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WE ARE NOT WORTH MORE. THEY ARE NOT WORTH LESS

THE ODYSSEY OF S. BRIAN WILLSON

GREG KING

For several years during the last decade I gathered inspiration from a neighbor who often passed by my house on his bike. Actually, he rode a “handcycle” — a tricycle he pedaled with his hands. His legs were gone below the knees, but with his arms he often cranked out hundreds of miles a week.

This old neighbor of mine is S. Brian Willson, a former U.S. Air Force officer. He served in Vietnam, but he didn’t lose his legs in the war. That happened on American soil.

After witnessing the effects of an American napalm raid on a peaceful Vietnamese village, Willson, a former all-conference athlete and scion of right-wing American conservatives, returned home to participate in antiwar protests. By the

eighties Willson was organizing military veterans to oppose the Reagan administration's three wars in Central America. Then, on September 1, 1987, he and fellow veterans David Duncombe and Duncan Murphy sat on a curving stretch of railroad track that crossed a public road. Their goal was to block munitions shipments from the Concord Naval Weapons Station in California to American proxy armies in Central America. As the train approached, traveling at more than three times the legal speed limit of five miles an hour, it became clear it wasn't going to stop. The protesters scrambled. Murphy, a sixty-six-year-old World War II veteran, jumped up to grab the locomotive's cowcatcher, then leapt to the side. Duncombe was also able to jump clear. Willson was not. The train ran him over, severing one leg and mangling the other, and carving a chunk out of his skull. (He would end up losing both legs and his right frontal lobe.) A navy ambulance arrived quickly, but the medics refused to work on Willson, who was bleeding profusely, because, they said, they couldn't treat people who were not technically on navy property. Seventeen minutes later a county ambulance arrived and rushed Willson to the hospital.

During a government inquiry, navy officials acknowledged that they had anticipated a "confrontation sooner or later" with the veterans. The action had been widely publicized, and the tracks at that location had been blocked by protesters going back to the 1960s. So there was an established protocol for making arrests before the trains moved. No one, particularly not the three blockaders, expected the train to barrel through. Nonetheless, the train's engineer told investigators that his superiors had instructed him not to stop that day, to "prevent anyone from boarding the locomotive" and hijacking it. Willson was never able to determine exactly how high up the chain of command these orders originated, but former FBI agent Jack Ryan revealed that he had been fired for refusing to investigate veteran peace activists, including Murphy and Willson, as "domestic terrorists."

Immediately after the incident, thousands of people descended on Concord. Four days later, with Jesse Jackson and Joan Baez looking on, protesters ripped up the tracks at the naval weapons station. After the navy made repairs, a twenty-four-hour-a-day occupation of the tracks began. It blocked every munitions train leaving Concord for more than two years. More than two thousand people were arrested, and some were jailed for as long as six months.

I met Willson nearly twenty years later when he lived near me in Arcata, California. We would chat at the post office or see each other in the neighborhood. He walked on prosthetics, and if anyone deserved to use a car it was him, but Willson pedaled almost everywhere to reduce his carbon footprint. Sometimes when we talked, he spoke of his frustration with writing a memoir. It wasn't coming easy.

When the book came out in 2011, I had to wonder if Willson's frustration was simply self-effacement. *Blood on the Tracks: The Life and Times of S. Brian Willson* is gripping and at times beautifully written. In my opinion it's among the most important American histories since Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. Willson lucidly blends the personal and the political, and reaches well beyond U.S. activities

in Southeast Asia and Central America to connect the dots of American exceptionalism, expansionism, and warfare around the globe since the country's founding. He followed the memoir up in 2012 with *My Country Is the World: Photo Journey of a Stumbling Western Satyagrahi*.

Willson grew up in upstate New York. His parents were conservative Baptists, and his father belonged to the John Birch society and contributed to the Ku Klux Klan. Willson was a top student, a captain of sports teams. He went to church, studied the Bible, and attended anticommunist Christian student gatherings. In 1964 Willson supported Republican Barry Goldwater for president, pleased that he was advocating bombing targets in North Vietnam and using tactical nuclear weapons to defoliate the demilitarized zone that separated North from South Vietnam.

Willson was a lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force when he finished his master's degree in criminology at American University Washington College of Law in Washington, DC. Less than a year later, in 1969, he shipped out to Vietnam, where he served as a security and intelligence officer charged with protecting South Vietnamese air bases. While there he inspected a recently napalmed village "to perform a quick estimate of the pilots' success at hitting their specified targets," he says.

