

## Ursula Franklin: an inspiration at Massey College<sup>1</sup>

I only knew Ursula Franklin—physicist, philosopher, teacher, pacifist, author, and mentor—for a few years. Upon her death last year, I was not only saddened, but desperately jealous of those who had known her, and worked with her, for so many years longer.

Human beings who are academically proficient and deeply accomplished across many disciplines are very rare. Academics who take their work and intellectual inquiry seriously, without taking themselves seriously, are even rarer. The world is awash with marginal experts, self-reverent authorities, and self-obsessed politicians and journalists, who opine publicly and imperiously at the drop of a hat. The truly wise expert, the deeply informed and well-studied expert, who works from a basis of humility towards genuine discovery, sharing while growing, reaching out while learning and teaching, while idealistically continuing to question and probe, is very rare indeed.

When I first met Ursula Franklin, two weeks after having joined her Massey College as Master, I knew from her work, public persona, and demeanor that I was in the presence of a unique human being whose contribution to global understanding and sanity was simply beyond equal.

I remember the discussion in the late summer of 2014 as if it happened this morning. Whenever I look at the chair in my office where she sat and spoke with me for 90 minutes, the clarity, smile, warmth, and focus of her eyes and face come back to me. Her primary purpose was to wish me well in my new post, extend the offer of support and collaboration, and bring me up to date on her activities at Massey. It was very much a “get to know you” gathering over tea and biscuits.

What I knew of Dr. Franklin included some of her writings, her books, her Massey Lectures from 1989, and her many interviews on the radio and television. My genuinely deferential posture in the face of a senior academic of her standing and accomplishment evoked a warm but direct response: “Please, Master, call me Ursula; titles and distinctions often get in the way of honest conversation.”

I uncomfortably agreed to her request, as I was quite humbled in her presence, and felt remarkably privileged and eager to gain her advice and perspective on a College in which she had been a senior and driving force for so many years. But, Ursula being Ursula, she did not come awash in Massey gossip, but with a question regarding something I had written that had troubled her. She asked, “would you mind if I raised an Op Ed you wrote in the *Globe* a couple of months ago?”, to which I replied “of course not”, quite unbelieving that someone with her intellectual acuity and vast writings of her own would take any notice, whatsoever, of something I had written. She continued: “Hugh, it was a piece on the need for Canada to have more deployable military capacity, which, frankly I found troubling, because in my experience there are very few problems in this world not made worse by the military option. You know I am a pacifist.” It struck me that calling herself a “pacifist,” in an explanatory way, would be akin to Albert Einstein admitting that he was interested in physics. The look in her eye made it quite clear that this was not a “make conversation” editorial note to fill time; this was a probe so that she might better understand what made the fifth Master of Massey College

tick. It struck me that doing a trite “let’s agree to disagree” would be disrespectful and, frankly, not in keeping with the Massey tradition of interdisciplinary debate and engagement.

As an experimental physicist—who had been interned in her German homeland during the war as a young person because of a Jewish parent—she had been awarded both the Order of Canada, at its highest rank, and the Pearson Peace Medal, for her remarkable research and advocacy. What truly set her apart from her colleagues, however, was her immense contribution to a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty through her seminal research on atmospheric testing, and the impact of the migration of strontium 90 radiation through the food chain to children’s teeth, and her advocacy for fair treatment of female academics at the University.

Ursula’s “pacifism” was more than a political bias; it was a deeply felt, heavily researched, and articulately promoted view of broad global interest, and one that she pursued with a mix of intellect, deep conviction, and pervasive social responsibility. For Ursula, this was about the weight of history, the risks of misapplied technology, and our common duty to our fellow human beings. Implicit in her careful question to me, therefore, was an inquiry into my own humanitarian instincts, and sense of ethics and responsibility to the innocent civilians who often pay the price for militarism. She deserved a respectful answer, one far beyond a patronising or dismissive reflection, based on the politics du jour.

“Ursula, I believe that a democracy, while seeking always to avoid war and seek non-violent solutions, needs the capacity to deploy well trained, properly equipped and capable forces on occasion, when other choices have been exhausted, or the threat of non-deployment outstrips the risks of any deployment itself.”

