

Forgetting the Crimes of War

In the U.S. political culture, Memorial Day has become one more chance to glorify American wars and to exploit U.S. soldiers' deaths to generate sentiment for more wars, a troubling tactic addressed by Gary G. Kohls and S. Brian Willson.

By Gary G. Kohls

One of the many heroes of the peace movement who came out of the Vietnam War was Vietnam veteran S. Brian Willson. Just like millions of other draft-age Americans, law student Willson had been drafted into that illegal and genocidal war – against his will – and came back disturbed and angry.

For reasons discussed below, he joined the anti-war movement after witnessing the Reagan/Bush Central American war after he traveled to Nicaragua and saw peasants being murdered by US-backed Contras (aka “freedom fighters”). Willson joined the antiwar movement in 1986 and has protested vigorously against America's aggressive war policies ever since.

But his real life change came on Sept. 1, 1987, in Concord, California, where Willson was part of a gathering of antiwar protestors that were symbolically trying to stop the transport of weapons from a U.S. Navy munitions base. The weapons were destined for Nicaragua and El Salvador as part of the U.S.-backed war in Central America.

As a Vietnam veteran, Willson understood well the satanic nature of America's perpetual wars against peasants, campesinos and other poor people in Third World countries who were unjustly accused of being “communists” as they were seeking relief from the tyranny of their ruling classes. He also knew about the poisonous realities of military toxins that are used in war that regularly poison innocent civilians, children, babies, villages, farm fields, water supplies and all the future inhabitants of the warzone.

Willson felt so strongly about the criminality of his country's foreign policy against militarily inferior countries, that he put himself directly in harm's way that day by lying down in front of the weapons supply train, expecting the engineer to stop. Instead of stopping, the engineer actually increased its speed above the speed limit and ran over him, severing both legs. The engineer later testified that he had only been obeying orders on how to deal with antiwar protesters.

Willson survived his near-fatal injuries, and he became a universally celebrated near-martyr for peace. He has vowed to spend the rest of his life speaking out

against war. The piece below was written on May 27, 2016, and published in CounterPunch.

The Vietnam War radically changed him from a conservative Republican who had been raised in a Christian fundamentalist household. In Willson's autobiography, titled *Blood on the Tracks: The Life and Times of S. Brian Willson*, he wrote about his war experience:

"in April 1969, I witnessed the incredible destruction that had just been inflicted (by aerial bombing and napalm 'practice') ... on a typically defenseless village about the size of a large baseball stadium. With smoldering ruins throughout, the ground was strewn with bodies of villagers and their farm animals, many of whom were motionless and bloody, murdered from bomb shrapnel and napalm. Several were trying to get up on their feet, and others were moving ever so slightly as they cried and moaned. Most of the victims I witnessed were women and children.

"At one dramatic moment I encountered at close range a young wounded woman lying on the ground clutching three young disfigured children. I stared, aghast, at the woman's open eyes. Upon closer examination, I discovered that she, and what I presumed were her children, all were dead, but napalm had melted much of the woman's facial skin, including her eyelids. As the Vietnamese lieutenant and I silently made the one-plus hour return trip to our airbase in my jeep, I knew that my life was never going to be the same again."

An eyewitness to Willson's 1987 act of resistance to the US War Machine wrote that Brian questioned "the lessons of 'patriotism' with which we so proudly indoctrinate our children, especially our boy children. ... Nearly twenty years later, I stood just behind Brian on a California train track in a well-publicized effort to block munitions trains carrying American weapons to kill other poor villagers in El Salvador and Nicaragua, thinking about the words he had spoken that morning, before one of those trains ripped his legs from his body. He said, '...each train that gets by us is going to kill people, people like you and me. ... And the question that I have to ask on these tracks is: am I any more valuable than those people?'"

Here is the latest, very powerful testimony about what he thinks of Memorial Day from the American antiwar hero, S. Brian Willson:

Remembering All the Deaths From All of Our Wars

By S. Brian Willson – May 27, 2016

Celebration of Memorial Day in the US, originally Decoration Day, commenced shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War. This is a national holiday to

remember the people who died while serving in the armed forces. The day traditionally includes decorating graves of the fallen with flowers.

As a Viet Nam veteran, I know the kinds of pain and suffering incurred by over three million US soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen, 58,313 of whom paid the ultimate price whose names are on The Vietnam Wall in Washington, DC. The Oregon Vietnam Memorial Wall alone, located here in Portland, contains 803 names on its walls.

The function of a memorial is to preserve memory. On this US Memorial Day, May 30, 2016, I want to preserve the memory of all aspects of the US war waged against the Southeast Asian people in Viet Nam, Laos, and Cambodia – what we call the Viet Nam War – as well as the tragic impacts it had on our own people and culture. My own healing and recovery requires me to honestly describe the war and understand how it has impacted me psychically, spiritually, and politically.

Likewise, the same remembrance needs to be practiced for both our soldiers and the victims in all the other countries affected by US wars and aggression. For example, the US incurred nearly 7,000 soldier deaths while causing as many as one million in Afghanistan and Iraq alone, a ratio of 1:143.

It is important to identify very concretely the pain and suffering we caused the Vietnamese – a people who only wanted to be independent from foreign occupiers, whether Chinese, France, Japan, or the United States of America. As honorably, and in some cases heroically, our military served and fought in Southeast Asia, we were nonetheless serving as cannon fodder, in effect mercenaries for reasons other than what we were told.

