

**Transcript:**

We the people of the United States. A House divided against itself cannot stand. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

**Jason Raia:**

Hello, and welcome to *George Washington Slept Here*, the civic education podcast from Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, where we explore American history, civics, and the idea of liberty through conversations with some of our favorite thinkers, writers, and leaders. I'm Jason Raia, chief operating officer of Freedoms Foundation and host of *George Washington Slept Here*. The format is simple, a long-form conversation with a friend of Freedoms Foundation where everyone can learn something new. Before we go any further, a little self-promotion. This podcast is how we reach a larger audience beyond our Valley Forge campus. So if you enjoy the show, please help us spread the word by telling your friends. And if you want to support the show, you can donate by going to our website [www.freedomsfoundation.org/podcast](http://www.freedomsfoundation.org/podcast). We love hearing from listeners, so feel free to email us at [qwshpodcast@gmail.com](mailto:qwshpodcast@gmail.com) with comments, questions, or suggestions. Today's interview is with civil rights leader Robert Woodson. Hello, Mr. Woodson.

**Robert Woodson:**

Hello. How are you?

**Jason Raia:**

I'm great. So happy to be here with you. Our conversation today is gonna be structured in a way to keep us on track. We wanna explore your origin story. How did you become the person sitting here before us, which is here at the Woodson Center in Washington, D.C. And your current work, what you are doing, the great groups that you're working with. And then I wanna talk with you about the state of America today, and this is a place where for our listeners, to know that we are gonna get into a little bit of the 1619 Project and 1776 Unites, and talk about that controversy. And, and then we will finally end with a quiz for which you do not need to prepare. It's just for fun. So tell us, where were you born and raised?

**Robert Woodson:**

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania during the depression, 1937 In South Philadelphia, a low-income, blue-collar neighborhood.

**Jason Raia:**

And if I remember correctly from your book, you talked about there still, horse carts that were coming through the city and delivering to families.

**Robert Woodson:**

Oh, yes. It was quite a festive time on Saturday morning, hucksters would come through with horse-drawn wagons selling peaches, watermelon, fish, and women would gather around these wagons and gossip. And it was a very festive time. Your small street, it was Garrett Street, It was almost like a family. So it was really a very intact neighborhood.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. A real community.

**Robert Woodson:**

A real community.

**Jason Raia:**

Absolutely. Absolutely.

**Robert Woodson:**

It was during the time of segregation, so we, at 3rd grade plays at the Smith School, were held at night so that parents could attend. And as you came into the auditorium, The table in the back was filled with lunch pails. There were so many parents attending a 3rd grade play.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right. Coming straight from work.

**Robert Woodson:**

Right.

**Jason Raia:**

So let's talk a little bit about that because you grew up in the era of Jim Crow when segregation was part of the law, not just an unfortunate happenstance between individuals, but enshrined in law. And then how did that affect your life, and how did it not affect your life?

**Robert Woodson:**

Well, it did not affect my life because, you know, as far as we were concerned, we were defined by the people we saw every day. The shopkeepers, the store owners, they're all black. The churches, the barbershops, the only white person we saw come in was an old Italian man selling what they call Javelle water, which was bleach and sharpening knives and whatnot. But that was pretty much our life. Also, there was no association between poverty and pathology.

**Jason Raia:**

Tell them everybody about that.

**Robert Woodson:**

Everybody was poor. Remember, I'm coming out of the depression into the war. The depression, we didn't have money, and during the war things were rationed.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

So it was not uncommon for, for me to have holes in my shoes. Instead of telling my mother that I would just find some cardboard and cut around and put them in because everybody had the

**Jason Raia:**

Everybody had holes in their shoes.

**Robert Woodson:**

Everyone had holes in their shoes. And you made do with what you had.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

So there was no stigma attached to it. And, also, there was no, no expectation that because you're poor, that you would be violent or somehow unruly.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right. So you are growing up in South Philly, and you decide to, you lost your father very early.

**Robert Woodson:**

Yeah dad dad moved us; he moved us out of South Philly into West Philly, Which is just opening up for blacks. And it was a cultural shock because there's trees in front of there are no trees in South Philadelphia. It was built on a dump. It was a landfill, literally.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Robert Woodson:**

So there are no trees. And so suddenly, you were in West Philadelphia. There are large streets with trees and porches, and it was an amazing, cultural shock.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

To see that. But my dad moved us out, and within a month or two, he became ill. And then two years later, he died, Leaving my mother with a 5th-grade education and five children to raise by herself.

**Jason Raia:**

Wow.

**Robert Woodson:**

She was a domestic, so she didn't have much time to read to us after school.