“How do you mean that?” she asked.

“Well, I remember as a Senator visiting with Canadian forces in Afghanistan who were deployed in Kandahar province with other NATO forces. At one base, under Canadian command, in the Peshawar district, I found myself with the Canadian Minister of National Defence and the Chief of the Defence Staff, climbing up to an observation tower that afforded us a view of the territory beyond the fence of the NATO base itself. I noticed a Stalinesque three-storey birthday cake structure several hundred yards beyond the wire, flying an Afghan flag and with a Canadian forces armoured personnel vehicle parked in the yard. I turned to the female officer with the Canadian flag on her shoulder flash and asked the obvious question: ‘What is that building there?’

“‘Senator, that was Taliban headquarters before this area was secured by NATO forces,’ she replied crisply.

“‘What did they do there?’ I asked.

“‘Senator, it was their military and civil admin hub. It had caches of arms, a range of vehicles, and it was where they brought prisoners who were subjected to harsh treatment and, sadly, often tortured.’

“‘And what happens there now?’ I asked, assuming it had become a base for the Karzai government’s administration in this part of Kandahar province.

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“Senator,” the young Canadian Officer replied, “it is now a district girls’ school under the protection of the Canadian Forces, Sir.”

I paused, in my answer to Dr. Franklin, hoping that the clarity and humanity of this Canadian military position would perhaps encourage her to reflect on the notion that there was never any good whatsoever that could come from a military deployment and at any time.

She smiled, reflected for a moment, and then offered this quite remarkable rejoinder,

“Well, Hugh, I do remember in 1945 that many of us cheered when Soviet troops marched into Berlin to liberate what was left of the city from the Nazis.”

As we both reflected on what she had just said, I had at first thought this was a mildly concessionary response on the part of a woman whose intellectual depth, and deep historical experience with the world easily dwarfed my own. But, as I contemplated the content and calibration of her retort, it occurred to me that whatever the spirit of her considered response, it was not concessionary at all. It was the absolute opposite, politely offered in good grace and genuine warmth.

The history of what Soviet troops did in Germany toward the end of the war, was not only about stout and brave battles against the remaining armed resistance of Nazi and Whermacht forces gathered in the final defence of Hitler’s Third Reich. Their actions were inspired by Nazi atrocities, and the mass starvation of Soviet citizens during Germany’s failed *Operation Barbarosa* invasion of The Soviet Union, resulting in rape, pillage, and broad incidents of cruelty and inhumanity among German women and civilians. This was compounded by territorial subjugation of large parts of Eastern Europe by the Red Army in fulfillment of Stalin’s totalitarian vision of Russia’s best geostrategic interests. As was often the case with Ursula, this was a magisterial reply that operated at many levels all at once.

1. She had been alive, present, and in full witness of the military events and deployments that ended the Second World War.
2. However initial military purposes may be of noble intent, more often than not, the use of military power cannot avoid the risk of the innocent and defenceless being victimized, and ignoble and indefensible then stepping up.
3. Any deployment of the military cannot but lead to the unavoidable reality of the developments that ensued across Europe at the end of the Second World War. As those developments required the creation of NATO and the massive investments in the Marshall Plan to rebuild Western Europe from the rubble the Nazi attacks and occupation had created, whatever the temporary if central value of a Red Army entry into Berlin, in the end many would pay a price for that, long after the war came to an end.

As I never win at poker, Ursula could tell from my face that I was gathering the full import of her comment as I looked back at her. “I have an idea,” she interjected, “you and I should have a debate—more of a civilized discussion—with the Junior Fellowship over tea one afternoon or evening where we might make our respective cases, or in a way where we might both learn a little.”

While I had no doubt how much the Junior Fellows and I might learn from her, the notion of her learning anything at all from me struck me as quite generous on her part, if not a touch fanciful. But I immediately agreed that this would be a splendid idea.