When I came to understand the true nature of the war, I felt betrayed by my government, by my religion, by my cultural conditioning into “American Exceptionalism,” which did a terrible disservice to my own humanity, my own life’s journey. Thus, telling the truth as I uncover it is necessary for recovering my own dignity.

I am staggered by the amount of firepower the US used, and the incredible death and destruction it caused on an innocent people. Here are some statistics:

–Seventy-five percent of South Viet Nam was considered a free-fire zone (i.e., genocidal zones)

–Over 6 million Southeast Asians killed

–Over 64,000 US and Allied soldiers killed

- Over 1,600 US soldiers, and 300,000 Vietnamese soldiers remain missing
- Thousands of amputees, paraplegics, blind, deaf, and other maimings created
- 13,000 of 21,000 of Vietnamese villages, or 62 percent, severely damaged or destroyed, mostly by bombing
- Nearly 950 churches and pagodas destroyed by bombing
- 350 hospitals and 1,500 maternity wards destroyed by bombing
- Nearly 3,000 high schools and universities destroyed by bombing
- Over 15,000 bridges destroyed by bombing
- 10 million cubic meters of dikes destroyed by bombing
- Over 3,700 US fixed-wing aircraft lost
- 36,125,000 US helicopter sorties during the war; over 10,000 helicopters were lost or severely damaged
- 26 million bomb craters created, the majority from B-52s (a B-52 bomb crater could be 20 feet deep, and 40 feet across)
- 39 million acres of land in Indochina (or 91 percent of the land area of South Viet Nam) were littered with fragments of bombs and shells, equivalent to 244,000 (160 acre) farms, or an area the size of all New England except Connecticut
- 21 million gallons (80 million liters) of extremely poisonous chemicals (herbicides) were applied in 20,000 chemical spraying missions between 1961 and 1970 in the most intensive use of chemical warfare in human history, with as many as 4.8 million Vietnamese living in nearly 3,200 villages directly sprayed by the chemicals
- 24 percent, or 16,100 square miles, of South Viet Nam was sprayed, an area larger than the states of Connecticut, Vermont, and Rhode Island combined, killing tropical forest, food crops, and inland forests
- Over 500,000 Vietnamese have died from chronic conditions related to chemical spraying with an estimated 650,000 still suffering from such conditions; 500,000 children have been born with Agent Orange-induced birth defects, now including third generation offspring
- Nearly 375,000 tons of fire-balling napalm was dropped on villages

–Huge Rome Plows (made in Rome, Georgia), 20-ton earthmoving D7E Caterpillar tractors, fitted with a nearly 2.5-ton curved 11-foot wide attached blade protected by 14 additional tons of armor plate, scraped clean between 700,000 and 750,000 acres (1,200 square miles), an area equivalent to Rhode Island, leaving bare earth, rocks, and smashed trees

–As many as 36,000,000 total tons of ordnance expended from aerial and naval bombing, artillery, and ground combat firepower. On an average day, US artillery expended 10,000 rounds costing \$1 million per day; 150,000-300,000 tons of UXO remain scattered around Southeast Asia: 40,000 have been killed in Viet Nam since the end of the war in 1975, and nearly 70,000 injured; 20,000 Laotians have been killed or injured since the end of the war

–7 billion gallons of fuel were consumed by US forces during the war

–If there was space for all 6,000,000 names of Southeast Asian dead on the Vietnam Wall in Washington, DC, it would be over 9 sobering miles long, or nearly 100 times its current 493 foot length

I am not able to memorialize our sacrificed US soldiers without also remembering the death and destroyed civilian infrastructure we caused in our illegal invasion and occupation of Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia. It has been 47 years since I carried out my duties in Viet Nam. My “service” included being an eyewitness to the aftermath of bombings from the air of undefended fishing villages where virtually all the inhabitants were massacred, the vast majority being small children. In that experience, I felt complicit in a diabolical crime against humanity. This experience led me to deeply grasping that I am not worth more than any other human being, and they are not worth less than me.

Recently I spent more than three weeks in Viet Nam, my first trip back since involuntarily being sent there in 1969. I was struck by the multitudes of children suffering from birth defects, most caused presumably by the US chemical spraying some 50 years ago. I experienced deep angst knowing that the US is directly responsible for this genetic damage now being passed on from one generation to the next. I am ashamed that the US government has never acknowledged responsibility or paid reparations. I found myself apologizing to the people for the crimes of my country.

When we only memorialize US soldiers while ignoring the victims of our aggression, we in effect are memorializing war. I cannot do that. War is insane, and our country continues to perpetuate its insanity on others, having been constantly at war since at least 1991. We fail our duties as citizens if we remain silent rather than calling our US wars for what they are – criminal and deceitful aggressions violating international and US law to assure control of

geostrategic resources, deemed necessary to further our insatiable American Way Of Life (AWOL).

Memorial Day for me requires remembering *all* of the deaths and devastation of our wars, and it should remind all of us of the need to end the madness. If we want to end war, we must begin to directly address our out-of-control capitalist political economy that knows no limits to profits for a few at the expense of the many, including our soldiers.

