

**“Re-imagining Mars”  
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The distinguished historian Will Durant has calculated the total length of time in recorded human history during which our planet was free of war. It's twenty-seven years. We've had world enough and time to learn about the causes and cures of war. Theories abound. One says war is a reprise of psychological and physical abuse due to bad childrearing habits. Eisenhower cautioned against the military-industrial complex. “War-mongering munitions makers” have been the political left’s favorite explanation too. The theories range from geopolitics to gender. Yet, a standard modern reference text on war concludes, “the voluminous works of contemporary military intellectuals contain no new ideas about the origins of war. . . . [A] ‘satisfactory’ scientific view of war is as remote as ever.”

Despite having no reliable causal picture of war, we persist in advocating for its photographic negative, named peace. It is a natural impulse, but actually, not a good one. Plato called peace “really only a name.” Hobbes said it was just “a breathing time.” The Oxford English dictionary defines peace as “the absence of war.” With peace imminent at the end of World War II, the French novelist Marguerite Duras described her sense of “a great darkness falling . . . the beginning of forgetting.”

Invariably, the peace has been shattered long before war breaks out. The hostilities persist long after the armistice. But our flight from war’s horror is so headlong that, along with the dead, we bury the wisdom purchased so dearly in war’s misadventure. “Longings for peace,” said James Hillman in his book A Terrible Love of War, “become both simplistic and utopian, with programs for universal love, disarmament, and an Aquarian federation of nations, or [a throwback] to the status quo ante of Norman Rockwell’s apple pie.”

The failure of all these diagnoses and cures leads Barbara Ehrenreich to conclude, in her book Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passion Of War, that war is an autonomous force – rather than the consequence of something else. But even if autonomous, war does break into the world through human beings. We have a say in how this force expresses itself.

An autonomous force entering the world through humans sounds like something spiritual. So I have to ask, is war a manifestation of spiritual energy? An intimate consort of war seemed to be thinking along these lines when he said, “despite the impossibility of physically detecting the soul, its existence is proven by its tangible reflection in acts and thoughts. So with war, beyond its physical aspect of armed hosts there hovers an impalpable something which dominates the material . . . . To search for this something we should seek it in a manner analogous to our search for the soul.” So said General George S. Patton.

A distant ancestor of Patton embarked on such a spiritual search in the ancient Hindu text called the Bhagavad-Gita, or Song of God. Krishna, the ultimate manifestation of God in Hinduism, is asked for his support by the chieftains of two rival branches of a royal family. He won't take sides, but offers to give his vast army to one and to act as counselor for the other. One chieftain, Duryodhana, opts for the army. The other, Arjuna, says he is happy to have Krishna as his counselor.

This is a decisive moment in the story. In choosing the army, Duryodhana reveals himself as having no value higher than winning. In choosing Krishna's counsel, Arjuna reveals himself as a holy-man-in-training.

Arjuna agonizes over warring against his cousins. He wants to leave the field. Krishna shakes his head and points Arjuna toward a calling instead: to act in the world – and in the imminent strife that confronts him – so as to fulfill the relationship between God and humans, but without attachment to the outcome. Although the story is subtitled “Krishna's Counsel in Time of War,” Krishna's advice shows that this is no military strategy text. The “war” in question is the endless internal struggle within each person. In fact, Duryodhana and Arjuna are really archetypes, representing competing spiritual energies. What happens in the world outside is a reflection of what happens in the struggle within.

War may call people to the most repellant duties imaginable. As Thomas Merton has observed, the Bhagavad-Gita is saying that “even in what appears to be most ‘unspiritual,’ one can act with pure intentions and thus be guided by [holy] consciousness. The consciousness itself will impose the most strict limitations on one's use of violence . . . .”

This consciousness requires great discipline -- meaning discipleship to the divine, to the grace, balance, and wholeness of the universe. To inspire this consciousness in Arjuna, Krishna reveals all the forms of his divinity. The light of his spirit is likened to a thousand suns rising in the sky at once. In his form as destroyer, Krishna says “I am death, shatterer of worlds, annihilating all things.” Arjuna comes to realize that he has a calling in life – one filled with both joy and sorrow -- to sustain the human drama of gracefully limited creation and destruction.