Arriving at the village less than an hour after it was strafed and bombed, Willson writes that he "saw one young girl trying to get up on her feet . . . but she quickly fell down. A few other people were moving ever so slightly as they cried and moaned on the ground. Most of the . . . victims I saw were women and children, the vast majority lying motionless. Most, I am sure, were dead." As he walked, Willson's forward progress was stymied by bodies. "I began sobbing and gagging. . . I took a few faltering steps to my left, only to find my way blocked by the body of a young woman lying at my feet. She had been clutching three small, partially blackened children when she apparently collapsed."

It was in this moment that Willson became a war resister. Back on base he began questioning his superiors about reasons for the bombing raids, which led to his early return to the United States and, after another year at a base in Louisiana, an honorable discharge. He returned to American University, received a law degree, and was admitted to the Washington, DC, Bar. In 1973 the city of Cincinnati hired Willson as a consultant on the construction of a new criminal-justice complex. As part of his research, Willson lived for three months in the hundred-year-old Cincinnati Workhouse prison. Afterward he proposed a new prison half the size recommended by the state's architect and emphasized the need for "constructive rehabilitation programs" in lieu of incarceration — suggestions that were ultimately ignored. In the midseventies Willson served as coordinator for the National Moratorium on Prison Construction, a project of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee.

In 1980 Willson became a legislative aide to Massachusetts State Senator Jack Backman and advised the senator on prison and veterans' issues. Willson made regular visits to Massachusetts prisons, especially Walpole, a notoriously violent institution where guards were known to torture prisoners with beatings

and compulsory rectal searches. At Walpole Willson witnessed “two guards pull[ing] a prisoner out of a cell onto the walkway floor. One guard kicked the prisoner while the other hit him with a billy club, the prisoner screaming, the guards shouting.”

The experience sparked a flashback to the carnage he’d witnessed in Vietnam. It was, he says, “different from having a bad memory pop into your mind. When I looked around me, I could only see this woman’s eyes, the dead children, the gored water buffalo lying on the ground. I smelled the burned corpses and buildings of that village. I literally could not see, hear, or smell the real world of the very noisy prison around me.”

The flashback compelled Willson to take a leave of absence from his job, which he eventually left altogether to join other vets who opposed U.S. foreign policy. In 1982 Willson cofounded the Veterans Education Project, and less than two years later he became executive director of a Vietnam Veterans Outreach Center in western Massachusetts. He also volunteered on the U.S. Senate campaign of fellow Vietnam veteran and war protester John Kerry. After being elected, Kerry appointed Willson to a veterans’ advisory committee. In 1986 Willson and three decorated veterans fasted for forty-seven days on the steps of the U.S. Capitol to draw attention to the Reagan administration’s funding and training of the Contras, a mercenary army seeking to overthrow Nicaragua’s left-wing Sandinista government. One year later Willson lost his legs attempting to stop arms shipments to the Contras.

After recuperating from the incident in Concord, Willson traveled to Nicaragua several times, where he was greeted by cheering crowds and shared a podium with President Daniel Ortega. He also traveled to El Salvador, Colombia, the Palestinian territories, Ecuador, Brazil, Iraq, Cuba, and Chiapas, Mexico. U.S. society, he felt, was in need of physical and spiritual transformation. “Our obsessive pursuit of materialism has preempted the evolutionary social-biological compact that guided our species for millennia,” he writes. “I believe human beings come into the world with the archetypal characteristics of empathy, cooperation, and mutual respect. We are wired as social beings. Yet these fundamental characteristics have been buried under an avalanche of narcissistic, egocentric behavior fueled by modern materialist culture.”

During the late nineties Willson stopped traveling the globe and began moving across the landscape almost entirely by handcycle. He lived in small communities, where he and his partner, Becky Luening, practiced sustainable living by installing solar panels, growing their own food, and buying locally. “Part of me wanted to drop out completely,” he says. Instead he organized bike rides. In 2006 Willson and a dozen other cyclists, many of them veterans, rode from Eugene, Oregon, to Seattle, Washington, and back to attend the Veterans for Peace National Convention. During the summer of 2011, at the age of seventy, Willson handcycled from Portland, Oregon, to San Francisco,



S. BRIAN WILLSON

“pedaling” his book at speaking engagements along the way. He figures that, since he first began using a handcycle in 1997, he has logged sixty thousand miles.

On September 1, 2012, Willson and dozens of other peace activists gathered in Concord to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the train assault. Several luminaries attended, including former high-ranking CIA official Ray McGovern and Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg. The day’s events were documented by Bo Bodart, a filmmaker who is planning a feature film on Willson’s life titled *Paying the Price for Peace: The Story of S. Brian Willson and the Peace Movement* (payingthepriceforpeace.com).

