***Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist. One Woman’s Spiritual Journey***

By Dr. Jan Willis

Thesis: Throughout life we make decisions that can alter our course and lead to outcomes we can’t possibly foresee. Do we float along in the current set for us early, one influenced by birthplace, family religious heritage, and racial identity? Or do we boldly step ashore and head for an unfamiliar horizon on a road that’s less certain and possibly riskier in search of what we hope will be our best self?

**Early Life**

In her autobiographical book, *Dreaming Me - One Woman’s Spiritual Journey*, Dr. Jan Willis takes the reader back to her birthplace of Docena, Alabama, a small working class suburb of Birmingham where the steel mill provided jobs and the Ku Klux Klan enforced racial expectations. Light skinned from birth, Willis became aware early in life of the significance of skin color. She knew she was different from others of her family and community. Because she was so light, some including her own father, questioned her paternity. Even at a young age Willis sensed tension about this. It was later that she learned she was the great-granddaughter of a white man whose genetic influence was more pronounced in her than her mother and sibling. This put her at conflict with herself, giving her a sense of being, as she says, “dirty and polluted.” She was tortured by the knowledge that white blood, the blood of the “oppressor” ran through her. From that time forward she was on a quest to resolve the internal conflict that ate away at her.

All around her were reminders that being black meant being less than. This was the Jim Crow South of the fifties and sixties. Schools were segregated, boundaries that kept blacks out of white neighborhoods were strictly observed and if ever those structures were challenged, the Klan came calling. Willis tells of one occasion when Klansmen burned a cross outside their home. With her mother huddled behind a locked door clutching a gun, Willis found herself wanting to walk out and reason with the men to tell them that they were all human and should learn to live in harmony. Her desire wasn’t to confront but to teach. She looks back on that as a time she began to understand that compassion, communication and words were the better instruments to overcome conflict that divided people.

Religion was ever present in Willis’ early life. She tells about her Baptist upbringing and the pressure her mother put on her to be baptized into the faith. She was 14, two years beyond the age when children were expected to make a decision for Christ and assume responsibility for their mortal souls, when her mother ordered her to attend revival services and not come home until she got right with Jesus. With reluctance she did and, to her great surprise, the experience of being baptized gave her a sense of tranquility and the bliss of a pure spiritual event. But that soon faded and wouldn’t return for many years.

From an early age, it was obvious to everyone that she was intellectually gifted and this too caused conflict within her home. Her father was an intelligent man but had been denied the opportunity to attend college by his father, who insisted he go to work in the steel mill. Recognizing his daughter’s gift, he encouraged her by prompting her with perplexing questions about the natural world, challenges she eagerly accepted and wrestled with until she found the answer. In school she performed well above her grade level, which earned her a reputation as a difficult student. Some teachers, concerned the girl might be too much of a challenge to teach, asked that she not be assigned to their class.

But she wasn’t deterred. She continued to excel in school, which sometimes brought uncomfortable attention. It was the practice of administrators at her segregated school to showcase the scholastic talents of their more gifted students before white county school officials and Willis was often chosen. During one such occasion she balked when the superintendent posed a science question because to her the whole thing felt too much like performing. Even at that young age she understood she was being put on display as an exception to the commonly held understanding that the colored kids were inferior to whites. After a few tense moments of silence, she finally acquiesced and gave the answer but not without resentment.

And more followed. About to finish high school she was featured in a network television documentary about gifted minority students in the south who had been offered scholarships to northern and Ivy League universities. Again, it was this sense of being an exception that she resented on behalf of others of her race. But at the same time, the offer to attend a school of her choice was her ticket out and she didn’t hesitate to take it.

**New Horizons**

She chose Cornell where she majored in philosophy and the universe of ideas opened to her. She also became active in the anti-war and civil rights movements. Cornell was then a hot bed of activism and it was there that she found her activist voice. In high school she had joined classmates to march in Birmingham and when Martin Luther King, Jr. led the historic march that drew worldwide attention, thanks to Bull Connor’s police dogs and fire hoses, the entire Willis family was there. For young Willis, it felt that they were finally “talking back” against racism and the seeds planted in Birmingham found fertile ground to grow at Cornell.

Along with the movements her interest in world religions was developing, Buddhism in particular. She became aware of the devastating effects of the war on the people of Vietnam. Stories on the evening news showing monastic Buddhists protesting through self-immolation served to heighten her interest so when the opportunity came along to study Buddhist philosophy for a year in India, she jumped at the opportunity.

**Crossroads**

In India she came to know Tibetan refugees and during a side trip to Nepal a chance encounter with a Buddhist monk proved transformative. It happened in a small shop. Without introduction or conversation the monk, seemingly sensing a searching deep within Willis, approached her and suggested that she should remain in the country and study at his monastery. Though intrigued by such a bold notion she returned to Cornell to complete her degree and soon found herself immersed in the civil rights movement.

When the Black Student Alliance made plans for an armed occupation of the student union she joined in and willingly assumed a leadership role. Her commitment to the cause drew the attention of a member of the Black Panther Party involved in the takeover and Willis was recruited to join the Panthers. She traveled to California to meet with one of the leaders but found herself conflicted. Two clear options lay before her - join the Panthers and take up arms and possibly be killed or imprisoned or accept the monk’s offer in Nepal and pursue the non-violent path. In *Decision Time: A "Piece" or Peace?* she writes that she chose to go to Nepal and study Buddhism under the guidance of Lama Yeshe, the monk who would become her lifelong teacher, mentor and friend. And it was through Lama Yeshe’s guiding insight that she was finally able to assuage the conflict of her mixed ancestry that had gnawed at her since her youth.

After her time in Nepal she returned to the United States and the world of academia, earning her PhD from Columbia and becoming a professor of Buddhist studies. However, there were still spiritual wrinkles to be ironed out. Tibetan Buddhism, which had become her practice, seemed a long way from the Baptist faith she was born into. Her intellect and curiosity had taken her to the far reaches of the world and introduced her to ideas and philosophies she could not have imagined as a young black girl walking the dirt streets of Docena. But sitting with her father in his home church, a place she hadn’t entered in decades, she felt a familiar stirring of the soul she’d first experienced on the day of her baptism. Was there a choice that had to be made? Reflecting on that, she realized that in moments of need and fear she’d found herself reaching out to both Jesus and the Buddha for comfort. What did this mean? Is it possible to be both Christian and Buddhist? Willis concludes yes, it is, at least for her. In the faith of her childhood and the lighted path of the Buddhas she finds the comfort of spiritual fulfillment and strength at a place where the two divergent roads don’t cross but merge.