

POLITICS AS USUAL: It isn't just a statue

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

What is a statue?

Is it a work of art?

Is it a representation of a thought, a feeling?

Is it a commemoration of an event?

Is it a representation of, or honour of, someone of importance?

To celebrate someone who has made a difference in one's community?

Clearly a statue can be all of these things depending on the context.

How many of us walk by statues every day and never give them a thought beyond an occasional, 'well, isn't that nice??' type of thing?

There are a number of famous statues on the campus here at York University that I see every day.

I have admired them - the water sculpture near the West Accolade building is particularly beautiful, if in an odd kind of way. We have a few statues, and a bust - or two - of famous folks who helped found various colleges and departments within the university.

But none that seem to engender feelings of hostility or controversy.

Well, none that I am aware of. Just lovely mute testaments of honour to those who played a part in the development of the institution.

Which brings me to my point: statues and busts and sculptures can be things of beauty; however, they can also be symbols of oppression and of racism, which create flashpoints for conflict and violence, as the recent events in North Carolina have demonstrated.

The removal of a statue of a leader of the Confederacy - a movement which, at its heart, was about wanting to keep the slave trade alive - was the ostensible reason for a march on Charlottesville City Hall, in protest by a group of white nationalists/racists/neo-nazis and other assorted thugs.

The armed protesters argued that the removal of the statue was the removal of an important part of their storied past and that they were protecting or taking back their history. Whatever the heck that means.

I am not sure what it is they are 'taking back?', but it certainly wasn't history. And it certainly wasn't their history regardless. Why anyone would want to claim that history as their own speaks volumes about them, as they soon demonstrated. Amply.

The disgusting display of violence and racism belied their stated purpose in any event.

It wasn't about a statue, but about what that statue represented: a time of deep racial divide in the United States, and the odious desire of some folks to return to that time.

The removal of that statue, and all that it represents, frankly, should have happened quite some time ago, in my humble opinion; the same with the removal of the confederate flag on legislative buildings. It shouldn't need to be said, but clearly it does - these racist symbols have no place in the modern world.

There are many monuments, in many countries, that were erected in a much different time and place in history.

Careful and considered conversations are needed about what these monuments represent and whether they should be removed as a consequence.

As our values change, so too should what we choose to honour in our public spaces.