

Robert Wootton

The Journey From Conscientious Objection To Thai Massage

Thirty-five years ago, Robert Wootton was told he was “throwing his life away” when he applied for the status of Conscientious Objector to military service during the Vietnam War. In retrospect, Robert sees that choice, and the subsequent Alternative Service he performed as a teacher in Thailand, as “the best decision I ever made.” In this interview, Robert, an Oconee County native, discusses the influences on his commitment to non-violence and his experiences in Thailand, where he spent six years learning the Thai language and culture, Buddhism, and the ancient healing art form, Nuat Boran or Thai massage, which he now practices and teaches. Robert has a PhD in Linguistics from UGA and is a licensed massage therapist living in Asheville, NC.

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How did you decide to become a Conscientious Objector?

Robert Wootton

It was a hard decision, and it took me several years to make. Then it took two more years of legal wrangling with the Selective Service to get recognized as a Conscientious Objector and to work out what I was going to do for my Alternative Service. So, the process took from 1967 until 1971, before I finally went to Thailand at age 24.

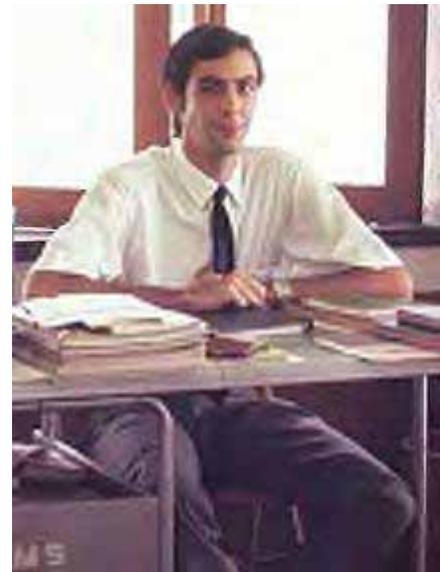
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What was your family and social background, and did they support your decision to oppose the Vietnam War in this way?

Robert Wootton

I came from a conservative family and belonged to a conservative church in Oconee County where there was no questioning of the government, and military service was thought to be a glorious thing. Both my parents had high moral standards and disapproved of violence, including violent TV shows. So they were a positive influence on me, but they did not question the war. We forget now that it took many years before people started questioning the Vietnam War. So at first, I didn't think anything about it, and when I did and was making my decision, I didn't get much support. I felt alone, and that was hard. People said I was making trouble for myself and I should just go along with the crowd.

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Robert Wootton, circa 1971.

Were there any role models to help you with your decision?

Robert Wootton

I was serious about religion and was considering going into the ministry. I purposefully chose to go to a church-related college, Florida Presbyterian, where I studied religion and philosophy. I was fortunate to meet and study with Christian ministers and scholars who were good models of looking deeply into the core meaning of religion and putting their faith into practice by helping people. In college, I also got interested in languages and international cultures, and studied for a year in Germany, where the lingering effects of World War II were still evident. I puzzled over how I could be there enjoying the people and culture of a country that only a generation earlier had been our bitter enemy. I was also influenced by the Civil Rights movement. I was impressed by the moral integrity of non-violence as preached by Martin Luther King and Gandhi, and also by several white Christian ministers I met who worked for Civil Rights. My father was on the faculty at UGA, and I saw him stand up with a number of others to call for the peaceful integration of UGA. So I learned there were non-violent ways of doing things and it was connected with religious belief.

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You had an opportunity to go to college and reflect upon your convictions, before having to make a decision about the draft, right?

Robert Wootton

Yes, and I am thankful that I had the time to mature and go to college before I had to make a decision about the draft and military service. Of course, that is why the government wants to draft 18 year olds immediately out of high school, before they have a chance to develop some moral convictions of their own. It is a tragedy to throw young men into such difficult foreign situations where terrible things happen that may effect the rest of their life. I am glad I was able to make a choice that has proved to be an important asset to my life.

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So, at some point, these social and political threads you're describing got sewn together into a statement of personal belief for you?

Robert Wootton

Yes, with all this background, when I did think seriously about being drafted and having to go to war, it felt morally repulsive to me. I imagined Jesus in this situation, and it was clear to me that He would be the peacemaker, ministering to the victims of war and injustice. He would not kill or be a party to it. I believed that the deeper message of Christianity is to love your neighbor and your enemy and this is a more powerful force than any military war machine for transforming the world. I believed that religious people are called to create a culture of peace rather than prepare for war. I also saw from looking at history and current events, that crises don't just happen; there is a history of bad faith on all sides leading up to them. Thus, we need to be living for peace all the time in the way we deal with others and the world. I believe there is a lot we can do to create international understanding and cooperation so we don't have to go to war. Killing and war are not the answers. They are failures. Violent means can never lead to lasting good solutions and peace.

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What was the process like to get approved as a Conscientious Objector?

