

Finding a Path Forward: On Spirituality and the Future

MARIANNE WILLIAMSON

AN INTERVIEW WITH ASHTON HIGGINS & MICHELLE ALAS

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MARIANNE WILLIAMSON is a bestselling author, political activist, and spiritual thought leader. For over four decades, she has been a leader in spiritually progressive circles. Williamson founded Project Angel Food, a non-profit organization that has delivered more than 18 million meals to ill and dying homebound patients since 1989. She has also worked throughout her career on poverty, anti-hunger and racial reconciliation issues. In 2004, she co-founded The Peace Alliance and supports the creation of a U.S. Department of Peace. Williamson ran for the Democratic nomination for president in 2020 and 2024.

Brown Journal of World Affairs: You have spent decades working with and writing about world religions and spirituality. What does spirituality represent to you, given that it is such a major part of your work, and how does faith inform your worldview and your political beliefs?

225

Marianne Williamson: Spirituality is the path of the heart—a path of love. It is not a separate category of life, but the underground river of being that undergirds all things. Dr. James Doty, a neurosurgeon at Stanford University, told me that in the field of neuroscience, there is a far greater connection between the brain and the heart than scientists once believed. They now see a kind of partnership between the two that forms the intelligence center of the body. That applies to an individual life and to civilization as well. An alignment between brain and heart, between reason and love, forms the basis of any well-lived life. It's also the key to any reasonable guarantee that humanity will survive another hundred years.

Journal: You have worked as a spiritual leader, author, and now a two-time presidential candidate. Those roles are connected by a desire to help people. Could you please share what led you to commit your life to the service of others? How did this mission inspire your presidential campaigns, and how has your previous experience equipped you to run for president during two incredibly contentious and high-stakes elections?

Williamson: That sounds a bit grandiose to me, like I had some eureka experience on the road to Damascus or something. I see the same things everybody else sees; I just have this Jewish-broad-from-Texas way of saying what I think. Our current geopolitical system is predicated on the tolerance of an unacceptable amount human and other species' suffering. There are corners of our society where you are allowed to say that, but when it comes to politics you had better not. And so I did.

I think what happens to most people, and what certainly happened to me, is that you gradually come to realize that a life lived only for yourself does not really work. Selfishness, self-reverence, withholding of love, judgments, unforgiveness—those things lead to suffering. Compassion, love, and forgiveness lead to peace. This is not a “you should” kind of thing. It is simply that the Law of Cause and Effect is as true on the spiritual as on the material level. The Golden Rule is not just a suggestion; it is a description of fact. Do unto others as you would have others do unto you, because they—or someone else—actually will. Once you realize that everything you do on some level comes back to you, you see that whatever you do, you are doing to yourself. A life of service to others is ultimately a service to oneself.

226

Some people would say, “But what does all this love stuff have to do with politics?” Well, it means universal health care rather than 70 to 90 million people underinsured or uninsured, 1.3 million people rationing their insulin, one in four Americans living with medical debt. It means tuition-free or near tuition-free college, like we had in this country until the mid-1960s. It means fair taxation, rather than a tiny group of Americans sucking up the vast majority of our financial resources. It means climate change mitigation as opposed to a continuation of the slow killing of our planet.

We can talk about this as though it is complicated, but in most ways it is not. All public policy should be created in response to this one question: “What is most likely to help the most people thrive?”

Journal: How do you think realizing that you cannot live just for yourself inspired your presidential campaign, given that many people consider politics, especially at the presidential level, to be reserved for people looking to benefit themselves?

Williamson: Thinking that spirituality and politics are two separate and distinct categories is a fairly recent development, and it is aberrational in U.S. history. When I was in college, we read Ram Dass and Alan Watts in the morning and went to Vietnam anti-war protests in the afternoon. There was not this sense of

separate lanes. The same psychological, moral, spiritual, and life principles that prevail within an individual prevail within a nation, because a nation is simply a group of people. If a person should behave responsibly, mercifully, and with integrity, then shouldn't a nation? Politics is simply our collective behavior

Earlier in my career, I felt that my highest opportunity for service was to speak and work with individuals on issues of personal growth and spiritual transformation. But I began to recognize about 20 years ago how many people's lives were stymied by social and economic conditions that reflected selfish, unjust, dangerous, and greedy public policy. There is a limit to how much individual accountability or even charity can compensate for a lack of social justice. Yes, I could pray for people when they were sick, but it would sure help if they had health care.

