

+A Conversation with William Powers

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Contact: Dan O'Connell, publicist 617-480-6585
dan@danconnellmedia.com

A Talk With William Powers, author of Twelve by Twelve: A One-Room Cabin off the Grid and Beyond the American Dream

Q. Why did you decide to retreat to a 12' by 12' house with no electricity or running water?

A. Because of Dr. Jackie Benton. The first time I met this slight sixty-year-old physician, in March 2007, she was stroking a honey bee's wings in front of her twelve-foot by twelve-foot, off-the-grid home on No Name Creek in central North Carolina. She struck me as someone who had achieved self-mastery in these confusing times, but discovering how she'd done this would prove to be a riddle intricately connected to the house itself.

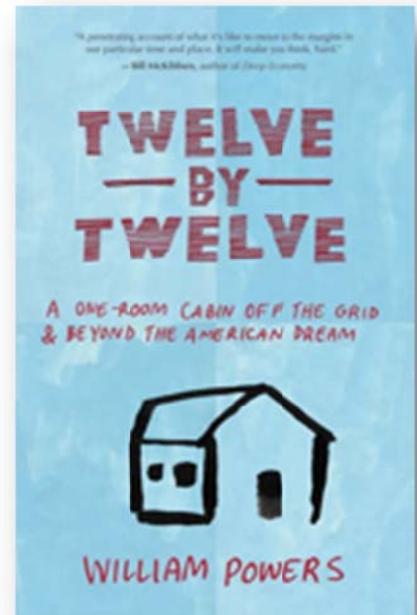
To my surprise she invited me to stay, alone, in her twelve by twelve for a season. That's how the adventure began.

Q. But we can't go back to living in caves and eating roots and berries. Isn't that what you're arguing here?

A. Not at all. The idea is to find the elusive contours of enough—and live there. Enough is the sweet spot between too little and too much. Not everyone will live twelve-by-twelve as Jackie does. But all of us can ask: What's my twelve by twelve? I live in New York City now. So my twelve by twelve is taking public transport—I don't own a car because it's not needed there—and by growing my own food in a small city garden. Someone else's twelve by twelve might be very different.

Q. What is a wildcrafter?

A. Wildcrafters quietly go about creating a durable vision of what it means to be an American and a global citizen. These are the people whose spirits nourished me as I hoed the rows at Jackie's place: permaculturists, biodiesel brewers, beekeepers, spiritual teachers, and so on. As the world flattens, they give hope. They shape their inner and outer worlds to the flow of nature, rather than trying to mold the natural world into a shape that is usable in the industrial world. Wildcrafters leave a small ecological footprint. They don't conform to any outward program, manifesto, or organized group, but conform only



to what Gandhi called the “still, small voice” within. I consider much of the dispersed “antiglobalization,” prosustainability movement to be connected to wildcrafting. Wildcrafters inhabit the rebel territory beyond the Flat.

Q. Why are you so opposed to Thomas Friedman’s “Flat World”?

A. New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman presents the Flat World in a positive light in his bestselling book *The World Is Flat*. Technologies like the Internet, he observes, are breaking down hierarchies. Thanks to bandwidth, companies can easily outsource certain jobs to India, China, and elsewhere; hence, people now compete on equal footing, according to talent, on a globalized economic playing field. World capitalism, guided by government incentives, will save us from environmental collapse, Friedman further argues, by inventing clean technologies to allow for the increased global consumption.

It’s not an argument to be taken lightly, and there is a level of truth to it. However, the metaphor suggests a darker truth about the way we’ve come to imagine the twenty-first century: the world has hit a flat note. Industrial agriculture creates a flat taste, and multinational corporations flatten our uniqueness into homo economicus serving a OneWorld™ Uniplanet. A once natural atmosphere has been flattened by global warming: every square foot of it now contains 390 ppm of carbon dioxide, though up until two hundred years ago the atmosphere contained 275 ppm (and 350 ppm is considered the safe upper threshold for our planet). Rainforests are flattened to make cattle pastures; a living ocean is depleted and flattened by overfishing; vibrant cultures are steamrolled to the edge of extinction. Have the well-rounded objectives of America’s Founding Fathers — life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness — been flattened to a single organizing principle: the unification of greed?