Robert Wootton

It took two years of patiently following the legal process, following up on every appeal, documenting everything and resisting intimidation and threat of prison. The local draft board automatically rejected my claim and denied every appeal. They didn't even follow legal procedures, like ordering me to induction with no notice on the day I was supposed to report when there was still an appeal in process. I finally had to refuse induction, and when my case went to the federal level, I won easily. Fortunately, I had very good counseling about the law that guided and supported me through the process. That counseling came from religious organizations. First, from the Friends Service Committee, the Quaker church that has a long history of peace work, and second from a Presbyterian campus minister.

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Does the same option for Alternative Service to the military exist today, that was available to you?

Robert Wootton

Technically, no, since there is not a draft now. But there is talk in Congress about a new draft. So I encourage young men to start thinking about their beliefs now, because if they do start it, it will probably happen quickly and they will probably not give deferments to go to college this time. If one does have a conscientious objection to war, then it is best to document that belief as soon as possible. There are a number of websites that can be useful such as <http://www.iwillnotkill.org/>.

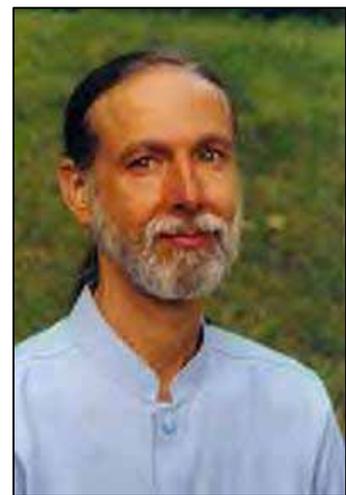
As far as doing service to our country, there are many ways of doing it, many non-profit organizations one can work with, and there are VISTA and The Peace Corps. Instead of discussing a new military draft, Congress would do well to encourage many forms of service. The volunteer work after Katrina is service and is still needed. I do respect those who chose military service. But they are not the only heroes, not the only ones who serve our country. Freedom also depends on strong internal health, which includes justice for all, education, health care, equal opportunities and constant defense of civil rights and liberties given in our Constitution.

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You went to Thailand as an English teacher for your Alternative Service and then spent many years there learning about the language, the culture, Buddhism and Thai massage. How did your interest in nonviolence fit in with going to Thailand and your practice of Thai massage?

Robert Wootton

Thailand was the perfect place for me to go to learn some things that I believe are the core of a non-violent lifestyle. The pace of life is slower there, especially 35 years ago when I was first there. The Thai people are wonderful. They are people-oriented, and they showed me the virtues of generosity, respect and living in the present moment. The core of what impressed me was embodied in the first Buddhist monk I met and studied with. I didn't know it at first, but he was an extremely busy and important person, yet he was always fully present, unhurried and inviting with me



Robert Wootton today

and everyone I saw him meet.

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Can you talk about the quality of “being present,” as it has influenced your work and your life?

Robert Wootton

I think this quality of being present is the key both to a non-violent lifestyle and to doing any kind of healing work. When you are present and attentive, you are less likely to harm anyone and more likely to be understanding and able to see creative win-win solutions. And, it is becoming more evident to me that real healing power comes as much from this quality of being present with someone as from the medical or therapeutic procedure. With presence it is not so necessary to use hard physical force to have a deep, penetrating effect - both in massage and in life. But to be present is a challenge. We often have to let go of our compulsive drive to fix things and make things happen in order to allow for the possibility of another power to work. It challenges our ideas of who we think we are and the way we think things ought to be. In other words, presence requires patience and openness, and it requires daily practice. Now, I say all this and I believe it, but I do not claim to be very good at it. I just notice that when presence happens, life works easier and I see things differently.

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Meditation informs your work as a Thai massage practitioner and teacher...

Robert Wootton:

Yes, and I learned it in Thailand. Many great meditation practices are taught in Thai Buddhist monasteries that help develop not only presence but generosity and loving-kindness. Some of these practices form the core of stress management programs taught under various labels here in America. Thai massage was carried on in these monasteries for centuries where it became integrated with these virtues and practices. In that setting, the act of giving a massage or any healing work is considered an act of generosity, done with compassion. Thus, the process itself becomes a meditation on being present and sending loving-kindness, and that has become more important to me on several levels.

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Does one need this framework of meditation in order to perform Thai massage?

Robert Wootton

Of course, Thai massage can be done as a physical exercise of stretching someone. But I think that misses the soul of the work. For me, the meditative approach is an essential ingredient to the effectiveness of the work. Of course, any bodywork modality can be done with this meditative attitude. But to the Thais' credit, they specifically link this attitude with their work. However, since these virtues and meditation practices are part of Thai culture, they are assumed and are not often taught when they teach Thai massage. I learned them from my years of study in the monasteries. Unfortunately now, with the new Thai massage teaching industry that has developed, along with the tourist industry, this meditative aspect of the work is not taught. You cannot learn to be present in the same way you can learn to do some massage movements.

by Suzann Roalman