True to Krishna's teaching that Arjuna must renounce attachment to outcomes, the Bhagavad-Gita itself ends without revealing the military result. It doesn't matter who “won.” Only that Arjuna's action is grounded in spiritual discipline and renunciation of attachment.

This is a story of the transformation of a soldier into a warrior, through expansion of consciousness. A warrior is someone who has practiced a spiritual discipline of humility and surrender to holy presence, a discipline of containing struggle and conflict while remaining conscious enough to hear “God's Counsel in Time of War” – even though everything is collapsing.

The image of the warrior has been tarnished by cultural misuse, but the nobility of the idea is intact -- captured poetically in the legendary Tao Te Ching (Stephen Mitchell translation), which declares that

Weapons are the tools of violence;  
all decent people detest them.

Weapons are the tools of fear;  
a decent person will avoid them  
except in the direst necessity  
and, if compelled, will use them  
only with the utmost restraint.  
Wholeness is his highest value.  
If wholeness has been shattered,  
how can he be content?  
His enemies are not demons,  
but human beings like himself.  
He doesn't wish them personal harm.  
Nor does he rejoice in victory.  
How could he rejoice in victory  
and delight in the slaughter of humans?

He enters a battle gravely,  
with sorrow and with great compassion,  
as if he were attending a funeral.

This idea is not a romantic artifact of antiquity. You can hear the echoes of it in Sue Peterson's testimony this morning about her own journey in doing the work of social justice. There are warriors among us this morning, practiced in the spiritual discipline of many arts, martial and otherwise. As Sue mentioned, for ten Thursday evenings this spring, a small handful of WUUs are meeting to seek a deeper understanding of the social justice ministry of our church. We talk about many different things from session to session, but the conversation is always about the relationship between the material struggles and conflicts of the outer world and the spiritual ones of the world within.

The Baghavad-Gita reveals the fundamental problem with how we view war. We want to distance ourselves from its terrible bloody stain. But war is simply an extreme and corrupted form of struggle and conflict, which are essential to human life. They are part of the divine energy that flows through us into the world -- an expression of life's endless process of creation and destruction.

We cannot even form an identity, individually or collectively, without struggle and conflict. We are defined by our adversaries. If they did not exist, we would have to invent them. And sometimes we do. New ideas compete with old ones. Political and religious movements wax and wane. Cultures flourish and wither. These dialectical processes are good.

All human pursuits are part of this endless creation and destruction. In a sufficiently open society, all such pursuits offer the radically creative possibility of experiencing the holy and reflecting it into the midst of the mundane. We tend to think that this is a special calling

reserved for poets, artists, and saints; but actually, the same noble calling awaits us all – carpenters and lawyers, brain surgeons and bellhops.

Every person has the capacity to connect with the truth, beauty, mystery, goodness, and wholeness that lie beyond the horizon of life in the material world; and to bring pieces of these facets of the holy back to share with others – by reflecting them in the work we do and the way we are present in the world. The word for the essential quality of such work and such ways of being is poetry.

The Greek ancestor of this word, *poesis*, actually means “creativity,” and creation of something new always involves destruction of something old. It is all one process. Every one has the God-given capacity for a kind of universal poetry – in her life, in her work, whether she ever writes a single verse -- whether the medium in which she works is opera or garbage collection. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.

All these forms of graceful creation and destruction require freedom, and freedom requires a space protected by limitations and boundaries. These limitations include everything from the ordinary rules of civil society to styles and conventions of artistic expression. Without enough of these, everything collapses into terrifying chaos. With too much of them, everything collapses into tedious rigidity and inertness. Such collapses reflect a violent dis-integration and corruption of the graceful balance of creation and destruction, imagination and literalism, belief and novelty, mundane boundary and far spiritual horizon.

When this happens, the universal poetry dies. When universal poetry dies, the channels through which truth, beauty, goodness, mystery, and wholeness are brought into the world and shared with others are shut down. Universal poetry is a divine capacity in humans. When this godliness is trapped in chaos or inertness, it will find a way to break into the world – violently, if the person in which it lives lacks the discipline and balance to express it in a better way. If the chaos or inertness becomes severe enough, the violence will escalate from the individual level – road rage, physical attacks, crimes of personal passion – to the social one – gangs, rampage killings, rebellion, governmental persecution, and, ultimately, war.

