

Activist recalls bloody train incident, nonviolent life in new book

John Dear | Jan. 31, 2012 On the Road to Peace

On Sept. 1, 1987, one of the most dedicated peace activists in the nation sat down with friends on the train tracks outside the Concord Naval Weapons Station near the Bay Area in California to block a U.S. Navy Munitions train loaded with weapons bound for Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Instead of stopping the train and arresting the protestors, authorities ordered the train to speed up to three times faster than permitted. While some protestors barely made it off the tracks and one jumped onto the front of the train, Brian Willson was hit directly and run over. As friends watched in horror, Brian tumbled over and over again under the train. The top of his head and his legs were torn off, and he suffered 19 broken bones and many severe cuts. But by a miracle of God, Brian survived.

Almost 25 years later, Brian has published an astonishing autobiography, *Blood on the Tracks: The Life and Times of S. Brian Willson* [1] (P.M. Press, Oakland, CA, 2011, 441 pages, with an introduction by Daniel Ellsberg). This massive book is one of the best accounts of nonviolent resistance in our nation's history. Like Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*, it should be required reading. Brian's story carries the same weight as the stories of Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero and the Berrigans. He has much to teach us.

Blood On the Tracks tells of his heroic life, determined dedication, risky resistance, sharp social critique and steadfast commitment to nonviolence. He takes us through his painful personal journey as a metaphorical map guiding us out of the "American Way Of Life" into a new nonviolent, liberated humanity. Along the way, he provides in-depth analysis of American militarism in Vietnam, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Colombia, occupied Palestine, Ecuador, Brazil, Iraq, Cuba and Chiapas. Finally, his subtle spiritual journey points us toward a slower, simpler, more authentic, peaceful way of life.

Brian constantly challenged himself to grow into a better, more open human being. Reading his book does the same for us. As he deconstructs the myths of American war-making and takes steps to resist, we ponder our own journeys and what new steps we can take. He concludes with reflections on his current pursuit of a simpler life rooted in the earth and local community.

I call him Brian because I have known him since the mid-1980s. In 1986, while I was working at the Washington, D.C., office of "Witness for Peace," trying to stop the U.S. war against Nicaragua, I met Brian and helped him support our friend Charlie Liteky, a Vietnam veteran who turned in his Medal of Honor at the Vietnam wall. Once, we spent an afternoon walking the streets of D.C. debating how to stop the U.S. wars in Central America through active nonviolence. His passion for peace had a huge impact on me. I was 25 at the time and still recovering from experiences the year before in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Brian told me I had a responsibility to resist and disrupt the culture of war here at home.

Like Ron Kovic, Brian was born on the Fourth of July, in 1941. He grew up in small-town rural America as a "Commie-hating, baseball-loving Baptist" and underwent a life-changing experience as a soldier in Vietnam. In the years that followed, he began to join other vets to protest the war. As he traveled the world and learned

about U.S. war-making, he became a full-time nonviolent resister. He organized, spoke out, marched, fasted, lobbied and was arrested and jailed for peace.

In the fall of 1986, he and his friends began a high-profile water-only "Veterans Fast for Life" against the U.S. contra war on Nicaragua. That fast, and his trips through Central America, led to his protest at the weapons depot the following year.

On one trip to Nicaragua, he met hundreds of *campesinos* who had lost their legs because of U.S. bombs and landmines. He wondered how he could live in greater solidarity with them.

In the summer of 1987, Brian knew that his resistance to U.S. war-making in Central America needed to escalate.

"Violence is our business to stop -- nonviolently," he wrote in a statement before the fateful day. "None of this is possible as long as we are unable or unwilling to pay the price or endure the risks of living and working for justice and peace."

"Once the train carrying the munitions moves past our human blockade, if it does, other human beings in other parts of the world will be killed and maimed," Brian wrote just before Sept. 1. "We are not worth more. They are not worth less. Let us commit to ourselves and the world that we will claim our dignity, self-respect and honor by resisting with our lives and dollars, no matter what it takes, any further policies designed to kill others in our name, in each of our names ultimately."

