

Planet of War
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
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Opening Words – (#583 Archibald MacLeish, Responsive Reading)

[The young dead soldiers](#) do not speak.

Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses; who has not heard them?

They have a silence that speaks for them at night, and when the clock counts.

They say: We were young. We have died. Remember us.

They say: We have done what we could but until it is finished it is not done.

They say: We have given our lives but until it is finished no one can know what our lives gave.

They say: Our deaths are not ours; they are yours; they will mean what you make them.

They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say; it is you who must say this.

They say: We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.

We were young, they say. We have died. Remember us.

Readings

1. From "[The Disease of Permanent War](#)" (May 18, 2009), by Chris Hedges:

The embrace by any society of permanent war is a parasite that devours the heart and soul of a nation. Permanent war extinguishes liberal, democratic movements. It turns culture into nationalist cant. It degrades and corrupts education and the media, and wrecks the economy. The liberal, democratic forces, tasked with maintaining an open society, become impotent. The collapse of liberalism...ushers in an age of moral nihilism. This moral nihilism comes in many colors and hues. It rants and thunders in a variety of slogans, languages and ideologies. It can manifest itself in fascist salutes, communist show trials or Christian crusades. It is, at its core, all the same. It is the crude, terrifying tirade of mediocrities who find their identities and power in the perpetuation of permanent war.

2. "[Iron](#)," by Carl Sandburg (1878 – 1967):

Guns,

Long, steel guns,

Pointed from the war ships

In the name of the war god.

Straight, shining, polished guns,

Clambered over with jackies in white blouses,

Glory of tan faces, tousled hair, white teeth,

Laughing lithe jackies in white blouses,

Sitting on the guns singing war songs, war chanties.

Shovels,

Broad, iron shovels,

Scooping out oblong vaults,

Loosening turf and leveling sod.

I ask you

To witness--

The shovel is brother to the gun.

Sermon

The War of the Worlds is a novel by H.G. Wells written in 1898 about Martians landing in a small village in England and their nearly successful attempt to destroy human civilization and take over the Earth. It has come to be known as one of the great works of science fiction, an early classic that set the tone for many “alien invasion” stories that followed.

On October 30, 1938, CBS’s *Mercury Theatre on the Air* [presented a radio drama](#) based on this novel as their Halloween episode. The setting was changed to Grovers Mill, New Jersey and a good share of the story was broadcast as a series of news bulletins reporting, first, astronomers’ observations of strange explosions on Mars, then the landing of a cylindrical meteorite in Grovers Mill, and finally the desperate, panicked reporting of the creatures that came from within the meteorite and the death and destruction that they caused as they incinerated onlookers with heat rays.

It all sounds kind of quaint from this vantage point; science fiction of the “bug-eyed monster” vintage. But the radio broadcast is remembered for the panic that ensued when some listeners, tuning in after the show had already begun, took the “news-bulletin” format to be real.

Partly, this can be attributed to the fact that the *Mercury Theatre* was broadcast without commercial interruption, to enhance its dramatic effect...which apparently worked well in this case. Outside of the introduction and the end of the show, there was only one disclaimer, 40 minutes through, affirming the fictional nature of what was being heard.

Also, the episode was directed and narrated by one Orson Welles, who brought his considerable dramatic abilities to bear on making it realistic (and soon became quite famous amidst the hysteria surrounding this broadcast).

The town of Concrete, Washington experienced a power failure just at the time that the radio drama reported that the Martians were spreading throughout the country, invading towns and attacking citizens with flashes of light and poisonous gases. Needless to say, this resulted in some panicked reactions, from fainting to frantic escape.

As it turned out, the cause of the power failure was a short-circuit at the Superior Portland Cement Co.