Journal: Many Americans are using spiritual beliefs to promote oppressive practices: restrictive abortion bans, discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, provision of public funds to private religious schools, and even mandating the teaching of the Bible in some public schools, like in Oklahoma. Much of your political work involves fighting against this Christian far-right movement. How do we reconcile the divide between different spiritual communities in politics? To what extent can or should spirituality play a role in a government that is supposed to be upholding separation between church and state?

227

Williamson: The spiritual themes of love, forgiveness, justice, and humility are not religious dogma or doctrine; they are principles of right living. Those hiding behind the name of religion but acting in unloving or unjust ways are not acting on spiritual principles, or even on the tenets of their own religion, actually. There is nothing very Christian about Christian nationalism, for instance. Nor is it very American. We are a religiously pluralistic nation, and no one religion should dominate our cultural, social, or political institutions.

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I saw two posts on my social media platforms that were both amusing and disturbing. One was someone telling me that we need to go back to Biblical principles like discipline and hard work. I do not remember a place in the Bible where it talks about discipline and hard work. The other post said we need to go back to Biblical principles like entering your country legally. I could

not remember that one either, although I do remember this in the Bible: “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Some of the greatest evils in history have been perpetrated in the name of religion. Our Founders were very aware of that, and the separation of Church and State—religious freedom as stated in our First Amendment—was established to prevent that. It protects both religion *and* government from interference by the other. Any American can worship how they please and if they please. And no matter whether it is a church, a synagogue, a mosque, or a meeting of atheists, no policemen can come in and say, “Knock it off.”

People are free to practice whatever religion they care to in the United States, but they should not feel free to impose on others their religious beliefs or dogma. That is why spirituality is so important. Spirituality unites us because it is simply the path of love, based on universal themes that are found in all the great religions of the world; religious dogma more often divides us than unites us.

Journal: One of the most famous quotes from your book, *A Return to Love*, says that “Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.” It also says that we must liberate ourselves from that fear to shine and inspire others to do the same for collective liberation. How do you think this fear manifests on a nationwide scale? What forces instill fear in our own potential? How can we unlock the potential of our people and institutions to create a more liberated future for ourselves and the world?

Williamson: We unlock people’s potential through education, health care, environmental and economic justice—and most of all, of course, through love.

As far as unlocking people’s potential, I think we should have more respect for how much of it is already unlocked. We should simply stop blocking it. We should recognize the incredible decency, intelligence, and wisdom that already exists in people. We suppress people’s voices in a myriad of ways, particularly through a political system that does more to block than to channel the innate wisdom of the American people. I think our Establishment powers are afraid of the voices of the people, and in a way, it is reasonable that they feel that way. Should the voices of the American people truly be heard and hearkened to, the corporate dominance that currently prevails in this country would not survive.

There have been unjust institutional forces in this country from our earliest beginnings, ranging from slavery to institutional suppression of women to economic inequality to segregation. That is nothing new. However, what has

happened over the last 50 years is more insidious: it is a system of domination and control that pretends not to be. It is a soulless and ethically neutral economic paradigm, with its tentacles everywhere. It has put corporate profits before the safety, health, and well-being of our people. It has turned us from citizens to consumers, more often in competition with each other than in relationship with one another. It puts money before people. It inherently divides us. And from that, all manner of fear has emerged. It has caused massive economic inequality and a devastating wave of human despair.

When communities are destroyed, when people are constantly living in a state of economic survival—struggling too much to ends meet, as is true for over seventy percent of Americans who say they live with chronic economic anxiety—it creates a Petri dish of despair. From that dish, all manner of personal and societal dysfunction almost inevitably emerges, including ideological capture by genuinely psychotic forces. From drug addiction to gang violence to terrorism, our failure to take care of one another opens space for everything that is fearful, dangerous, violent, and destructive.

We need to awaken from the myth of neutrality: the idea that as long as we are not consciously seeking to hurt anyone, that is enough. But it is not enough. To be neutral today is to acquiesce to a system that is inherently destructive to too many people.

229

Journal: Recently, the far-right movement has strategically focused on winning local elections to build their national platform from the ground up. The Democratic Party often touts grassroots movements as the key to success, but often only in the context of mobilizing voters for larger statewide or federal elections. What do you think is the role of grassroots organizing in the fight against the far-right? Do you think we should be focusing on local or larger federal seats? How can leftist grassroots movements win and effect change in more conservative communities?

Williamson: Especially at a time like this, every election on every level is the answer. And our greatest motivation will come not from what we are fighting against, but from a sense of what we are creating for the future. “Fighting against” and the anger it produces are like the white sugar of political activism; you get a quick shot of adrenaline, but then you inevitably crash. Activism in the spirit of creating a more beautiful world is like healthy food; it is real nourishment over the long haul.