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Brian Willson's Blood on the Tracks

In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan made many Americans feel good again, after Vietnam in the 1960s and the Oil Shocks in the 1970s. However, when part of Reagan's "Morning in America" involved death-squad slaughters in Central America, some Americans, like Vietnam veteran S. Brian Willson, refused to stand aside, as Dennis Bernstein reports.

By Dennis Bernstein

July 21, 2011

My first direct encounter with S. Brian Willson, occurred not too long after he was fitted for what he refers to as his "Stilts," the prosthetic legs he has worn wherever he goes since he was purposely run over on Sept. 1, 1987, and nearly killed by a U.S. Navy munitions train.

Willson was hit while engaging in a nonviolent blockade in protest of weapons shipments going to El Salvador in support of pro-U.S. death squads.

Back then, my colleague Chela Blitt had caught up with Brian at a fast and dance benefit for a fledgling group of anti-war vets. Chela had danced with Brian before the interview for Pacifica Radio Station WBAI.

Dancing on stilts for peace, after being run over by a train quite an accomplishment, no? But then Brian Willson is certainly a force to be reckoned

with.

More recently, I heard him speak in San Francisco as a part of his new book tour promoting his just published 500-page autobiography, *Blood on the Tracks*. Willson had just celebrated his 70th birthday on Independence Day.

He had biked down the 800 miles from Portland, Oregon, where he lives, and just the day before I saw him speak, he had hand-pedaled from Humbolt County, California, over mountains in hundred-degree heat. He said he was a little tired, but he felt great.

As a Vietnam veteran, Willson was transformed by his wartime experiences as second lieutenant. He witnessed first-hand up-close, and very personal the killing of hundreds of women and children during massive U.S. search-and-destroy missions.

And he was deeply moved by the dozen of Buddhist monks who were willing to set themselves ablaze in protest on behalf of the greater good.

Full of the suffering of war, this book offers us an alternative way of thinking and an example of a bold new way to live our lives.

“No Reader, I believe, will finish this book without a sense of awe at the human spirit that is revealed in it,” Dan Ellsberg concluded, in his introduction to *Blood on the Tracks*, “and of gratitude for the map that Brian Willson has provided, in his life and this account of it, of the way out.”

Brian Willson is calling for nothing short of a new paradigm that does offer a way out. He says in the interview for the Flashpoints show on Pacifica Radio:

“We have become addicted to a material way of life, that requires imperial policies to extract all these resources around the world, funnel them to 4.6 percent of the world’s population; demeaning, impoverishing, murdering, maiming people all over the world who are in the way of our precious metals needed for our cell phones and our computers, in the Congo.

“And we are facing a massive correction of our wayward ways in the West.”

According to Brian Willson, we either become a part of a new more peaceful, balanced, respectful, culture, or we will simply be swept aside by a massive “correction.”

Dennis Bernstein: Welcome S. Brian Willson, and congratulations on your new book, *Blood on the Tracks*. I understand you’ve been working on the

autobiography for eight years, and even longer, and it took you 33 rejections to find a publisher who would publish this big book, that could hold open a stadium door.

Brian Willson: I've been actively writing it for about eight years. And, of course, I was thinking about writing it for many years before that. But then, of course, things keep happening and you have to keep adding to the memoir. And, so finally after thirty-three rejections I was able to find a publisher to publish the book.

DB: Thirty-three rejections?

BW: Thirty-three publishers rejected it.

DB: Well, I'm glad that the thirty-fourth published it. But, and you sort of had to contribute your advance to the publication.

BW: Yes, I did. Because they felt that a book of this length..

DB: Five hundred pages.

BW: was not going to be marketable with the price they would have to put on it at thirty or thirty-five dollars. So I said I wanted it at twenty dollars. And they said just help us with the money and then we'll put it out. But it's my life story, my memoir.

I call it a psycho-historical memoir because I weave in lots of history and psychology to understand my own personal journey in the midst of this incredible conditioning of being basically being part of the plunder of the planet and not even realizing it. Of course, why would we realize it when we are growing up with that conditioning?

But the story of my journey from being a very typical, I call myself an ignorant, dumbed-down person; very typical to various levels of awakening, which is still happening. And it's a journey, it's a long journey, not a destination, of constantly uncovering new wisdom and learning new people, stumbling, I mean meeting new people, stumbling on the path, getting back up and kind of taking another step and the next thing you know another experience is happening.

And it's another "Wow" experience that I wouldn't have had if I had a career as a lawyer. Because I would have been kinda set with my career and my income and my life-style commensurate with the income. And fortunately I couldn't be a practicing lawyer which is what I thought I was going to be, because I couldn't follow the protocol of the court.

Basically saying so, in other words, I was blessed with a lot of what I

initially thought were obstacles that all kinda continually became new opportunities.

DB: Well, there's so much that I want to talk to you about. Let's start with the government cover-up and the cover of the book. What was happening before this picture? And then what is portrayed in this picture, right on the cover of the book.

BW: The cover of the book has this very dramatic photo of what was the scene on the tracks about maybe four or five seconds, a few seconds after I was run over.

Of course, I hope the listeners know that the Concord Naval Weapons Station, which it was called at this time, was the largest weapons depot on the West Coast from which the weapons were shipped to various war zones that the U.S. was involved in, including Central America.

So we were there to bring attention to the fact that these death trains were going on these tracks, and the trucks carrying munitions parallel, on a road parallel to the tracks, every day. And so we were there for, lots of announcements in advance of what we were doing, why we were doing it, where and when, and that we were going to block the trains knowing that we would be arrested.