I interviewed Willson last year in the Portland home he shares with Luening. Willson gave me a tour of their converted urban landscape. Much of their food comes from a permaculture garden, solar panels provide most of their electricity, rainwater irrigates the plants, and a composting toilet eliminates the need to join a centralized sewage system. These efforts, Willson said ruefully, amount to little more than gestures verging on “green washing.” Yet Willson and Luening continue to work closely with like-minded neighbors to eschew centralized, fossil-fuel-dependent systems as a path toward even higher levels of community sustainability and, by extension, peace.

King: In Vietnam you accompanied a South Vietnamese lieutenant into a village that had been napalmed just an hour before. Burned and blown-up bodies of women and children lay scattered about. But when you broke down, the lieutenant couldn’t figure out what your problem was. How was his reaction humanly possible?

Willson: I think we’re all capable of being in denial of our humanity. And we’re all capable of participating in evil.

When I looked into the eyes of a dead woman I saw there, what I experienced wasn’t a thought; it was an overwhelming sensation that hit my body. The lieutenant asked me what was wrong, and my brain and nervous system struggled to come up with words. “She’s my sister,” I finally said. It was just an interpretation of what I felt. It’s like when a father goes home and sees his child and just wants to hug her. It’s a response that comes out of your whole being. It’s love. It has nothing to do with thought.

King: But how was the lieutenant able to shrug at such a massacre in his own country?

Willson: Many of us are conditioned to be obedient to some master or ideology. The ideology usually includes a class structure in which some members of society are more privileged. You constantly have to demonize other people in order to justify such privilege. I had that conditioning. The lieutenant had it too. He was from an upper-class Vietnamese family that had collaborated with the French for many generations, and he’d been sent to a French school and also educated in the

United States.

I was kind of a lower-middle-class kid who was trying to become rich and successful. The experience I had in Vietnam caught me by surprise. Before that I was a creature of compliance, concerned with making money, saying the right things, dressing the right way.

The question is: what causes the break from that conditioning and the recovery of one's empathy and sense of cooperation? I don't really know. I recently read *The Lucifer Effect*, by Philip Zimbardo, who conducted the Stanford prison experiment. [In 1971 Stanford student volunteers were randomly divided into "guards" and "inmates" and placed in a mock prison environment. Within a week the study was shut down because the "guards" had become brutal and sadistic. — Ed.] In the book Zimbardo is trying to figure out how good people can do evil things — and how some can then revert to being humane and caring.

I hesitate to say that my transformation after visiting the bombed village was automatic. I knew that I was the bad guy, but I also wondered: How could that be? How could I be a bad guy? I hadn't pulled the trigger. I hadn't dropped the bombs. But I was complicit in this whole system. By protecting the air base from attack, I'd enabled the planes to conduct their bombing missions. Maybe it was my removal from the actual act of killing that enabled me to see it as the horror it was.

I THINK OF MYSELF AS A RECOVERING WHITE MALE, RECOVERING FROM MY EARLY CONDITIONING ABOUT HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL. THE VALUE SYSTEM I WAS RAISED WITH DEHUMANIZED ME TO THE POINT THAT I FOLLOWED AN ORDER TO TRAVEL NINE THOUSAND MILES TO PARTICIPATE IN DESTROYING ANOTHER PEOPLE.

Before Vietnam, I'd thought that being born in the U.S. was enough to make me a "good guy." But seeing that woman's eyes, it was so clear. It was such an overwhelming truth. It was irreversible. The only options were just to get drunk or high and stay that way my whole life, or to embrace the truth.

Sometimes I wonder: Why was I asked to do that extra duty? It was very unusual that I was even in that village, assessing bombings. I didn't know any other air-force officer who was doing that. It was just a fluke. I like to think of it as divine intervention. It was the Great Spirit talking to me, telling me I was not going to slide through this world. I wanted to slide through it. I wanted to go to graduate school, not study too hard, get my degree, get a nice job, and make a lot of money. But that's not real, the Great Spirit said. I was going to have to deal with the hard truths.

I can still hear the moaning from the villagers who hadn't died yet. I left that village while people were moaning. I didn't even summon any medical help.

Their moaning is now my moaning. I am connected to them, not separate. We're all connected by empathy. I believe

there is a soul in everything. God is in everything, and its all connected. If you can really feel that type of connection, then your life will be radically changed. You will make completely different choices. And it's not enough to *know* you're connected. You need to *feel* the connection. Feeling is a wisdom that we've lost. During the Enlightenment, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, rationality was emphasized over feelings, with damaging effects. The Enlightenment thinkers made interesting contributions to reductionist principles, but not holistic principles.

King: Your memoir came out around the time of your seventieth birthday. Can you give us a synopsis of your story?