The violence will not be logical, but rather, chaotic. Any ground for discharging the violent urge will do. The anger of the German people at the unfairness of the Treaty of Versailles, which concluded World War I on terms that were harsh and unfair to Germany, fits this pattern. It was splattered like lethal acid all over groups that had no part in imposing the treaty -- notably, Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and assorted other non-Aryans all over Europe.

So. Is war a manifestation of spiritual energy? In thunder, yes.

Many years ago, a young and liberally educated physicist read the Bhagavad-Gita in the original Sanskrit. It fascinated him. A dozen years later, his work took him to a beautiful place where he experienced that “light of a thousand suns rising in the sky at once” of which Krishna spoke in the ancient text. The place was Los Alamos, New Mexico. The occasion was the first test of the atomic bomb. The physicist was Robert Oppenheimer, architect of the Manhattan Project. Witnessing the explosion, he said to himself, “Now I am become death, the shatterer of

worlds” – the line spoken by Krishna in revealing his destroyer aspect. Oppenheimer felt no exultation, but rather, dread and shame at having crossed a forbidden boundary. The lesson of the ancient text about the humility and discipline required of a warrior had come too late. He had made a god of theoretical physics, which became terrifyingly nontheoretical.

War is force without restraint. In war, there is neither a secular higher power strong enough to restrain the combatants nor a spiritual one whose call they can hear.

Religion is frequently invoked in wartime, of course, but only as a request for tactical support. No modern general would have considered Arjuna, the hero of the Bhagavad-Gita, to be anything but a fool for choosing God’s advice over God’s army.

In war, the violence continues until one side or the other is exhausted. The collapse of imagination that made going to war look like the only option also makes grinding onward until the bitter end look the same way.

The human impulse toward godliness is not extinguished by war, which invariably strikes sparks of selflessness, heroism, and deep connection among those it ensnares. But these are undisciplined flashes. They cannot derail the machinery of war, but rather, can only remind us of the universal poetry tragically trapped in chaos or inertness long before the fighting began. The Irish airman of whom Yeats wrote was an aristocrat, fabulously wealthy, with a peacetime life so meaningless that aerial combat seemed a delight. The warrior he might have been never saw the light of day.

In contrast, the powers and principalities of seventeenth century Japan woke up before the chaos descended. Their ethics undoubtedly fell short of the Tao Te Ching. But they did have boundaries they would not cross, limitations the violation of which would bring shame and dishonor. Can we even imagine that, in our shameless society of today? These limitations could be seen in their centuries-old aesthetics and ethics of swordsmanship, inculcated through disciplined training and spiritual practice.

At first the guns looked like freedom, but then chaos often does as the descent begins. Eventually, they were seen for what they were: a form of attachment to the outcome of conflict, machines of efficient production in the artless business of killing, a dangerously democratic way to evade the bothersome limitations of aesthetics, culture, and religion. Eventually, Japan’s warrior tradition won out over the guns – but only for awhile.

War breaks out when there aren’t enough warriors to prevent it. War grinds relentlessly on until the bitter end when there aren’t enough warriors to grab the reins and stop it. The warriors are crucial, because they have not distanced themselves from Mars. Rather, they have tamed him with a higher power. Without them, we are remitted to the leadership of banty roosters prancing across the decks of aircraft carriers in flight jackets, under boastful banners that say “mission accomplished.”

Governments rarely have any interest in warriors. It is soldiers they want – people to be molded into killing machines, their memory of their own godliness wiped clean by

indoctrination, like a computer hard drive. Warriors know that wartime begins at the first sign of loss of grace, balance, and integrity in the processes of creation and destruction that are the rhythm of human life. They have a joyful and sorrowful sense of stewardship toward all that grace.

Warriors know that the opposite of war is not peace but poetry, universal poetry. They know that men do indeed die every day for want of what is found there. Let us leave off praying for peace and take up praying for warriors. Let us become the warriors we are praying for. We are not the bystanders. We are the battlefield.

AMEN.