But while we can smile at the panic, the general theme of this story continues to play out in our cultural life, our cultural mythology. And though Mars was possibly chosen as the source of such an invasion because some of the scientific speculation that was going on around the apparent “canals” on its surface during the time of H.G. Wells, I wonder if another reason that Mars seemed a likely invader is because of the mythology behind Mars itself. Mars, after all, is [the Roman god of war](#), based in part on the figure of [Ares in Greek mythology](#). If we’re going to be invaded by aliens from another planet, Mars seems the likeliest mythological candidate. After all, Venus is closer...but picturing violent, tentacled monsters shooting death rays from the Planet of the Goddess of Love is maybe a little discordant.

Which makes me wonder, sometimes, how we ever named a planet for the God of War in the first place. And I found that, in the move from Ares in Greek mythology to Mars in Roman mythology, the god of war experienced something of a makeover.

The Greeks, generally speaking, experienced Ares as a troublemaker, to put it mildly. He was bloodthirsty and cruel. In Homer's *The Iliad*, Zeus, the leader of the gods, tells Ares, "You are to me the most hateful of the gods. . . . For dear to you always are strife and wars and battles."

For the Romans, however, Mars was honored as one of their most important deities, second only to Jupiter, who was borrowed from the Greek Zeus. Mars is much more dignified than Ares, and honored by the Romans as the father of Romulus who was said to have founded Rome itself. Though Mars began in Roman history and religion as a god of vegetation and fertility, he morphed into a god of war as Roman aggression and imperialistic ambitions grew. And this hateful Greek god of war, Ares, who was bloodthirsty and cruel, did not match their image of themselves...thus the makeover into honorable, upright, laudable god of war: Mars.

But what, I wonder, happened to Ares?

And I ask that question, not as some intellectual mythological diversion, but in terms of the heart-wrenching request of the young dead soldiers that MacLeish voiced in the Opening Words: *We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.*

How will we do that? How do we best honor their memory today?

Let me suggest to you that we are not doing a very good job of it, as a nation, as a world community. Honoring the memories of those dead soldiers; honoring the sacrifice of those who have survived the ravages of war and carry the wounds of battle would mean admitting the reality of the brutality and cruelty of Ares, the god of war.

Let me suggest to you that Mars *has* invaded our planet: the god of war with the makeover, the god of war that hides behind a grand and noble exterior; that demands our worship; that allies itself so closely with virtue and honor that it cannot be questioned. Mars has invaded: the god of war that depends ever and always on maintaining its noble appearance to satisfy its ravenous appetite for death and destruction. Mars has invaded: the god of war that is worried about *pictures* of brutality, rather than the brutality itself; the god of war that masquerades as necessity, as practicality, as peace, and so carries out its violent purpose unchallenged.

Mars *has* invaded. And if we look back to the residents of Concrete, Washington in 1938 and smile and shake our heads at the fact that they accepted something fictional as if it really happened, what then do we say about ourselves now, who routinely accept the most horrifying things *really happening* as if they were fiction. We listen to the radio, watch TV, read web sites and blogs and newspapers, and hear the reports of suffering and pain and war and destruction as if they were the latest installments of *Mercury Theatre*.

And the soldiers know better. The soldiers do not have the luxury of ignoring the reality. They cannot pretend it is Mars when Ares awaits them. Will we honor them by pledging to send more and more and more troops to more and more and more battles? Will we honor them by pledging perpetual war, by ensuring that the suffering they experienced will be experienced by generation after generation for as long as humanity survives? Will we honor them by continuing in the delusion that only war will keep us safe? (Did it keep the young, dead soldiers safe?) Will we honor their companions in battle who survived by putting bumperstickers on our cars but denying them psychological services, jobs, support

for re-entering a culture that worships Mars when they have experienced the torturous onslaught of Aries? If Memorial Day is about remembering, what is it that we will remember?