Thankfully, Brian doesn't remember the events of that day. The book, however, includes many color photos as well as the transcript of a recording of the event. The government denied that the train sped up, but media film footage captured the entire event, and supported the witnesses' claims. It was shown around the world, and spurred thousands more to protest our wars. Brian writes:

In one instant, I experienced, in my own body, the brute force of U.S. power that so many poverty-stricken villagers feel every day around the world. I survived, but my legs were taken from me. Since then, I've been walking on Third World Legs. ... From now on I would declare myself Absent With Out Leave from the American Way Of Life. My quest would be for an alternate way of life that I could promote. I thought about the villagers in Viet Nam and the *campesinos* in Nicaragua, and it seemed to me that these peoples lived a simpler life in tune with the earth that was not inherently violent, destructive, or imperial.

After Brian was run over, thousands journeyed to the Concord Naval Weapons Station and were arrested blocking weapons shipments. In the years afterward, every train and truck was blocked, and thousands were arrested on the tracks.

Blood On the Tracks is a major accomplishment and will live on for years as a testament of nonviolent resistance to American war-making.

"All of us are covered in the blood of war through our complicity with the American Way Of Life," he writes. "The alternative to genocide and ecocide is living humanly and wholly in local, steady-state, relatively small, food- and simple-tool-sufficient communities. We need to learn the art of becoming *uncivilized*."

He concludes:

My body healed long ago, but that does not mean my healing has ended. My journey continues. I realize now that the U.S. engine of prosperity cannot be stopped until we change our very way of life. Each one

of us must choose between an American Way Of Life that values selfish material prosperity and a way of life that values our collective humanity.

We don't have much time to choose wisely. Today, our national addiction to material comfort is so grotesque that, though we comprise only 4.6 percent of the world's population, we consume [up] to half of the world's resources. Our sky is filled with pollutants, our seas with plastics, our lands covered with pools of toxic waste. In our desperate desire for more, we are now waging war on our own home, the earth itself.

Blood On the Tracks should be reviewed by *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and every other major paper in the nation. He should be featured on all the national TV programs. The churches should grapple with his extraordinary witness, his crucifixion for protesting our wars and weapons. But if that doesn't happen, at least every one of us who struggles for justice and peace should read and ponder Brian's life and witness.

I hope *Blood On the Tracks* will inspire others to follow Brian out of the "American Way Of Life" and into the new life of peace and nonviolence. We don't necessarily have to sit on train tracks, but like Brian, we do have to figure out what our responsibility is. Brian Willson shows us the way.

John will speak Feb. 4 at the Seattle Spiritual Books Festival and Feb. 6 in Portland. His new book, [Lazarus, Come Forth!](#) [2], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to [John Dear's website](#) [3]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, [Divine Rebels](#) [4] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including [Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings](#) [5]; [Put Down Your Sword](#) [6] and [A Persistent Peace](#) [7], are available from Amazon.com.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.amazon.com/Blood-Tracks-Times-Brian-Willson/dp/1604864214>

[2]

[http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1570759367/ref=pd_lpo_k2_dp_sr_1?pf_rd_p=486539851&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe-](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1570759367/ref=pd_lpo_k2_dp_sr_1?pf_rd_p=486539851&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe-1&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=1584200405&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=1GYTD8AM60PI)

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[3] <http://www.johndear.org>

[4] [http://www.amazon.com/Divine-Rebels-American-Christian-](http://www.amazon.com/Divine-Rebels-American-Christian-Activists/dp/1569762643/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1326209314&sr=8-1)

[Activists/dp/1569762643/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1326209314&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/Divine-Rebels-American-Christian-Activists/dp/1569762643/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1326209314&sr=8-1)

[5] [http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-](http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1)

[Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1)

[6] [http://www.amazon.com/Put-Down-Your-Sword-](http://www.amazon.com/Put-Down-Your-Sword-Nonviolence/dp/0802863574/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348607&sr=1-1)

[Nonviolence/dp/0802863574/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348607&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Put-Down-Your-Sword-Nonviolence/dp/0802863574/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348607&sr=1-1)

[7] [http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-](http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-World/dp/0829427201/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348624&sr=1-1)

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[8] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>