Gandhi said the leader of the Indian independence movement was “the

small still voice within.” An integrative politics is emerging now, in which internal characterological issues are as important as what we choose to do. Our intuition as much as our political analysis will direct us to which election, or which activity, aligns best with our talents and abilities.

You mention how far-right forces have put their attention on all levels of government; we need to remember what that means. It means they have used the powers of democracy, and we need to do that too. Too often on the left, we are only interested in the hot federal campaigns and have not shown up for school boards, city council, mayoral races, or State Houses. There has been a rude awakening now, of course, so I think that will change. We need to see participation in politics as an aspect of a well-lived, meaningful life.

The traditional politician running for president will often say things like, “I want to go to Washington D.C. and fight for you.” On the campaign trail I used to say, “I do not want to go to Washington to fight for you. I want to go to Washington D.C. and co-create a new chapter in U.S. history with you.” I would tell people that the same forces I would be dealing with in Washington D.C., they must deal with on local and state levels—real estate developers, banks, corporate conglomerates, and so forth. This is an all-hands-on-deck kind of moment, whoever and wherever we are.

230

The philosophy of non-violence puts as much focus on who we *are* as on what we *do*, because everything we do is infused with the consciousness with which we do it. Gandhi said, “The end is inherent in the means.” Non-violence pertains to more than just our behavior; it calls for non-violent thought as well as action. One of our problems today is psychological and emotional violence, unfortunately on the left as much as on the right. That violence is a block to our success, and it keeps us talking only to people with whom we already agree. We all need to cast out our self-righteousness, arrogance, and absolute certainty that we are right and other people are wrong. No one has a monopoly on the truth, and no one owes it to us to agree with us. If we are really interested in societal change, we should become artists at moral persuasion—that means artists at non-violent communication. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “We have very little power of moral persuasion with people who can feel our underlying contempt.”

Journal: How do you find hope for changing staunchly conservative local institutions? How do you see hope, for example, for a college student returning to fix the issues in their red hometown in the deep South?

Williamson: You have to give up the idea that you are necessarily going to get

what you want in the time frame in which you want it. But you are planting seeds, no matter what. You sort of have to serve the ages.

Sometimes you are just expanding a conversation, but that in itself can be enough. There is a great anonymous saying, to “be fully invested in an effort but unattached to its results.” There is a deep yearning everywhere for a conversation that is more elevated and humanitarian, and that expresses a more soulful response to the times in which we live. Stand on what you believe, and know there is value in speaking it no matter who heard it. You never know whose thoughts you might influence.

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A shift happens whenever anyone stands up as an alternative to corruption, regardless of the outcome. Take Ralph Nader, for instance. He ran for president four times and never won. But on the other hand, there are millions of us whose souls have been seared by his courage and truth-telling. Is that not a success in and of itself?

Remember that there are also progressives in even the reddest states. State Representative James Talarico is making a stunning stand against Christian nationalist forces in Texas, and he is speaking as a Christian. So, when a student considers going back to Texas, they should consider looking for allies like him.

Journal: Many people justify dismissing local politics by arguing that they do not have the time or skills to research and monitor local politics—or they forget to engage. What’s more, national issues dominate the Internet, and consequently what we think and see when we do turn to politics. How do you think we can increase awareness around local issues? How do we help people find the time, resources, and interest to get involved in local organizing, even when it looks like the odds are stacked against them? Do you think there is a way to engage local politics on a national platform?

Williamson: Big corporate media conglomerates have destroyed local newspapers. People are not watching local news anymore. Worst of all, our contemporary lives just leave so little time and energy to engage in such things. But I think this election has made a lot of people wake up and grow up. I think a lot of complacency has begun to dissolve. We simply cannot afford to check out—not

if we want to feel good about ourselves.

The change needs to be holistic; it applies to every area of our lives. It means a change in the way families relate to each other; the courage to speak up in corporate boardrooms; engagement in our local communities, nonprofits, cultural institutions, and in local, state, and federal politics. It also means preparing our nervous systems—cultivating quiet through reflection, prayer, mindfulness, meditation, or simply taking enough time in nature—so we can endure and transform these chaotic times. None of us can do everything, but all of us can do something.

We need to stimulate our societal immune system. Every cell in the body is assigned to a particular organ, infused with a natural intelligence that leads it to collaborate with other cells. Together they support the healthy functioning of the organ and organism of which they are part. But when a cell disconnects from that natural intelligence, from its collaborative function, then that is a malignancy. The cell goes off on its own, forgetting its purpose and becoming a destructive force on the entire system.