Bill Moyers, in [a commentary on Memorial Day](#), said this:

Over some 40 years now it has seemed to me that as time goes by we tend to remember wars, and the suffering they bring, as if they were inevitable, natural acts of history, rather than politically inspired choices. But war, as was famously said, is politics by another means - the lethal legacy of failed leadership, enabled, even ennobled, by propaganda, the partisan opiate of politics. It is good to be reminded...that war is too important to forget, and that's one reason to observe Memorial Day. There is another - to hold before our face a mirror, so that we might see the images of war reflected in our own eyes.

Orson Welles, it is said, was inspired in his direction and narration of *The War of the Worlds* by two other radio plays written by poet, Archibald MacLeish, who wrote our Opening Words. Welles actually starred in one of these plays, [Fall of the City](#), in 1937. In it, the people of a nameless city subjugate themselves to a statuesque, armor-clad tyrant. Only the announcer, played by Welles, sees that there is nothing under the armor; the people, prostrate, don't dare to look. "The people invent their oppressors," says MacLeish. "They wish to believe in them."

In MacLeish's play, "[Air Raid](#)," the announcer is stationed on a tenement roof and as he waits and fears for the enemy planes to come over, his microphone picks up the incongruous, commonplace sounds and voices of women chattering, of children playing. Tensely poised for the inevitable attack, the announcer fills in the waiting time by remarking:

*We call it peace and kill the women and the children.
Our women die in peace beneath the lintels of their doors.
We've learned much; civilization has gentled us:
We've learned to take the dying and the wounds without the wars. . . .*

Let me suggest that war itself has become our oppressor. We need to look beneath its impressive armor to the emptiness it covers. Mars has invaded and taken hold of our minds such that we call war, peace; such that we move from debating just war to defending each and every war as just; such that we answer the young dead soldiers by saying we will give their noble sacrifice meaning by ensuring the deaths of more soldiers in meaningless war; such that we move from the war to end all wars to the war that never ends.

Chris Hedges, a long-time war reporter who wrote a book entitled *War is a Force that Give us Meaning*, describes this idea of permanent war as a type of invasion, saying it "is a parasite that devours the heart and soul of a nation. Permanent war extinguishes liberal, democratic movements. It turns culture into nationalist cant. It degrades and corrupts education and the media, and wrecks the economy."

And if--in a phrase that has been attributed to Greek playwright Aeschylus in the 5th Century BCE and Republican Senator, Hiram Johnson in 1918—if the first casualty of war is the truth, what does perpetual war suggest to you? Will we honor the memories of dead soldiers--will we honor the soldiers who survived through the battles, scarred with the brutal reality of war--with made-up stories? Will we admit to Ares or hide behind Mars?

H.G. Wells wrote another, lesser-known novel about Martian invasion in 1937 entitled *Star-Begotten*. This time, the Martians were not so malevolent, but were engaged in a subtle plan to infiltrate and alter the human race genetically such that we would pursue a peaceful, fair, and free world. The main character comes to identify these “altered” beings not least of all because they challenge many accepted notions of the time that, once examined, are illogical, unjustifiable, destructive to humanity itself. He imagines that, once reaching critical mass, these altered individuals will work to create “a world gone sane.”

But at the end—and I apologize for this spoiler—at the end he realizes that, indeed, *he* is one of these altered individuals, he along with his wife and newborn son, and that he need not only watch from the sidelines the changes that he foresees, but that he can and will be part of the challenge of building a new world.

The young dead soldiers do not speak.

Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses; who has not heard them?

They have a silence that speaks for them at night, and when the clock counts.

They say: We were young. We have died. Remember us.

They say: We have done what we could but until it is finished it is not done.

They say: We have given our lives but until it is finished no one can know what our lives gave.

They say: Our deaths are not ours; they are yours; they will mean what you make them.

They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say; it is you who must say this.

It is we who must say.

What will we say?

Closing Words (#578, Olympia Brown)

We can never make the world safe by fighting. Every nation must learn that the people of all nations are children of God; and must share the wealth of the world. You may say this is impracticable, far away, can never be accomplished, but it is the work we are appointed to do. Sometime, somehow, somewhere, we must ever teach this great lesson.