

Issues in Earth Science

“Eww, There’s Some Geology in my Fiction!”

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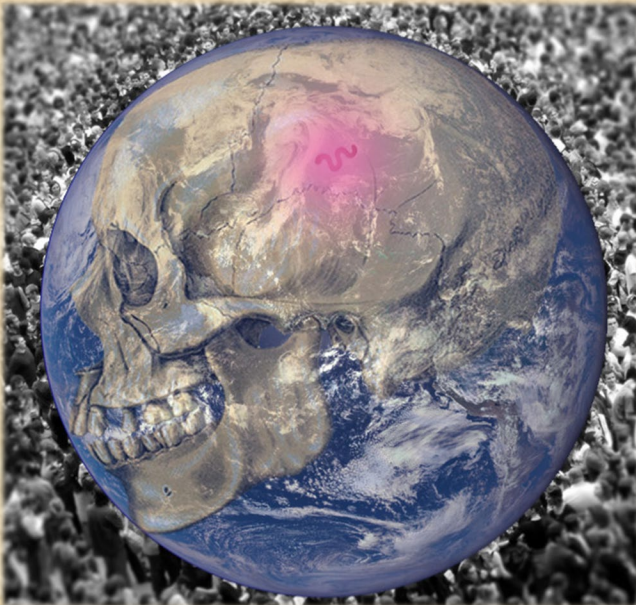
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Finally the secret to human compassion and justice is found and the whole world is on the threshold of becoming a perfectly loving place....or is it?

A Diet of Worms

by

Stephen S. Power



Good afternoon and thank you for joining us. I'm Dr. Stacy Pismire, a neurologist here at Johns Hopkins, and I led the team that studied Willington's brain. We have good news to report.

As you know, William Edward Ellington called himself Willington because it was "short for willing to do anything for anyone."

He was also called--by two presidents, three Nobel Peace Prize winners, and tens of thousands of others--"the most selfless man alive."

He wasn't always that way, though, which is why he asked us to conduct our study.

As a boy he lived inside his books, where he didn't have to play with anyone. As a teen, he studied geology because "rocks don't care." He was grateful he could spend the virus years either learning online at home or digging by himself in the hills around his house. In college he made professional connections, but no real friends. Classmates would later confess they had no idea they were classmates. And after graduation he worked as a mudlogger on an offshore drilling rig, which he considered an Eden for loners.

"I simply didn't see other people," Willington told me. "They were no more than worms to me. Then one morning I realized I was the worm."

That day Willington noticed another mudlogger hiding some tears because he'd missed the birth of his first child, and in a flash a world of compassion opened up to him. "I didn't see Jesus," he said, "but I did see things as He would've wanted them."

The next day Willington was supposed to go ashore for two weeks; he gave that leave--and every leave afterwards until his contract was up--to the new father. Then Willington spent the next thirty-two years travelling the world doing charity work. No sacrifice was too great if he could alleviate someone's suffering or increase their happiness.

Even after his death in March, he improved many more lives:

Willington's left lung allowed a New Jersey man to start running marathons to raise money for others' transplants. His right lung went to a Kentucky woman who promptly

traded business school for medical school so she could perform transplants herself.

After receiving one of Willington's kidneys, an Army colonel resigned his commission and started a soup kitchen. After receiving the other, a Los Angeles chef resigned from his restaurant to work there.

A Vermont roofer hugged an Arizona architect, each using one of Willington's hands, before building houses together for Habitat for Humanity.

He left his heart, fittingly, in San Francisco, giving it to a street artist, who has begun a school for homeless kids.

Willington's liver, pancreas, corneas, and other tissues also went to people who are now paying their gift forward. "I hate the word remains," Willington told me. "Nothing should remain of us. It all could be of use."

Which is why we got his brain. Willington could understand why those he'd helped would then help others, but he couldn't understand his own sudden and, to use his word, "compulsive" altruism. He hoped we could learn something from it.

I'm happy to say, we have.

In Willington's prefrontal cortex we found a colony of microscopic nematodes. Previously unknown, they're closely related to those found at the Earth's extreme depths. We suspect the nematodes were carried to the surface in the drilling debris that Willington analyzed on the rig, where they infected him, despite his wearing gloves.

The colony extended through his prefrontal cortex, which enabled the nematodes, we believe, to intercede in Willington's decision-making, either stripping him of the ability to do bad or causing him only to do good.

The nematodes were not confined to his brain, though. They were present in the blood samples we took.

Thus we also believe that the nematodes were transplanted along with his organs. This could explain the increased altruism their recipients manifested afterwards. Creating the desire to give of oneself bodily might be the nematodes' evolutionary means of spreading. Willington

did feel compelled to also donate countless gallons of blood and plasma during his last three decades.

Naturally this situation concerned us. The nematodes reminded us of other parasites that take over their hosts' minds, such as the fungus *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, which afflicts ants, or *Toxoplasma gondii*, which causes mice to lose their fear of cats. And we worried that by reporting our findings we'd besmirch Willington's life work by attributing it to the nematodes, not to him.

On the other hand, my team argued, what's wrong with a parasite inspiring people to make the world a better place so long as the world becomes a better place? Could we advocate for the destruction of such a benevolent creature, this "God worm"? No.

So we decided we would not only spread the good news of the nematode; we would spread the nematode itself. We couldn't in good conscience do otherwise.

For the past twelve weeks we've put nematodes in hundreds of drinking water sources around the country. They thrive in reservoirs and lakes as easily as they do in

the deep places of the world, and, fortunately, lax oversight and poor filtration systems have let them reach tens of millions of lips.

Already we've tracked a rise in giving and volunteerism. Violent crimes, suicides and addictions are down. Marriages and births are up. The fortunate are taking care of the unfortunate. Communities are coming together. Even corporations are putting people before profits.

We're lucky to have an ideal control group for this experiment: those who draw their drinking water from wells. In them we've found little improvement. We're sure that once they see the social benefits that they're missing out on, they'll want to sip from our cup too.

I see you have some questions, which my team will be happy to answer. But I have to go. I read about an infertile woman in Skokie last week, and I need to donate my eggs to her.

Thanks again for coming. Praise be to Willington. Praise be to the worm.



Stephen S. Power is the author of the novel "The Dragon Round." His short fiction has appeared most recently at "Analog" and "The Arcanist." He tweets at @stephenspower, and his site is stephenspower.com.

Credit: A Diet of Worms artwork by Russ Colson.

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