Willson: I think of myself as a recovering white male, recovering from my early conditioning about how to be successful. The value system I was raised with dehumanized me to the point that I followed an order to travel nine thousand miles to participate in destroying another people. It's incredible that I could do that, and without really thinking much about it. That's why I wrote the book — to understand how it was so easy for me to do that. I'm still recovering from it. It's a lifetime journey, and there's no happy ending. But it is a story that contains a certain amount of joy: the joy of learning the truth.

King: You have called the incident in which you lost your legs "attempted murder." Why?

Willson: The navy's protocol was for the train to stop and wait for arrests. Remember, I was once a military-installation security commander. I know how to secure equipment. Because they were carrying munitions, they were required to stop. Suppose I'd had a satchel of charges strapped to my body: I could have blown up the whole train, and a lot of people would have been killed. So not stopping was against protocol. And it was also intentional. Subsequent testimony revealed that the engineer had been ordered not to stop, and the train sped up to three times the legal five-mile-an-hour limit.

King: You have said you were surprised the engineer didn't stop, but you were not surprised that the government assaulted you.

Willson: In Concord I experienced what people all over the world experience when they stand up to power: they get clobbered. Look at the history of the U.S. labor movement. Seven hundred labor organizers and strikers were killed between 1880 and 1930. Our history is violent. But the official history says that we are the greatest country in the history of the world, because we defeated fascism in World War II.

King: Did you go through a period of mourning for your lost legs?

Willson: I did, but it wasn't until years later — about 1993. I started crying a lot. I didn't want to go anywhere, because I didn't know when I was going to break down. In my mind, nothing was prompting this. It was spontaneous. I was crying that I didn't have my feet, but at the same time I was thank-

ing my legs for adapting to these prosthetics and getting me around. I would caress my stumps, sometimes for hours a day, just appreciating what I had. They do such a phenomenal job, because I'm active, and I don't give them much of a break.

King: When did you start riding a handcycle?

Willson: In 1997. Until then I didn't even know they existed. I discovered them in Northampton, Massachusetts. The state had an office that was loaning out handcycles. They weren't like the one I have now — they were more like wheelchairs — but I was hooked right away. I used that borrowed handcycle every day for probably a month. Then I bought one, and I've been riding ever since.

I often wish that back in 1900 people had been able to think more clearly about the implications of burning fossil fuels. The internal-combustion engine arrived on the scene about the same time that bicycles had come into their own, with pneumatic tires and ball bearings. We went for speed, comfort, and convenience. These are not holistic principles. And we had a technology that would have enabled us to live simpler, more efficiently, and healthier. Economist E.F. Schumacher said that "small is beautiful." According to his fellow economist Leopold Kohr and social critic Ivan Illich, the most efficient speed for human society is that of a bicycle: twelve to fifteen miles an hour. So slow is beautiful, too. And so are *less* and *local*. Those may seem like just words, but really they are guidelines for an alternate vision.

King: You and your partner, Becky, have tried to live that vision. Are you satisfied with the results?

Willson: We've been trying to downsize because, for humanity to survive, we all need to radically simplify our lives. Becky and I have insulated our house. We've got double- and triple-paned windows. We've got solar panels. We heat with wood, and it's all local wood. We have an efficient stove. We eat dinner by oil lamp year-round. And we keep track of our kilowatt hours, trying constantly to reduce our energy use. We actually have charts. We terminated all gas coming in the house. We use solar-tube skylights. We grow food. We collect rainwater. We recycle. We compost our sewage.

King: Those sound like significant achievements.

Willson: Yes, but now I think we have to figure out a way to live without grid electricity, which means another radical downsizing. I meet regularly with a small group to discuss these subjects. We encourage one another to stretch our boundaries and push against perceived limitations. We ask questions such as "What is the embedded energy in a solar panel?"

King: What is "embedded energy"?

Willson: It's all the energy it took to produce that product. For instance, this chair. A lot of energy was used to bring this chair into being and get it to this room. Materials had to be mined, and for that, extraction equipment had to be built, and a factory had to be constructed to make the extraction equipment. You had to get the extraction equipment to the mining site, and you had to extract the raw materials out of the earth and load them into a truck that was manufactured in

another facility. Each of these manufacturing facilities requires thousands of parts. Fossil fuels are utilized at every stage of the process. Then you have to move the finished product to distribution centers, and from the distribution centers to the point of use. You have to build more roads and more trucks and fuel them. And that's just a chair. A solar panel requires even more energy and materials.

King: These things also usually require a fair amount of fresh water.

Willson: Absolutely, which results in pollution. In all of these processes, you're putting carbon molecules in the air. Just to make a computer chip for a smartphone they have to cook it to 4,500 degrees to embed the memory. It takes a lot of energy to get that much heat, and huge amounts of water. But we are addicted to our technology and our way of life.

