

Introduction to the Martyrology

by Nina Peskin

I'm going to share something with you that's personal and out of my comfort zone. This is it: I find myself numb a lot these days. I want to think of myself as a good person, and someone with integrity. But the world is over-full of overwhelming problems. My job is to deal with problems. I don't shy away from problems. But these are SO BIG. My mind and my spirit don't know how to deal with them. So I get numb. I binge watch. I cuddle my dogs and pretend the world is only as big as my house and the only people in it are my family. I can exert some influence, if not control, over something that size. I choose not to participate in some protests and take some stands that I think I should because it feels futile. Or because I'm tired. I'm not proud of this, and I'm sure some of you can relate.

I came into the world with a lot of strong feelings. I was incredibly moved by the plight of baby seals when I learned they were being clubbed to death for their fur. I circulated a petition around my elementary school and got over 100 people to sign. And had no idea that I should then send it somewhere and do something with it so it sat in a drawer for years, but my 5th grade heart was in the right place. At another point in my elementary years I insisted that my McDonalds burger be placed in a paper bag rather than Styrofoam because of what I learned was happening to the rainforests. My little brother still remembers this- he was mortified then but lovingly teases me about it now. When I was in 10th grade, my history class read Fahrenheit 451, and my teacher asked us, "Which one of you thinks you would be willing to go into hiding and memorize a book to keep them from extinction? Which one of you might do this?" I raised my hand, along with a bunch of other kids. My teacher said, "Nina's the only one of you who's not lying." This of course made me incredibly proud, but my adult self might have answered differently. I have a lot more at stake. I'm much more risk-averse now. I've changed.

If my child self could meet me now, she might be angry that I sometimes allow myself to shut down in the face of the challenges we face. She would probably tell me I'm not doing enough. She would question my integrity.

We have this precious opportunity every new year to remind ourselves of what we want to be. And the martyrology service, and these incredible, loving, zealous, devoted, possibly mad humans, wake up a place deep in me that wants to be that good. The place that wants to make the world better, be kinder, to courageously take a stand, to risk. Part of the legacy of the martyrs we read about every year is to serve as a kind of ner tamid- an eternal flame- of integrity. These people remind us how it feels to care so deeply about what the world should be. They remind us that we have to be willing to be uncomfortable, to be awake, and maybe even suffer for what we believe and what we love. As we read about these people who had such integrity and commitment to their ideals, we can consider what we might be willing to do differently for the sake of being the change we wish to see in the world. My prayer for all of us is that we allow our hearts to be touched by these stories. That we open up to the pain they felt and remember the values that are so deeply important to us that we would be willing to sacrifice for them. And perhaps to do something this coming year to make the world more what we want it to be.