**Jason Raia:**

Right, right.

**Robert Woodson:**

So it meant that I had to rely a lot on my peers, And I was blessed to have the kind of values, I selected good friends. Some of your listeners who are older will know one of them was Gordon on Sesame Street, Matt Robinson. He was the black guy with the afro.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah.

**Robert Woodson:**

He's the first one on Sesame Street. He was the only one that made it big.

**Jason Raia:**

Oh, I love it. So but eventually, you make the decision to drop out of school and go into the Air Force.

**Robert Woodson:**

Yeah. My friends were, we call ourselves the fellas. There were about six of us, And I didn't realize at the time that they were a year older than me.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Robert Woodson:**

And so when they left school, graduated, and went on to college, I was unaffiliated. Suddenly, I was by myself.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

And so I wasn't really participating that actively in school anyway. I was there because they were there.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

So I dropped out and went into the Air Force three months into my 17th birthday, And that was quite a cultural shock too. It was amazing, though, and a great experience.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

Because the military made you responsible. I got on a plane for the first time. I went into the military believing that black people were a majority in America. And, you know, you can read all the books you want right. Demographics, but it's more informed by what

your actual experience is. And so, suddenly, I'm looking at 400 people coming in on a weekend, and only 8% were black.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

My squadron.

**Jason Raia:**

So and you write about it in one of your books this dual experience of that it was in the military, in the Air Force that you came to realize that you could learn because they entrusted you. You tested. You were doing this stuff on top-secret missile guidance programs that you would never have thought you could do.

**Robert Woodson:**

I had no confidence in my ability to learn. Even though I was smart in school. I used to get A's as a kid, but I didn't think very much of it. But the Air Force did, after about 30 days of being in training, they gave you a day of diagnostic training for testing. And so then you get a counselor assigned to you. And he says, according to your test scores, you could be an engineer or anything else you wanted to, and we're gonna send you to a specialty school, only eight people going from the class. You're gonna go to Patrick I mean, to Keesler Field in Mississippi. To be trained in airborne electronics.

**Jason Raia:**

Which I am imagining is a fairly new field.

**Robert Woodson:**

Yes. The state and so I was trained there. It was a top-secret building, which meant that you couldn't take any books home, and no windows in the buildings. And you studied three hours of theory, three hours of practice, and he would test it every Friday. If you washed out twice, you have washed out.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

It's very competitive.

**Jason Raia:**

So here, the military has said, regardless of your skin color, you tested well. We're gonna give you this opportunity, but you're gonna have to work hard for it. And then you said you had a sergeant who tried to be an obstacle to that.

**Robert Woodson:**

Oh, yeah. I had some people who were working who did everything possible to thwart my chance. Because remember, I got my GED once I decided on the Air Force. Then I went to talk to some college courses in math, at the University of Miami, but it was segregated so I couldn't go on campus. So the Air Force arranged to have classes, certified classes on the base.

**Jason Raia:**

So you could attend.

**Robert Woodson:**

So my sergeant flew me on nights that I had classes. And so I had to, I was an athlete, so I went to base command with my squadron commander, who was an athlete. I told him they would give me a hard time, so he demanded that they round me on nights that I had classes. So there were always whites on the other side of the problem, curve, who countered the evil things done by some whites who are racist.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right. So the lesson was there are good people and there are bad people regardless of their color, regardless of where they came from.

**Robert Woodson:**



Absolutely. That was constantly, the experience that you had some people who, and they did some terrible things. Whenever you are flying at night, just a pilot and yourself, you're supposed to physically check under the floorboards to see if the transmitter is there.. But it's a court martial offense, if you don't log it out, most people just come and look at the log. If it's not logged out, you assume it's there.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

And they knew that.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah.

**Robert Woodson:**

So the same man set me up, Flew me that night, and took the equipment out. So I'm up here flying with the pilot, copilot, and the all of the stations downrange are open to receive my signal.

**Jason Raia:**

Mhmm.

**Robert Woodson:**

And I said, my operation equipment looks fine. They said the floorboard, and it was empty. And I said I I laughed, actually. I said, oh, they got me this time.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah. Yeah. But you took it as a lesson.

**Robert Woodson:**

I did.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah.

**Robert Woodson:**

You know, I just said, I knew what happened. There's nothing I could do to complain. I had to take so the pilot asked, is there anybody we can blame for this? I said, nope. It's my responsibility.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right. But there's that lesson, that early, early lesson, and we're gonna get to it, of personal responsibility, how important that is for you.