King: People in Portland seem to be ahead of the curve in terms of steering neighborhoods away from dependence on fossil fuels, but you have said that's not enough. How so?

Willson: We had 220 people at our place one Saturday during a Portland "green tour." It was fun, but deep down I was thinking, This still isn't the truth. I've done what the capitalists want.

For example, I've created three solar houses: I built a straw-bale solar house in Massachusetts, I retrofitted a house in Arcata, California, and I retrofitted this house. And I've done it

OUR HISTORY IS VIOLENT. BUT THE OFFICIAL HISTORY SAYS THAT WE ARE THE GREATEST COUNTRY IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD, BECAUSE WE DEFEATED FASCISM IN WORLD WAR II.

all the way the green experts say I should. But I bought all I needed for the projects from the capitalist system.

Whatever the next groovy idea is, the capitalists are going to figure out how to make money on it. I enjoy generating electricity from the sun, but in the big picture, I want to be part of a community that isn't dependent upon electricity at all.

King: Has anyone in your group actually moved beyond using new "green" technologies?

Willson: Not yet. There was a couple who lived without electricity for a year. They just shut it off. But they found that it was very difficult without help from a larger community.

Real community can replace our dependence on systems. The community *is* the system. I want to facilitate local relationships, local commerce, local interactions. I want to help people understand that we've all been sold a bill of goods, and now our task is to recover our humanity. And we do that by asking questions and experimenting. Can we live a whole year without buying food that comes from more than a hundred miles away? There are some people doing that. But now we're talking about a "hundred-foot diet." A permaculture advocate in this neighborhood says she's going to grow all her food on her five-thousand-square-foot lot.

The fact that there are people thinking like this is exciting. I mean, what Becky and I have here is OK, but it's pretty



bourgeois for a couple of activists. If I had my dream, I would be living in a group of about fifty people and using draft horses and growing all our food. I want to live in a community where neighbors are constantly interacting around food.

King: Is it possible for everybody in a city the size of Portland to scale that far back? Can everybody do what you've done? It's hard enough getting the kids to school and getting to work on time, much less growing a permaculture garden and living without electricity.

Willson: Well, I think anybody can do what we've done, but you have to want to do it, and it does take some money. If our nation wasn't spending \$14 billion a month on wars, we could be redistributing wealth, but that's not going to happen, because we have a plutocracy. No savior from outside is going to help us, including the federal government — *especially* the federal government.

People ask, "How can we create more jobs?" I don't want to create more jobs. Having a job is not natural or healthy. Humans are meant to have *work*, to be fully engaged with the life of food — planting, harvesting, celebrating, and eating it. But to have a job where you work for somebody else? That's a relatively new phenomenon in human evolution, only about five thousand years old. You work for the king or one of the king's managers. That's not normal. That's not healthy.

You can grow your own food. You can also learn about the forest, about mushrooms, about natural food sources. You can learn that you're part of nature. In Portland a lot of people are growing food who weren't before. They are growing food in the strips of grass beside the curb. This is a radical step. People are beginning to understand the limits of our industrial, central-

ized systems. Even if we can't grow all our own food, we can eat food that's been grown locally.

The earth is finite. There's not enough carrying capacity on the planet to feed 7 billion people. Yet we continue to live as if there are no limits. We have separated ourselves from nature. We think we are superior to nature, and we believe our technology will always come up with a solution for shortages or pollution or whatever problems we're facing. It's a Faustian bargain. Most scientists agree that ecological changes and global climate instability are making it difficult for people to survive, and it's only going to get worse, especially for those who live along the coastlines.

Our economic system requires endless removal of resources all over the planet. We continue exploiting the earth even when the exploitation itself threatens our survival. We are running out of clean water. We are running out of easily accessible, cheap oil, which has been the basis for the last century's worth of industrial development. When oil supplies start getting short — say 3 percent or 4 percent below demand — it will cause a panic, because trucks won't be able to get to every store with the food people are dependent upon, food grown 1,500 miles away. Look at the resources being used every day to maintain this modern life, and then look at how much pain and suffering is necessary to enable this life.

King: What about modern devices such as cellphones and the Internet? Are there no redeeming values to them? I have enjoyed your blog and Facebook postings many times.

Willson: The rare metals used in computers and cellphones have not just an ecological price but a human price as well. I have a friend, Keith Snow, who's been a journalist

in the Congo off and on for the last fifteen years. He has seen the plunder of resources for high-tech devices: metals such as cobalt, coltan, niobium, and germanium. Keith says 10 to 12 million Congolese have died since 1995 in wars fomented by corporations and Western governments who want access to these metals.