That is what has happened to humanity: we have been infected with the malignant thought that “It is all about me.” We will begin to heal when we remember it is all about *us*. That is what provides the incentive to collaborate, to overcome the weariness of these times. Make yourself available, simply show up to help in whatever way you can, and things start to change rather rapidly. Information is all around us once we open our eyes to see.

Journal: How has your upbringing in Texas informed your politics, and what do you think is one’s responsibility to give back or go back to their home community? What skills do you think people from predominantly conservative communities can offer to leftist politics and organizations, given these places are often dominated by people sitting in ivory towers?

Williamson: I regret not having gone back to Texas, actually. I was raised there at the time of Ramsey Clark, Jim Hightower, and Barbara Jordan. I had a very left-wing father who read I.F. Stone daily and walked around the house saying, “Beat the system, kids! Beat the system!” I was raised in an environment of brash, robust left-wing commitment, the likes of which you hardly see today.

In the 1990s, just around the time that the Contract with America came to be, when Newt Gingrich led an upheaval of right-wing conservatism, I was talking at a conference of State legislators. I was speaking my mind, of course. A woman came up to my table at the luncheon afterward. She introduced herself

as a State legislator from Amarillo, Texas, put her card on the table in front of me, and said very intently, “Call me. We need you.”

But I lost her card. I look back at that moment as a big mistake; I wish I had looked her up. There was no Internet then, and something like calling her felt hard for some reason. But it is exactly what I should have done! And I regret not having done it.

That woman knew my politics, and she knew what was happening in Texas. That was one of those moments in my life when I came to a fork in the road. When you are older, you look back at those moments and wonder how things might have been.

Journal: Your presidential platform is notable for its call to end the War on Drugs, to create a Care Economy, and to revamp health care, among many other proposals that seem radical in comparison both to other candidates and the stated platforms of either major party.

Williamson: My platform did not just treat symptoms. It treated root causes, and people of a younger generation are more likely to understand that. Our country will not be healed only by tweaking things here and there. We must shift our economic paradigm towards one built on a humanitarian foundation.

233

Journal: Why are revolutionary visions so important in U.S. politics, especially today? Why is it important to fix the bullet wound instead of putting a bandage over it? And do you see your visions being adopted by the Democratic Party in the near future, given that you have run as a Democrat several times? What do you think is the future of the Democratic Party if they do not adopt these policies?

Williamson: The United States is built on revolutionary ideals, and the revolution is unending. Our mistake is to think it is ever over. The United States was born of a revolutionary mentality and without it, we are doomed. That all men are created equal, endowed by our Creator with the inalienable rights of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness; that governments are instituted to secure those rights; and that we the people have the right to alter or abolish that government if it is not doing its job—those ideals were revolutionary in 1776, and they are revolutionary today.

From the days of our founding, there have been forces in this country—from slavery to the institutional suppression of women to the Gilded Age to segregation—who, for their own ideological and/or financial purposes,

have done all they could to undermine those ideals. But throughout history, others have pushed back against forces of injustice; we can too, once we reclaim our revolutionary spirit. The reason we are in trouble now is because the conduits for that revolutionary fervor have themselves been corrupted.

The question now is, where do we go? At a time when short-term corporate profit maximization has become the United States' organizing principle as opposed to genuine democracy and humanitarian values, and government itself—as well as its adjuncts—have been drawn into the matrix of corporate dominance, how do we break through?

I have had a front row seat to how a system of corporate power, including media and political parties, insidiously controls our politics. And I have the scars to prove it. But I am not pessimistic. I just realize change is going to take longer than I once expected. The Democratic Party has been held hostage by its corporate wing, living in ultimate obeisance to its corporate donors for decades. Obviously, that has led it to a terrible electoral defeat. Will it look in the mirror, humbly inquire into where things went wrong, and set out on a different path? Will it return to its traditional principles of unequivocal advocacy for the working people of the United States? I do not know. So far, I have my doubts.

234

Journal: If this is going to take longer than you expected, and if these forces have been so corrupted, do you think it will take longer for the Democratic Party to adopt your philosophies? Or do you think that the Republican and Democratic parties are not yet capable of being that conduit for change?

Williamson: I think millions of people are processing things now. And processing is necessary before anyone can know what we are supposed to do. There are so many moving pieces. It is not a time for action so much as for observation, for thinking about all this, for making ourselves ready for whatever comes next. Some terrible things could be on the horizon, it is true, but some great things are possible as well.