And a big sign by the tracks said exactly what the penalty was. It was, I think, a five-thousand-dollar fine and one year in prison, something like that.

So there was no fear that we would be killed or maimed, so we took our positions. And I must say that I have no memory of being hit. So I have a four-day, kinda of a four-day period, of uhm,...

DB: You were out for four days.

BW: I was talking after I was hit but I have no memory of it. I have amnesia basically, they call it retrograde amnesia. So the picture on the cover shows the scene within seconds and there are four people at this point hovering over my very badly wounded body. Two were working on the bleeding in my legs.

Jerry Condon, who had been a Green Beret-trained medic, who went to Sweden rather than to Vietnam, during the Vietnam War. My partner at the time, Holly Round, whose face you can see in anguish over Jerry's right shoulder.

Then Duncan Murphy who is hovering over my upper body and my face, just holding my energy, and Dave Hartsough, who is sitting there with his left hand on my bleeding head. And other people you can see their expressions, very anguished.

This is Steve Brooks who is coming to the scene to help in stopping my

bleeding. He was a door gunner in Vietnam and he was at that time commander of the BFW wage peace post in Santa Cruz. And the man down here, holding, which he appears to be talking to the Marines that are surrounding the train was Pierre BlasÃ©, who was also a door gunner in Vietnam.

DB: And you have no doubt you were hit on purpose to send a message?

[Also participating in the interview were Francisco Herrera (FH) and David Hartsough (DH), who were eyewitnesses to the train running over Willson.]

FH: Actually Dennis there's another very interesting detail on the picture, look at the end of the train, which had about two box cars. Two box cars are like five hundred meters away, it's not, it's not a train that stops, or slowed down at all. I mean the whole train went through.

BW: And it's surrounded by Marines 'cause there were 350 armed Marines at that base guarding the weapons, and the trains, and the trucks, day and night.

DB: Spotters on the trains.

BW: Two spotters on the front of the train to always make sure the tracks were clear. The train speed limit was 5 miles an hour, and the FBI established it was going 16 or 17 miles an hour at the point of impact and still accelerating, and it had never done that before. We found out that the train crew was ordered not to stop that morning, which was a very unusual order.

DB: Ordered not to stop?

BW: Ordered not to stop. We have that in their own statements. And, even though they stated later they didn't see us but we have their statements.

DB: They looked away when they ran over you.

BW: And we know that they didn't stop because there was a fear of us bordering the train, i.e. hijack, which was, you know, I'm sure it was just a figment of their imaginations used as a rationale for whatever the order was.

And then we know that, Duncan, who was one of the other two veterans with me, blocking the train, he and I were on the Domestic Terrorist Watch List, which we know because an FBI agent, Jack Ryan, from Peoria, Illinois, spilled the beans when he refused his orders to investigate us as terrorists.

And he was fired after almost 22 years in the FBI for that. Putting all that together, it was an attempted murder.

DH: And there's no question at all that they did see us. As we said there were

two spotters on the front looking right at us. The train has stopped on the other side of the road and then began going faster and faster, and I was standing right next to the tracks, looking at these guys in the eyes, yelling "There are people on the tracks, stop the train." And flagging it down. And they just were not stopping!

DB: Francisco, you show up in one of these pictures. Sorta looking. it's right after the train hit.

DH: You were playing the guitar.

FH: I was playing the guitar, singing "Peace is flowing like a river." While it wasn't that morning.

DB: Blood was flowing.

FH: You could see that train speed up, the sound, the energy. Everything about the train said, "We're here to do damage." And it was very clear, the level, the level of

BW: the intent. Another piece of evidence was that the Navy ambulance arrived within, I don't know, a couple of minutes, David would know better because I have no memory, but they refused to help because apparently my body wasn't lying technically on Navy property. It was on the right-of-way, roadway, and so they left.

And the Navy fire department, however, did come shortly thereafter, and did render some assistance, and stayed there until the county ambulance arrived to take me to John Muir Trauma Hospital in Walnut Creek.

DH: Which was about twenty-five minutes later.

DB: I want to go back to the beginning, but I want to stay with this a minute or two more because it is such an important, shall we say, decision that the government made, to go ahead and take this kind of action to support what every human rights group in the world knew, was already a mass-murdering death squad policy both in El Salvador, in Guatemala, and more to come.

Talk about what you see as the significance of that decision. And maybe just talk a little bit about how you found out. 'Cause as you say, you didn't know that you had been run over by a train. Somebody had to tell you.

BW: I'm still very naive, you know. I could not imagine them doing what, to me, what they do to people in other countries, all the time, which I had documented. So I think that what I was really excited about, was on the fourth day after I was hit, I was told that up to 9,000 people showed up at the tracks

including Joan Baez and Jesse Jackson, and others.

And although this was, what happened then was somewhat in debate as to its propriety, three hundred feet of track were ripped up by the people that came, and it was an expression of rage.

DB: I'm looking at that now, there's a picture of that. Ripping up people went there to send a message as well.

BW: And although the tracks were repaired within a week or two after that, every train and every truck at Concord, every train had munitions on it, and every truck had munitions on it. That was the sole purpose of moving from the bunkers to Port Chicago where they were loaded on ships.