I don't own a cellphone. I might die on my cycle someday because I have an accident and don't have a cellphone, but that's OK.

That said, I'm not going to tell people what to do. I'm just going to say that the human and environmental consequences of the electronic-gadget revolution are devastating. And, yes, I do have a laptop.

King: Jet fuel is a major contributor to global warming. Do you fly in planes?

Willson: I stopped flying eleven years ago, but I can't tell people not to fly. I flew five hundred thousand miles before I was sixty, and I gained a tremendous amount of cultural experience because of it. Refusing to fly in airplanes now is a move toward mutual aid and respect, but it's a mere gesture. I live in incredible comfort when so many are suffering. I continue to make choices each day that remain at odds with mutual aid and respect.

King: Your memoir is, in part, the story of a man who comes to act and feel and believe much differently than he was raised to do. Are you very different now than the people you grew up with?

Willson: When I was writing the book, I tracked down sixteen former high-school classmates online. They're mostly Republicans. Five or six cited the Holy Bible as their favorite book. They are still very conservative, probably Tea Party members. If I hadn't had my experiences, maybe I would have been like them.

On my journey I've been through a lot of changes. I've had to go through each one to get to the next. And so I suspect that whatever I'm thinking and believing today is not going to be what I'm thinking and believing next year. But I do think my evolution follows a certain path.

King: Your book contains a rich historical perspective. What is the importance of history in our current lives?

Willson: History is indispensable because it provides us with context. As novelist George Orwell said, "Those who control the present control the past, and those who control the past control the future." The totalitarian seeks to eradicate memory. If you don't have memory, you're at the mercy of whatever you are told at the moment.

The past is always with us, from the origins of life on earth 4 billion years ago to now. It includes the history that has not been written, because the victors write the history books. In my own life, my military experiences and my years as a prisoners' advocate showed me that something was not right about what I'd been taught. When you realize there has to be something else to the story, that's when you start to learn the real history: the history of power and how it is always tyrannical — *always*. If we know history, then we understand the demonic nature of power and the incredible courage of people

who fight against it. We need to understand how obedience to power allows terrible things to happen. If we understand that power can survive only with mass obedience, then we know that it will collapse as soon as we withdraw our obedience, like we saw happen in North Africa and the Middle East during the Arab Spring. That's very important to understand: that power is vulnerable because it requires cooperation.

King: You contend that our history is one of ongoing "vertical imperialism." What do you mean by that?

Willson: You could say that we're at the end of a 5,500-year cycle. The cycle started with the development of vertical power, the advent of kings. Civilization was built through the concentration of power: armies to fight wars, slaves to build the cities and the irrigation systems. This obedience to authority grew out of the domestication of plants and animals, which led to surplus resources, which led to some people having more than others, which became the basis of social class. Five thousand years ago this class-oriented system was new. It required force to keep people in line. Either you believed in the divine right of the king and complied willingly, or you were forced to comply by the military. In this 5,500-year period humanity has had probably fifteen thousand wars. The system built on taking from others by force has been going on for almost three hundred generations.

When you look at the archeological evidence, there isn't any sign of systematic violence until about 5,500 years ago. It appears that Paleolithic and early Neolithic societies were mostly matriarchal, and they were sharing and cooperative, which is the primary human archetype. The characteristics that enabled us to survive this long are empathy, cooperation, mutual respect, and a sense of fairness. Once you get into class divisions, nothing is fair. If you do retain your empathy, it will be wrung out of you, because it's not functional in modern class systems.

We're at the end of what I would call the Age of Plunder, and we're entering the Age of Consequences and Responsibility. We can keep outsourcing the consequences for only so long. We've polluted the water, the air, and the soil. We've colonized people's minds and hearts. And there's nothing left to sustain human culture. It's just a commodity now.

King: Is it possible for humanity to go back to a culture based on cooperation and empathy?

Willson: Yes. Deep in the viscera, we have memories of empathy, because it's innate. Cooperation is indispensable for survival. But there are limits to how many people can cooperate effectively. Self-sufficient communities utilize simple tools and are relatively small. When people ask me for an alternative vision, I say it's the Neolithic village of about two hundred inhabitants, and there are still thousands of them all over the planet. A good example is the Zapatistas in Chiapas. Each of the roughly 1,400 Zapatista villages is a network of forty to sixty families. Their culture is built on extensive family relationships.

King: Like the Vietnamese villages you describe in your book.