Q. So what is the “Soft World” antidote that you propose in *Twelve by Twelve*?

A. It’s by nature difficult to articulate in a crisp definition. The Soft World, you might say, is what is being steamrolled by the Flat World: the uniqueness and creativity of individuals and local communities; a well-rounded biosphere; a creative, collective imagination about what comprises happiness. Wildcrafters on North Carolina’s creative edge are finding the soft within the flat.

Q. Isn’t clean technology the way to slow global warming? We need scientists, not philosophers to help us.

A. We need both. And a lot of the emerging policies around the clean economy and green jobs are coming directly out of a change in consciousness about our relationship to Mother Earth. We see it increasingly bubbling up into mainstream culture, from James Cameron’s film *Avatar* to Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* to Eckhart Tolle’s *A New Earth*. Changes in norms that displace humans as the crown of creation—that’s a big part of what spurs the well toward investment in green tech.

Q. Isn’t this just another stunt—living 12x12—like No Impact Man?

A. Jackie lives in the 12 x 12 year round. She has no place else to go. As a senior physician she could earn a quarter million dollars, but instead only accepts \$11,000—the amount she needs—and lets the health care system have the rest. Her neighbors—Paul Jr. and Sr. and their partners—have sold their home three years ago and moved into 12 x 12s and are finding a whole texture to life unavailable to them in the suburbs. These and dozens of others I met are living on the radical edge of simplicity in an advanced industrial economy, while remaining active participants in it.

Q. You talk about FLO—fair, local, and organic—but isn't opposing globalization akin to opposing earthquakes? It's inevitable.

A. That's Flat World thinking. Soft World thinking sees new possibilities. Just to take one example: farmers markets. Farmers markets are like an emerging social contract between twenty-first-century polis and dumos; country folks produce healthy foods in an earth-friendly way and townspeople pay a little more. The number of farmers markets in the United States has more than doubled, from 1,700 in 1994 to 4,300 in 2006. They provide a lot more than food. They heal the edges of our über-industrialized economy, allowing a less chemical- and fossil fuel-intensive economy to flourish. They heal our relationships with each other as we reconfigure the buying and selling of food around fresh air and community. Most importantly, they heal our spirits, because if something pays, it stays, and by shopping there you vote for a kind of independence: the right to farm.

Q. What is the Leisure Ethic?

A. At the 12 x 12, I noticed, part of wildcrafting involves reclaiming the right to be idle — ratcheting down from overdeveloped to developed, from too much to enough. Jackie expressed it to me once like this: part of the joy of simplifying one's material life is that you don't have to work long hours to buy and maintain a bunch of stuff. This leaves time for open-ended chats — like the kind I began to have in North Carolina. Doing nothing is a carbon neutral activity!

This "leisure ethic," as I've come to dub it, isn't laziness; it is an intelligent, holistic balance between doing and being. It is embodied by the Aymaran philosophy of "living well," which includes enough (and not more) food, shelter, fresh air, and friendship.

Q. Why do you argue that development aid "punishes people for living sustainably?"

A. Idleness has been under threat at least since we stamped "underdeveloped" on the majority of humankind, most of whom actually live in enough. Harry S. Truman, in his 1949 inauguration speech, declared that the era of "development" had begun, and used, for the very first time in such a context, a new word: "underdevelopment"

Suddenly two billion people who had been doing alright — like my Mayan friends in Guatemala — were no longer doing alright. They were underdeveloped. And in one of the most spectacular missionary efforts in history, the rich nations henceforth strove to lead the underdeveloped of the world to a paradise of development, where they too would be domesticated and tethered to a logic of Total Work.

Truman might have more accurately called these "underdeveloped" people the planet's Idle Majority, the billions who reject the Puritan work ethic and extol balance.

About the author

William Powers has led development aid and environmental initiatives in Latin America, Africa, and Washington, DC. The author of the memoirs *Blue Clay People* and *Whispering in the Giant's Ear*, his essays on global issues have appeared in media including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and *Slate*. He has been interviewed on programs including *Fresh Air* and *Living on Earth* and is a senior fellow at the World Policy Institute. Powers lives part-time in New York City. His website is



www.williampowersbooks.com. For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact Dan O'Connell at 617-480-6585 or dan@danococonnellmedia.com.

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