Every train and every truck, because of an encampment had emerged on the tracks twenty-four hours a day for twenty-eight months, every train and every truck,

DB: How many trains?

BW: I have no idea how many hundreds of trains

DB: Hundreds.

BW: There were over two thousands arrests. Three people, at least, had their arms broken in the arresting process, including David Hartsough's arm. And for another ten or twelve years after that twenty-eight months many of the trains and trucks were blocked.

It was just that the twenty-four hours presence wasn't always there. But there was always people there, at some point during the day and night.

So that was obviously not an intention of the government to have that kind of reaction. They probably just didn't you know they don't think about things very reflectively obviously.

I had been an installation security commander in Vietnam. I had been through lots of training about securing military bases from various threats. And so in my mind, no commander of a military base would run a munitions train over anything on the tracks, a stalled car, a cow, human beings, some object that wasn't known what it was.

The two spotters would get off the train and investigate, after the train stopped to allow them off to investigate and remove whatever is there, before the train would continue. So the fact that they didn't even do that, which would just be the normal protocol was so obvious. I mean, it was just so obvious an intent to, I don't think, I don't know if playing chicken is the right word.

But they knew that we were committed to staying there. And we knew the speed limit was 5 miles an hour, and we knew that the protocol was to have us arrested. And blockades at Concord go back to the mid-sixties so it wasn't totally unique.

You know, it was a pattern over the years, of course, different commanders every year. But at any rate, I had to be convinced in the hospital by various friends who were visiting me that I was run over by a train because I could not believe it. I just couldn't believe it.

DH: But, when I went to visit him, a couple of days after this, in the hospital not only were there no legs, almost every inch of his body was covered with bandages, from broken arms to elbows, to a hole in his head. I could see his eyes and that was about the only thing that wasn't covered.

FH: Well, yeah, because the train, the engine had a lower piece, but then Brian, I remember this very clearly, you were rolled, once the engine went over you, your body kept rolling with the rest of the train until obviously the train was going so fast, that it obviously passed Brian's body and at some point your body stopped rolling.

BW: Well, it was pretty horrendous for all those who remember it and were witnesses. My partner at the time, had to, here's a picture of her waiting for the train to go over me

DB: Oh, my God.

BW: My slumped body under the box cars. We'd only been, we'd had a ceremony about ten days earlier to celebrate our commitment to one another. So this was within two weeks

FH: That was ten days before, I remember specifically, Bob Mossell and I were at the ceremony when you brought out the letter. Here's the letter I'm sending to the commander.

BW: Yeah, I sent it the next day. And the book is only a little bit about the train.

DB: You are not going to fly, are you? You're not going to recommend people fly. How did you get here?

BW: I came here on my hand cycle, one crank at a time, seven hundred miles, had eighteen book talks on my way here.

DB: Let's be clear.

BW: I do about forty-five miles a day, I'm cranking with my hands, I'm pedaling with my hands. Cranking my hand cycle, with no motor, one turn of the wheel at a time, one crank at a time.

I figure about 700,000 cranks to get me to San Francisco, and that's simply to suggest that we need to be actually making a radical departure about the assumptions in how we're going to move our bodies from point A to point B. I wanted to do it without burning fossil fuels and I wanted to be part of an energy descent plan for my own life, using less carbon.

And I am still not to the point where I would like to be but it was a demonstration of the fact that a seventy-year-old man, who is a double amputee, could human power himself from Portland to San Francisco and promote my book at the same time.

BW: And one day it was a hundred degrees.

DB: A hundred degrees and you're out there go.?

BW: Yeah, that was a tough day.

FH: Right after Sebastopol.

DB: How do you feel today?

BW: Well, I'm a little tired actually from all this thirty days of traveling. But I'm okay, I haven't been cycling very much for a couple of days. I did cycle to the Unitarian Church yesterday from David Hartsough's house where I'm staying, and where my fellow cyclist Joel is also staying. He's the one that enabled me to do this trip because he hauled a bike trailer with our personal gear, and our sleeping bags, and tent and food, and extra clothes and stuff.

My partner Holly Rolland and I were living in San Rafael, in Marin County at the time that I was hit. Shockingly there were so many death threats coming to the hospital towards me, the hospital hired a private security firm to have one guard outside my room, twenty-four hours, there were three shifts.

And Holly was having death threats at her house in San Rafael for being the partner of this crazy guy that was taking on the empire and so she had to call San Rafael police to help her feel safe at our apartment. And then David, unbeknownst to me, while I'm in the hospital, David offered an apartment in his house in San Francisco where we could move to, to feel safer.

And in fact, when I left the hospital, after twenty-eight days, we didn't go to our place in San Rafael. Holly had already terminated that lease. And we went to

David's house. But there are a lot of steps at David's house so it was a little difficult for myself getting in, but it was a safe space where we stayed for almost four years.

DB: Well, maybe we can roll it back a little bit now and just talk a little bit more about the book, both in terms of your beginnings, and then also where you are going now, and what's on your mind. You grew up in rural town, upstate New York, a lot of people in the summer, couple of hundred in the winter. Talk about growing up.

BW: Well, I had a relatively pleasant upbringing compared to a lot of people. Family was very religious, and very conservative right-wing Republicans. But you know as a kid it didn't, I mean I did have to go to Sunday school every Sunday.

DB: And they did have a stack of Bibles.

