available weapons and easily-available prejudices, it is not totally his problem, which will go away when he does. At another time, it could have been Jews who were lined up, it could have been black people, but in Montreal it was women — women in an engineering faculty — killed by somebody who wanted to be an engineer.

In remembrance what is it that we are called upon to reflect? We remember the fourteen students in Montreal. But we also remember that they were abandoned. Our memory should not block out the fact that Marc Lepine, at one of his killing stations, went into a classroom in which there were men and women. He asked them to separate into two groups, and when this didn't happen, he fired a shot to the ceiling. Then it did happen. The men left. Fourteen women were killed, and Marc Lepine could leave this classroom. It is not as much a question of how he got in, but it is a question of how he got *out*. In our memory and reflection, we have to include the fact that these women were abandoned by their fellow students. We have to face it.

We men and women have to ask: What does it take to make solidarity real? Is one shot to the ceiling or its verbal equivalent enough to abandon the victims? You may wish to think on what you would have done, maybe even what you are doing in less lethal situations. Is a joke enough to condone harassment? There's a lot to be reflected upon. Many of the comments after the massacre were comments on what was called a "senseless killing." Are there killings that are not senseless? Are there sensible killings? Are there people who can be abandoned? If reflection shows that all killing is senseless, we may ask why then do we

have tools of killing around — if we agree that all killing is senseless. We may wish for a second to reflect how we, as a community, would have felt if the identical massacre had taken place in a bank, in a post office. Maybe, heaven forbid, in a hotel where the young women were prostitutes. How would we react?

We speak on occasion with fair ease about all of us being brothers and sisters. And maybe finally I could urge you, in memory of these our young colleagues, to reflect on what it means that someone is your sister, someone is a member of that human family. That doesn't mean you have to like or love her, but it does mean you have to respect her presence as the right to be there on her own terms, not by gracious permission of the dominant culture, not only as long as she keeps her mouth shut and goes through the prescribed hoops; but because we are members of one family and each of us has an inalienable right to be, and to fulfill our potential. And if the grief we feel, the remembrance we must continue, and the reflections we have to share, bring us into a world in which it is not empty rhetoric when we speak of each other as brothers and sisters, then, I think, the memory of the students in Montreal will serve us well.

Ursula Franklin is a professor in the Faculty of Applied Science and Engineering, University of Toronto. This is the address she gave at the university's commemorative service for the fourteen women murdered at the *École polytechnique*, Montreal. Her address, given on 19 January 1990, was also read to the Senate by Senator Roy Firth on 21 February 1990 as part of the request for a Senate Committee inquiry into violence against women.

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