Willson: Yes, and we were destroying them. The villages

in Vietnam were similar to the Amish villages near where I grew up. People feel secure there, because they know one another. Your neighbor is not going to attack you or exploit your resources, because they're part of your community. Modern nation-states, whether in the First World or what we call the "Third World," are mostly run by oligarchic elites, using a vertical model of dominance. It's unsustainable. It's not based on mutual respect and fairness. It's about maintaining privilege. It's also psychologically damaging, because you grow up believing some people are "better" than you and others are "worse" than you. Right off the bat you've created a pathological thought structure that leads to discrimination and suffering. It often leads to the oppressed actually worshiping their oppressors.

We will survive, *if* we survive, through cooperation. We will organize our planet into bioregions based on the carrying capacity of each watershed, and we will localize the production of food, water, and shelter in that bioregion. We will put our energy into rebuilding local communities, and we will conserve.

King: You contend that civilization is founded on a surplus of goods, which are then hoarded by a minority that holds power. How is this manifested in our daily life?

Willson: Civilization requires demonization of the majority to justify preserving the minority's privilege. In church

WE ALL NEED TO DECIDE WHETHER TO COOPERATE WITH THE POLICIES OF AN UNFAIR, OLIGARCHIC SYSTEM OF POWER. WE COULD DECIDE NOT TO COOPERATE. I UNDERSTAND THE PRESSURES AND THE APPARENT LACK OF OPTIONS, BUT YOU'RE A HUMAN BEING. YOU CAN SAY, "I'M NOT DOING THIS ANYMORE."

we're taught to love one another, but the same church leaders tell their children that we shouldn't feel love or empathy for certain people. David Bohm, a pioneer of quantum physics, says our problems originate in our thought processes, which are rooted in mechanistic reduction and separation rather than an embrace of the undivided whole.

King: That's a rather heady concept, to say that the way we think is the problem.

Willson: We forget our body's wisdom. We study the earth as if it were "out there," not a part of us, which is a fatal flaw.

Everyone is capable of making radical changes in their lives, but first they must experience a shift in consciousness. They must stop seeing the world and themselves as separate. The leaves on that tree and I are the same. We look different, but we share the same molecular structures. Bohm talks about "body wisdom." We need the brain; the brain is an amazing organ. But it's not where ideas come from. They come from feelings, which then have to be synthesized in the mind. If we honor body and mind, we can become very wise.

King: The body might also be referred to as "heart." Heart

versus mind.

Willson: I discovered my heart in Vietnam. The Vietnamese lieutenant was a member of the privileged class, like me. We were sort of equals going out to that village, but when we left, I was in a completely different place. I'm still reeling to this day from the realization that everything in the universe is connected, at every moment.

King: Some of us are quite attached to our current social and economic systems. What makes the systems so bad?

Willson: They cannot persist without fossil fuels. This incredible energy source has allowed us to enjoy this consumer-driven, carefree life. But the energy systems we use require a lot of security to keep them going, and a lot of maintenance. They require activities like tar-sands oil extraction and mountaintop removal for coal — five hundred mountaintops removed so far in Appalachia. They require deep-water oil drilling, which will result in more disasters like the Deepwater Horizon spill. They require uranium for nuclear power and fracking for natural gas. They are devastating ecosystems and accelerating climate change. It's suicidal. How can President Obama talk about a nuclear renaissance after the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant disaster?

It's time we end our dependence on centralized systems. Through cooperation and community we can downsize our lives, make these systems unnecessary, and forestall destruction of the environment.

King: Yet, despite this apparent forward motion toward destruction, the majority of Americans — and I include myself here — appear content to consume vast quantities of fossil fuels and live a consumer lifestyle.

Willson: Etienne de la Boetie addressed this in his 1553 essay "The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude." People get addicted to their servitude be-

cause they get something out of it — not dignity but longevity. That's one of the themes of my book: that dignity trumps longevity.

In our culture we have all these possessions. I have this rug I got in Baghdad during the First Gulf War. It has a lot of meaning to me. But oil and empire enabled me to have that rug. All this convenience based on fossil fuels is coming to an end, because resources are finite.

And we can't forget the carbon molecules in the air. We're currently at 397 parts per billion. Most scientists say 350 parts per billion is a safe threshold. Continuing to exceed it will likely be disastrous. We know that putting carbon into the atmosphere is deleterious to life on the planet. Not many people deny the signs of climate instability. We've had record numbers of tornados in 2012, starting early in March, accompanied by record high temperatures. We also know that the supplies of easily accessible oil are dwindling rapidly. That's why we're turning to tar sands and fracking for natural gas, which are difficult, costly means of extraction. This carbon took 200 million years to form in the ground, and in one century we've

brought at least half of it to the surface and put it in the air and the water, all to fuel our modern industrial civilization.