BW: When they died, I collected the Bibles in their house, over sixty Bibles. I stacked them up and it was so incredible I had somebody, a friend, take a picture of me standing holding my hand on top of the Bibles. Half of them were Jerry Falwell Bibles 'cause his name was on the Bibles. And I went, wow, this is almost beyond belief. I got to have a picture of it.

But, it was a very small town, there were seventeen kids in my eighth-grade class, six boys and eleven girls. I went on to high school with twenty-eight kids in my class, there were twelve boys and sixteen girls. And I was a jock. I loved high school because I was a good baseball player, I was a good basketball player, which is pretty easy to do in a small school where there aren't that many boys. But I was actually quite proficient at those sports, and I was an honor student, and I was on a student council.

DB: You didn't really like shoveling snow.

BW: I did, I loved shoveling snow. I would set my alarm, when I knew there was a storm at night, I set my alarm for five thirty in the morning to make sure I could shovel all my neighbors walks before they went to work. And I loved it, and I didn't charge anybody money but they all gave me tips.

And I actually earned a lot of money shoveling snow, and it is true, I loved it. I loved being in the snow, I loved the shoveling and I can't explain it. But of course I sledged in the snow and so at any rate by the time I went to college

DB: I loved the snow because I didn't have to go to school.

BW: Yeah, a lot of school days, a lot of no school days with the snow. And then I went to college, and you know, I wanted to be an FBI agent for a while, then I

changed to wanting to be a Baptist minister and then finally decided to go to law school and that's where I got drafted.

DB: You sorta got caught in a loop hole there. You were college bound

BW: I was actually in graduate school in a dual program of a masters degree in criminology, corrections and a law degree specializing in criminal law at American University in Washington and I got my draft notice in my fourth semester of this program. I thought it was a mistake because I had a school deferment which was pre-lottery.

And I flew home and met with my Selective Service board in Fredonia, New York. And I said "This must be a mistake." And they said, "No, this is not a mistake. You have a preferential deferment of school but all the young men in this county, which is a farming county, either grape farming or dairy farming. All the young men who work on their family farms have an absolute deferment and the Pentagon doesn't take that into consideration when they give us the quota for the demographic pool of the county for young men. So we are short of men because there are fewer available for the draft and we had to go into the preferential deferment 2S."

I knew nothing about any of that. So, I was for the war, I was for killing the commies and so I didn't have any political or philosophical reason to avoid it, once I got caught.

DB: You wouldn't be going to Canada even though it was just around the corner.

BW: I wouldn't have thought about it. It was not in my consciousness. And so I enlisted in the Air Force in a four-year officer program to avoid the Army. But I went at twenty-five.

DB: And you went in as a lieutenant?

BW: I was commissioned a second-lieutenant in November of '66.

DB: Did that feel good?

BW: It did, I wound up, on the day of my commission, I bought a Corvette.

DB: The trouble is you can't fit anything in those trunks, I don't even know why they have them.

BW: There is a picture of the car, of my Corvette, in the book.

DB: What year was it?

BW: It was 1966, I was the first time in my life that I had money to spend. And

here's the picture of the car, right here. That was my Corvette with me as a second-lieutenant standing next to my Corvette. Then after Vietnam, I got rid of the Corvette and bought a Volkswagen beetle with flower details.

DB: Let's talk about Vietnam. Obviously this is at the core of the driving force for you, Brian. And I really want to talk to you about this. So, please say a little bit about what you were doing there, your special assignment and what happened, I guess it was around April 18, 1969

BW: Well, actually it was approximately, the first village I went into was approximately April 12 or 13, 1969.

DB: Well, talk about that please.

BW: Well, I was actually trained as a low-level commander in an Air Force Ranger type trained unit at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. So when I went to Vietnam I had this twelve weeks of Ranger training with forty men under my command. And our job was to protect air bases in hostile areas. Meaning first, Vietnam, but they also told us we might go to Guatemala, and we might go to Korea. I knew nothing about what was going on in Guatemala.

So we wound up getting to Vietnam in March of '69. And we were at a small base in the Delta which was getting attacked quite often, at the time. And we had the heavy machine guns, and the starlight scopes, and the outgoing mortars, and the counter personnel radar.

And we were actually supplementing a regular base security unit and the very first week I was there, there's a picture of me looking, I'm just sitting pensively on a pallet. And this was taken by one of my troops.

I was sitting there in the daytime, we were working at night, but sometimes in the daytime I was just hanging out on the flight line checking on the flights. And so it's a damaged Polaroid that shows me pensively looking at another pallet of body bags.

You can't see the other pallet in there but you see me sitting on a pallet and I'm just like "Wow, how did I get here? What's happening?" But I had a special assignment that I didn't even have to do but the Vietnamese base commander asked me to assess the success of bombings of targets.

DB: U.S. bombings.

BW: Well, actually they were, what I was told was that these were South Vietnamese, believe me the U.S. was doing plenty of the bombing, but after Nixon was elected in '69 the code word was Vietnamization. Turn the war over to the

Vietnamese as if they hadn't already been heavily involved in the war both as soldiers and as victims.

We heard that these new pilots that had been trained in the United States had been infiltrated by the VC, the Viet Cong, which we called the enemy, people who righteously and correctly defending their country from our illegal invasion.