At Massey, her work on science and society was renowned for its warm inclusion of other disciplines, and graduate students of all ages and provenance. Senior Fellows renowned for their experience and leadership in medical research and education were delighted to partner with her, as were countless Junior Fellows. Long before my arrival, in getting myself briefed on her over 25 year presence at Massey, I heard story after story of the waves she made

with her naturally intellectually inquiring persona, through her own research and writing, and through her dedication to mentoring and encouraging others. Being invited to her office for tea was one of those special events in a doctoral candidate’s life that generated immense impact, inspiration, and motivation. When she came up to hall for lunch, her table was always a centre of laughter and serious reflection. Never condescending or aloof, she was the veritable embodiment of the interdisciplinary and intergenerational idea of learning with others, and from others and their different disciplines and backgrounds – the fundamental purposes for which Massey College was established.

One of her partners and dear friends was Dr. Boris Stoiceff, a broadly recognised and revered professor of physics, whose expertise in the physics of light earned him kudos and standing worldwide. He too was a Senior Fellow at Massey, and became both a wonderful collaborator and colleague of Ursula’s at the college. He died in 2010, and his life was celebrated at Massey’s Ondaatje Hall by a broad mix of academics, former students, business leaders, and applied scientists from the private and public sectors.

While Ursula was very much still alive, and gamely battling the physical impairments advanced years generate for us all, colleagues among the college officers, encouraged by my predecessor and omnipresent fourth Master, John Fraser, decided that a tribute to her remarkable presence at the college should be visibly established in the college’s quadrangle. A truly wonderful transparent metal globe was designed by Camie Geary-Martin installed within sight of the pond. Hard work led by Jill Clark, the Bursar, and Anna Luengo, the College Administrator, supported by Facilities Manager Kelly Gale, saw this installation established and unveiled the summer before Ursula’s death.

Her insistence that the globe, in its transparency and elegance, not be dedicated only to her, but to Boris Stoiceff as well, spoke of the spirit of collaboration and joint effort that underlined who she was. That she saw its design and viewed it in place before she passed in 2016 is a modest reflection of how important she was as a mentor and spiritual force for science, humanity, and understanding, not only at Massey, but across the University, and the world. It stands as a symbol for a world where illumination and understanding should replace hatred and intolerance, and is one all members of the Massey College community pass every day as they go about their lives. I can see it from my office window.

Also at Massey, in the frequently used Upper Library, are the Wisdom Windows by Sarah Hall—a series of nine panes of beautifully etched glass that dominate one of the walls. The windows were inspired by Ursula, and our former college Visitor, Rose Wolfe, herself a former Chancellor of the University, and a tireless social worker, community leader, and philanthropist, whose dynamic humanism, respect for history, and human rights and dignity, graced the college for many years.

That both of these leaders should have been honoured in this way speaks volumes of how paths cross over history in ways that defy either cynicism or despair. Rose Wolfe started her career as a social worker specializing in helping the survivors of the Holocaust upon their arrival in Canada. Ursula Franklin, herself interned in a Concentration Camp, began a new life, after the war, in Canada. They came together at Massey College, each from different professional backgrounds, but united there by the common commitment to sharing ideas and perspectives that would make the world a better place.

A quote by Ursula with regards to these windows and light entitled “Of Light, Enlightenment, and Innovation” reads as follows:

In the minds of those who observe and study the natural world, Light has always occupied a unique place. The casting of shadows, the sharp edge that divides light and dark, the movement of shadows as the light source changes position; these confer to Light (and her children the colours) the role of a teacher – to illuminate, to enlighten. Light teaches dis-

cernment, and nowhere more convincingly than in the observation that too much light on an object as well as too little can hide essential details. It is no wonder that the boundaries between zones of darkness and places of light – the transitions, shadows and eclipses – have provided and continue to provide the most profound insight.

What Ursula Franklin wrote, taught, deciphered, discovered, researched, and addressed—in, among many other vehicles, the

1989 Massey Lectures—continues to inspire and serve humankind in so many ways. We are deeply honoured to protect and preserve a small part of that wondrous and global legacy, and, above all, are deeply grateful to have been a small part of her amazing time of service, study, courage, and mentoring on this earth.

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