In her book *The March of Folly* Barbara Tuchman says that power ultimately collapses because of folly and stupidity, mostly in the form of war making. We've reached the end of our ability to remain arrogant and narcissistic, to continue seeing ourselves as separate from nature. We need a radical new epistemology based on empathy and cooperation and integration with nature. We're at the point of correction — or of human extinction, which is its own sort of correction. The collapse of industrial civilization is long overdue, and it has to happen if we're going to survive.

King: You tend to paint corporate, government, and military managers with the same broad, somewhat dismissive stroke, but they can't all be bad. And it can't be easy for Americans to consider walking away from a culture they have known all their lives, especially when alternatives are not readily apparent.

Willson: I do think it's a mistake to divide the population into the "99 percent" and the "1 percent," because everybody's human, including those in the corporate hierarchy and the government. But we all need to decide whether to cooperate with the policies of an unfair, oligarchic system of power. We could decide not to cooperate. I understand the pressures and the apparent lack of options, but you're a human being. You can say, "I'm not doing this anymore." And there are people who have done that. President Obama could say, "I'm going to start working for the poor and stop making war and stop supporting Wall Street." The price he would pay for this would probably be very heavy, both politically and personally, but he would recapture his dignity and place in history as a noble and courageous person.

King: That's one of the toughest concepts in your book: that dignity trumps longevity. Convince me that you're right.

Willson: We fear death. We don't even consider it a part of the life cycle. This fear dictates all kinds of repressive, misguided behavior. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "I submit to you that no man is free if he fears death. But the minute you conquer the fear of death, at that moment you are free."

I'm fine with the thought of dying, whenever it happens. I just want to stay active until my heart stops. Somebody asked me a few weeks ago what I think I'll be doing when I'm seventy-five. Seventy-five? I'm just trying to enjoy today. I don't know about tomorrow. In his 1951 book, *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, Alan Watts argues that there is no security except in the moment. That's all you've got.

King: Any other security is an illusion.

Willson: Yes. Throughout history we've looked for false security in empires, churches, nation states, and corporations. They've all been patriarchal institutions. They're all run on tyranny and class, and they're not sustainable. They're killing the planet. The UN estimates that some two hundred species of plants and animals go extinct every day. It's clear that humans might soon join that list. Do we still have within us a yearning to survive? If so, change will happen, probably without us even organizing it. We will realize that the environment is not "out there." We are the environment. It's all one. I don't like this

idea that we are going to save the environment. We're going to save *ourselves*. Our well-being is at stake. Realizing this is a radical shift.

Anything is possible, even our extinction.

King: During your 2011 book tour you visited several Occupy camps. What's your impression of the Occupy movement?

Willson: It's thrilling. I've been waiting forty years for some kind of awakening to occur on the left. Occupy has opened up a conversation about the whole system. I visited twelve Occupy camps on the East Coast. Subsequently most of the campers were evicted, but something was launched there.

You can try using force to make people obey, but there's only so much you can do if there are hundreds of thousands of people in the streets every day. This is what I'm hoping will happen in the United States. When people go into the streets — that's where power really is. It overwhelms everything else.

Occupy is an earnest effort to create a new paradigm in a society that's totally dysfunctional. All the camps I visited had rules against drugs and alcohol. They used a horizontal model in their general assemblies. They were leaderless — or, as they sometimes say, "leaderful," as in "full of leaders." In the camp in Buffalo, New York, I was impressed with their aversion to going over fifty tents, at which point they would no longer have had a solid community, because it would have gotten too big, and consensus would have been impossible.

King: What gives you hope?

Willson: I don't use the word *hope*. I think *hope* assumes that I know what should happen. I'm not assuming that humanity should survive, but I'm interested in its survival. It's natural to want to keep breathing and experiencing life. I want others to survive too. I don't want to continue on by myself. I'm not a survivalist.

What excites me is that people are now talking in ways they didn't before, especially since the Occupy movement opened up a national conversation about class and income disparity. I think it's enabled people to stop believing in our system. It's the belief in that system that keeps us from being more radical. The Constitution was designed to promote private property and commerce rather than human liberty, and the Bill of Rights was adopted simply to ensure ratification of the Constitution. The white middle class in post-World War II America is the only population that has actually attained those rights. Nobody else has. Native Americans haven't. African Americans haven't. And now the white middle class is losing those rights as well.

If you can see through the myth of the Founding Fathers, the myth of the Constitution, the myth of American exceptionalism, then you can re-create society. We're not just trying to reform society. We're actually asking the crucial questions: What do we need? And how can we fulfill our needs? That's what people do when they understand that they can no longer depend upon the system to do it for them. We are capable of identifying our needs and deciding how to meet those needs as a community. And when I say "community," I mean relatively small groups. But thousands of them. ■