I hadn't quite figured that out yet, and that they were going to sabotage their missions. And he wanted to make sure that he had somebody, somebody he respected to go and assess whether that was the case. And I think he picked on me because I was probably the only sober officer at the base at the time.

I was really anxious, felt I was over my head. And I was always studying reports and he would see me studying reports in the command bunker. Because I'd been a graduate student I could study and read, and that helped me feel a little safer and a little less anxious although I'm sure it didn't really solve much but it helped me psychologically.

And so I was to go with one of his lieutenants who would guide me and my jeep to certain places where these bombings happened. And I didn't really think that much about it, it was during the daytime. And it wasn't dangerous to be on the roads in the daytime. And so what these targets were, we went to five targets in one week in April.

They were all inhabited villages, inhabited fishing and farming villages. Almost everybody was struck by planes flying at 300 feet meaning that they could really, they wouldn't have to worry about missing anything from their five hundred pound bombs, their Gattling-gun machine guns and their napalm bombs.

And so everybody in those villages, for the most part, was wiped out and that meant what I was witnessing was lots of bodies, many of them blackened from napalm, and at least half of those bodies in those villages were obviously young children because you could see their burned corpses that were three feet, three and a half feet.

And it was just shocking, this was the war and I started realizing slowly but then more rapidly that this was all deliberate, intentional acts of war crimes which were justified because we were killing the vermin, the rodents, the evil commies. And all I saw on the ground were people that were authentically living in their villages and I knew I was no longer an authentic person.

I mean I got it. It was like wow, they are in their village, and I'm nine thousand miles from my village and I'm standing over them as supposedly a savior of democracy. And I knew it was all B.S. I knew at that point how deeply my conditioning had dehumanized me.

One of the people, one of the women at my feet, I couldn't walk any further in one village because there were too many bodies. And I was stopped at this point because the bodies were too intense. And the woman at my feet had been holding three children. She was lying on her back, with her eyes looking up, and her eyes were wide open.

And I thought "Wow, is she alive?" I realized that they were all dead, but the napalm had burned her eye lids off, along with facial skin. And her eyes were staring at me and when I looked in those eyes, I knew she was my sister. And I call that irreversible knowledge. I could not, not ever forget it. Because it wasn't a thought, it was a feeling in my whole body, the visceral, the body which is undeniable.

And from that moment on that was in the first village I went into. From that moment on I've been on a different path. It's a very clumsy path, it is not always, it's certainly not linear and it's not neat. I emerged as a new person from that experience, it was an epiphany.

DB: Did it manifest right away, did it change your behavior off the bat?

BW: Well, I started talking, I started speaking to my superiors every day about the illegality and the unconscionable nature of the war, and the intentional bombing of civilian targets. And after all I had to learn the rules of engagement as an officer, which were you do not target civilians or civilian infrastructure. When I would constantly bring that to the attention of my superiors, they just laughed.

And I know they were irritated at me, and I was the night security commander, so we were always attacked at night and my adrenaline was working, so I was not lax with the duties but they felt I was affecting the morale by my rhetoric which I was not. It wasn't rhetoric, of course, it was my speaking of what I knew.

I didn't even talk about it to my enlisted men, I was talking to other officers on the base, many of which were always drinking. I just said, look this is the only way I can keep my sanity, I've got to talk about it. But I kept my duties and then after five months I was sent home early, so I was very relieved.

DB: Do you have any idea of who that woman who was at your feet holding the three

BW: I gave her a name. I think of her all the time. I gave her the name Milee. Which is just to change the words from Meeli, reverse the letters and made her into Milee. She's kind of my mythological mother, my mythological sister. She's the one that taught me that everything in the universe is totally connected with each other, and with all of life.

And although I haven't always lived with those incredible principles, they have actually kept a certain resiliency in my journey towards honoring this incredible truth that I knew nothing about growing up in capitalist U.S.

I was really quite well adapted to be successful according to the definition I had learned. Make money, get your career, make money, get your house and live happily ever after. And I knew that was all B.S. by that time.

I didn't know what it meant. It meant I was no longer one of the guys which was actually initially a sad thing, because I had always enjoyed being one of the guys, one of the jocks. And I knew that wasn't going to be happening and, but I also knew something else was emerging. And it's still emerging 42 years later.

DB: Francisco [Herrera] and David Hartsough were there on September 1, 1987, when a train treated you, Brian, as the same kind of vermin and related to your living breathing body in the same way you observed which began the beginning of your transformation.

I wanted to ask you about the Buddhist monks who began to set themselves ablaze, extraordinary act. In this country, people thought it was lunacy; we understood it as the highest form of protest giving the individual life for the greater good of the people, we love that phrase. And the irony is that also the guy that burned himself alive, if I'm not mistaken, I hope I'm not, in Washington, D.C., near the White House.

BW: Near the Pentagon .

DB: Near the Pentagon, went to your same, small, tiny high school.

BW: Right, Norman Morrison, seven years ahead of me. I knew him as the first Eagle Scout that I had ever met. He dated our next-door neighbor, our neighbor's daughter. I didn't know him well, 'cause I was ten and he was seventeen at the time. But when I realized who that was, when he immolated himself in 1965 I thought he had become a kook, course by that time I was really a right-winger.

But then in Vietnam I had dinner with a Vietnamese family after I had turned against the war and they sang me a song called "An Ode to Norman Morrison" telling me that Norman Morrison was an inspiration to the entire country to continue resistance to the U.S. occupation and devastating of the Vietnamese life and villages. At that point Norman became my hero.