Ultimately, I have faith. Our ancestors responded to slavery with abolition, and they prevailed. They responded to the institutional suppression of women with the women's suffrage movement, and they prevailed. They responded to the Gilded Age with the establishment of organized labor, and they prevailed. They responded to segregation with the civil rights movement, and they prevailed. In every case, leaders rose up. And I think we are going to rise up now. We need to do more than identify the problems in our past; we need to identify *with* the problem solvers. Sometimes I feel that our ancestors are leaping up from the

grave to say, “Do not be wimps! We weren’t!”

Yes, would-be authoritarians and corporate behemoths are threatening to destroy our democracy, that is a legitimate fear. And neither the Democratic nor the Republican party as they are now constituted are real conduits for preventing that. But things are changing, both inside and outside those parties. Anything could happen now, for better or for worse.

Third party voices have been very important in the history of the United States. Women’s suffrage came from the Women’s Party. Abolition came from the Abolitionist Party. Social Security came from the Socialist Party. Unfortunately, the way things work now, the major parties have made it almost impossible for third parties to gain serious power. But that might change. Again, we cannot see over the horizon quite yet, but I do feel that, regardless of what form it takes, the American people will rise, and we will overturn corporate tyranny. There is a matrix of corporate powers: insurance companies, Big Pharma, Big Food, big chemical companies, Big Ag, gun manufacturers, Big Oil, banks and other financial institutions, and big defense contractors. Americans on both the left and right now realize that the political power of that corporate matrix has permanentized the economic injustices the majority of Americans now live with. That corrupt system will not disrupt itself. That is our job.

In both cases, the system just waits for violence to break out and then seeks to suppress or eradicate its symptoms.

235

Journal: You have written on political violence and are outspoken against the current violence in Palestine and other global conflicts. You even hope to create a United States Department of Peace. Following recent escalations of violence domestically over the last few years, many U.S. politicians have been outspoken against political violence at home despite supporting conflict in their foreign policy. How do we reconcile the rhetoric around condemning violence domestically while committing and enabling mass atrocities abroad? Is that tension even possible to reconcile, or do we need to reframe how we think about peace and violence?

Williamson: Our government is as casually violent at home as anywhere else; it just pretends not to be. Elsewhere, it drops bombs; here, it builds prisons. In both cases, the system just waits for violence to break out and then seeks to suppress or eradicate its symptoms. The reason our politicians do not talk about

treating root causes is because of how often *they* are the root cause.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said there are two kinds of peace: negative peace and positive peace. Negative peace is when there is no outright violence, but there is an underlying tension and anxiety. Positive peace, he said, can only be predicated on brotherhood and justice.

Health is not the absence of sickness; sickness is the absence of health. Similarly, peace is not the absence of war; war is the absence of peace. We need a paradigm shift to peace creation—to the brotherhood and justice to which King referred. There are four factors which, when present, statistically indicate that there will be less violence and more peace in any community or country: greater economic opportunities for women, greater educational opportunities for children, a reduction of violence against women, and the amelioration of unnecessary human despair. To be clear, it is not that we do not have the resources with which to adequately address those issues. It is that corporate profits serve war, not peace; prisons, not opportunity; fear, not love.

As far as the Middle East is concerned, the United States strayed years ago from the role of “honest broker” between Israelis and Palestinians. The last U.S. presidents to make genuine efforts at that were Carter and Clinton. Since then, no U.S. president has been willing to say what needed to be said—from Bush declaring U.S. allyship with Israel no matter what, to Obama knowing better, but refusing to spend political capital on declaring that the occupation was illegal and a two-state solution was imperative.

Again, a Department of Peace would be ideal. But without a serious and fundamental paradigm shift, its existence would mainly be performative. That is why the President’s bully pulpit is as important as his or her managerial or administrative skills. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr. said the primary job of the Presidency is not administrative but moral leadership. We do not just need more political car mechanics in Washington; the problem is that we are on the wrong road. I think the people need to take the wheel.

Journal: Is there anything else you would like to share?

Williamson: We are living within two simultaneous realities; one world is crumbling, while another is struggling to be born. We need to be death doulas to one and birth doulas to the other. We must be wise and responsible stewards of a profound and historic phase transition—as we move from a dirty economy to a clean economy, from a war economy to a peace economy, and from a corporate-dominated politics to a country that is truly “of the people, by the people, and

for the people.” We must be fierce but gentle harbingers of a different way of doing things. There is in each of us a yearning and the power to do that. In fact, as Americans, we’re hardwired for it. This story is so far from over.

Journal: Thank you very much. 