**Robert Woodson:**

And not despair because somebody has done things to you that it's harmful.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

See, I never I never gave into despair. Nor did I say, do I did I give into bitterness.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. You chose how to react to what had happened.

**Robert Woodson:**

Absolutely.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Robert Woodson:**

I knew that it was clear. I said they're not going to make me like them.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. So how long were you in the Air Force?

**Robert Woodson:**

Four years.

**Jason Raia:**

Four years. And then eventually, you go on to Cheyney University and then the University of Pennsylvania where you did a master's in social work and went into social work for a while, but were pretty unsatisfied by that path. What tells it what happened there?

**Robert Woodson:**

Because I really saw how the child welfare system was really injuring families That I was in foster care. So only 3% of children who are abandoned or neglected by their parents have any psychological dysfunction when they come into foster care.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

But the more they move these children, the more the child declines, the the more the child acts out, the more subsidy comes from the federal government into the state system.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

So I said there that it's, let's say, \$10,000 in foster care if the child acts out. They go into a therapeutic home where the reimbursement rate is twice that, and if they continue to act that way, they go into a group therapeutic home. So you really are incentivizing the destruction. So the more a child moves and is disrupted, the higher value they are to the system. So I pushed back against that. And I said, we are injuring children with a helping hand.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right. The intention might have been good to help, but the consequences of the system that was established or is established because we know it still exists.

**Robert Woodson:**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his letter from prison made the point that the most difficult phenomena human phenomena can confront isn't malice. Because malice you can confront with violence is folly.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah.

**Robert Woodson:**

It's when someone is doing something that they believe is in your interest that is injuring you with a helping hand.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

Oh, why are you upset? My intentions are noble. Yeah but the consequence of this noble intention is the destruction of people. And so that's why folly is more difficult to challenge.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. So how did you become involved in the civil rights movement? I know you met Dr. King a couple of times.

**Robert Woodson:**

Mhmm.

**Jason Raia:**

Tell us about your work, how you became involved, Then and then I would maybe this is my word and it's too strong, but I'm disillusioned with the movement.

**Robert Woodson:**

Yeah. Well, I saw that a lot of these kids are in the system were black. And when I began to and also, I noticed that with the school systems that, a lot of the kids were in failing schools, and there was little and it was segregated. It was and housing was segregated. I couldn't rent any place in West Chester, I couldn't rent any place I wanted to. And so, this so I got involved as a young civil rights activist and unseated and older leader at the time.

**Jason Raia:**

Mhmm. Mhmm.

**Robert Woodson:**

And so I got involved, but I became very disenchanted over the issue of forced bussing for integration. I believe that the opposite of segregation is desegregation, not integration.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Robert Woodson:**

Because I was debating this with Julius Chambers, the head of the, black lawyer from Harvard, who had the NAACP Legal Defense Fund before the New York Bar

Association. And I said, Julius, if you have two schools, one is all black where there's a presence of excellence, and school B is integrated with his diminished excellence. Where should we send our children? He said to school B.

**Jason Raia:**

Wow. Because the the goal there was the was integration

**Robert Woodson:**

Yeah.

**Jason Raia:**

Not the excellence of education.

**Robert Woodson:**

Right. And I said that a goal should be excellence.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

And then if you pursue excellence, then integration would be a byproduct of excellence.

**Jason Raia:**

So you really are a believer in the sort of market economy even within education that if you create something that is excellent. If you create something, people will want to be there. And that will sort out some of these other really important issues, but they will get sorted out by the fact that you're striving for excellence.

**Robert Woodson:**

For more than two and a half decades, the word enterprise was in my organization's name. National Center For Neighborhood Enterprise. Center for neighborhood because we still do believe that the principles in a market economy should apply to the social

economy. Only 3% of the people in the market economy are entrepreneurs, but they generate 70% of the jobs.

**Jason Raia:**

I've read that statistic, and it doesn't surprise me, and yet it shocks me to think that 3% of entrepreneurs are creating 70% of jobs and how important that is. So let let's-

**Robert Woodson:**

But also they're C students too.

**Jason Raia:**

Yes. Yes. And you talk about that that they're, and I and I.

**Robert Woodson:**

They're not A students.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. These are the ones who often drop out of school who do not do particularly well in a setting that requires testing and, and sitting still in your seat. I've met those when I was teaching those kids who are frenetic and can't sit still, and yet you know that there are the gears are turning all the time. And, but before you came to found the Woodson Center here you worked at the NAACP, the National Urban League. You were a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. You moved into policy. What lessons did you take from that experience?