There were at least 76 monks that immolated themselves during the war in protest of the incredible, incredible, incredible beyond-belief carnage that we were inflicting on that country. And there were actually eight or nine people in the U.S. who immolated themselves, Norman was one, but there were eight others.

This expression of almost, to the point where you don't know how to express your absolute angst, outrage, grief over policies of murder, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year funded by the United States people and the government. And it goes on and on, and it's like so criminally insane you don't know how to respond.

FH: Which just sheds a lot of light on the decision Bradley Manning made, or, well this is all to be discussed in the court or whatever that happen, but I mean whoever helped with the whole WikiLeaks.

BW: Yeah, when you find out incredible war crimes, which is true for every war, there are some people that want to reveal it. It's just a human.

DB: And it's not going to look good for Bradley Manning, and even you, the fact that you could prove that the government was, in fact, purposefully tried to kill you, that's what made it impossible for you to win. As a lawyer give us the thirty seconds

BW: Well quickly, you can only sue the government under the Federal Tort Claims Act which says you can sue the government for negligence of its employees but not the criminal intent of its employees. And we tried to get the county of Contra Costa, the state of California, and the U.S.

DB: So let's just be clear, if they purposely try and kill you, you can't sue them but if they make a mistake you've got an opening.

BW: Correct. And since nobody was to, none of the criminal administration agencies were going to file criminal charges, we had to go into civil court and sue, and our case was so strong that we thought now how are we going to lessen the strength of our case

DB: to win.

BW: to win. It really screwed up my mind thinking about it. We finally settled, rather than lose in court.

DB: Let's talk about, a little bit more about why you're riding your bike, and what it means to you, the notion of changing the paradigm, why we are at that crossroads, and you on the bicycle crossing those roads.

BW: Well, I'm trying to be honest, always, in my journey, sometimes I go into my own denial, periods of denial but I realize more and more, as many people do, that western civilization is on a collision course with life itself.

And we've all been conditioned to adapt to the mores and values that enable us to be considered okay or successful or at least just reasonable people. And

thus in adaptation we are dehumanizing ourselves because we are adapting to a capitalist society that promotes individualism versus cooperation, competition versus community, acquisition versus inquisition, I say acquiring things rather than being curious and questioning things.

And so we have become addicted to a material way of life, that requires imperial policies to extract all these resources around the world, funnel them to 4.6 percent of the world's population; demeaning, impoverishing, murdering, maiming people all over the world who are in the way of our precious metals needed for our cell phones and our computers, in the Congo.

And this has been going on really since the conquest in 1500, 1492. And our whole country is founded on dispossession of hundreds of nations of human beings that lived in this land, that the Indians call Turtle Island.

To recognize the fact that this deep psychic, I call it a deep psychic scar etched into our soul, that we dispossessed people in order to call ourselves exceptional people. It's just, I mean, it makes me want to cry. But the recovery, uncovering all of this, and then recovering humanity, is really quite a task because I'm looking at my own addictions to the convenience and the comforts.

And one of the ways I've started addressing it in myself and sharing it with others, is I stopped flying eleven years ago because I looked at the carbon footprint of flying and said I've got to stop that. I've reduced my riding in cars, a lot. But I have really increased my hand cycling for most of my local travel, my meetings, my going to the store. I've done 55,000 miles in the last fourteen years on my hand cycle.

And we are facing a massive correction of our wayward ways in the West, and now India and China are adopting our model. It's very seductive obviously. But we will have a correction of our behavior and the correction will be pretty horrendous. I would like to be part of a people who are preparing psychologically, emotionally and spiritually as well as with their lives for this dramatic collapse, that will happen, because we've been living totally unsustainably, morally, ecologically, socially.

We're wired socially, we are wired to be cooperators. That's the only way we've survived four or five million years as a hominid, and we've been living for several thousand years actually, before the conquest even; we've been living as obedient servants to vertical power structures, we call it democracy. It's still a vertical power structure and we can tell after, recently especially, what a fraud it is.

There is an oligarchic cabal that owns the whole system and we really, to recover, need to withdraw our support and consent to that system. That requires lots of concrete strategic thinking about how we withdraw our support, simplify our lives, reduce our payment of taxes, or eliminate taxes, participate in perhaps obstruction practices that actually make business as usual impossible. Like they did it in Tunisia and Egypt for those people who know what misery is.

The question is when will we know the misery index here, as things get worse and worse. But the issue is, there will be a correction, simply because we're going to be running out of a lot of the resources we've been so dependent upon and assuming we are forever, on a finite planet.

We've been living as if these resources are infinite and that technology is going to always save us. Well, every piece of technology requires mining something out of the earth. And that's probably not sustainable either, so we are facing this really harsh reality that the way we've been living is not sustainable and will not continue.

And we're almost all of us in this boat. So we're all in this together and we are also, therefore, capable of creating a radical solution together if we want to survive, and the stakes are so high you can't rule that out. But you can't say that it's obviously going to happen, but you can't rule it out.

So, yes, I'm interested in developing an eco-consciousness which is a real, genuine archetypal being. We're moving from the age of entitlement, enabled by plunder to the age of consequences which provides us this opportunity to learn humility on the planet. We may or may not take that opportunity on.