**Robert Woodson:**

Well, first of all, I didn't. I used to despise policymakers. Because they said they were just wasting their time. Then I realized that they were setting the rules of the game.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Robert Woodson:**

So winners or losers are not necessarily determined by the skill of the participant. It's the rules of the game.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

And so, then I met Dr. Peter Berger, the first conservative that I ever met in my life. And what I found refreshing about him is that he argued with me.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Robert Woodson:**

Usually, white liberals do not argue with black people. They just smile, and no matter how stupid things you say, they'll say, oh, that's great. Sounds good. But Peter Berger literally challenged me, and I really found it refreshing to have an argument with a person on issues. And then Peter Berger invited me when I was with the Urban League to meet with James Q. Wilson and some of the notables in conservatism. And I challenged the notion that if you increase the cost of crime, crime will go down.

**Jason Raia:**

Oh, interesting.

**Robert Woodson:**

And so I said to him that this didn't work in areas because the young people that I deal with on the streets don't make that calculus.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**



That you, they have to first invest in them before you can withdraw anything. So there has to be moral and spiritual investments before you enter that account, before you can withdraw from that account.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

And so that puts me at odds with them. And then Peter invited me to come to the American Enterprise Institute, to further my discussion and work.

**Jason Raia:**

So tell me, when did you found what originally was the Center For Neighborhood Enterprise, what is now the Woodson Center. What what when did that happen, and what made you feel like you needed to do this to?

**Robert Woodson:**

Well, for five years, I was at the American Enterprises and they did a good job. I was able to bring in practitioners in the books that I wrote about *eA Summons to Life*. I was able to go back to gang members and sit for a year and follow them around to find out what transformed and redeemed them. And I wrote a book of *A Summons to Life*. And then once I knew what to look for, I went around the country and identified seven of these, Josephs, as I call them.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

And I brought them to the American Enterprise Institute and had scholars, actually Peter Berger and his wife Brigitte and Dr. Robert B. Hill, sit in a room for three days. Scholars that were secure enough to be able to sit and listen to untutored people.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

And so my second book out there was *Youth Crime and Urban Policy: A View from the Inner City*, where I just stayed out of it by recording, so the scholars are able to ask probing questions that probe the depth of their process of redeeming people. So that book was reviewed by the Vanderbilt Law Review primarily because Bob Woodson stayed out of it.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

And let the young people tell their story.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

And so that's what, and to buy that was a think tank. They say we don't do anything here. We just think about it. So I hit my glass ceiling.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

And I said, I've got to find a way of going in and actually with an appreciation of policy, but I still need to support and promote actions that are taken to generate change and redemption and transformation in these communities.

**Jason Raia:**

So there's a couple there there were three things that I noticed, in reading, particularly from *Lessons From the Least of These*. You talk about personal responsibility. You talk about agency, and you talk about these grassroots leaders. And this is the quote that I loved. You said they are antibodies to the societal ills that are decimating lives. Tell us about these grassroots leaders that you discovered once you started interacting in these communities.

**Robert Woodson:**

Well, you know, and and and it affected my faith. I started the center for 10 years to pursue social justice for poor people. But then I found out through my friend Leon Watkin, a young man who was living in South Central, Los Angeles, 62nd and Pico, and his neighborhood was terrorized by 26 members of the Eastside Crips gang. So Leon became tired of it, and so he put up these wanted poster signs saying he wants to meet with the leaders. And he gave a phone number for a phone booth. They kept playing games.

So finally, one day, Leon met with them on a Friday night and in the back alley where they're big enough for dump trucks to come through. And they came up with two carloads of them, as we say, strapped down with guns and colors flying. And Leon is walking towards him by himself with jeans on and a T shirt with his hands out to his side. And so they said, I heard you're looking for me, and he said, yeah. I wanna talk to you about your life. Leon sat on a trash can for three hours and had this young man in bible study the next day. And then a week later, he had the whole 26 member gang in bible study. Well, I'm watching this.

Absolutely flabbergasted by what I'm witnessing. And so I asked Leon, and then I ended up helping Leon establish a not-for-profit, and these young men set up a business, where they were cutting lawns, cutting grass. Small business owners who they used to terrorize. They end up working for them, painting their businesses, and they become ambassadors of peace. And so it changed my whole understanding of how transformation works. And so from the experience I had with Leon.

Again, I knew what to look for, and together with what I learned before, I knew that the Woodson Center from that day forward would have to learn. So I had, for two years, town meetings all over the country where I called grassroots leaders together to ask them what works and why it doesn't work. And so I had now two years, 200 case studies of how communities became transformed as a consequence of having the Leon Watkins as and so it deepened my understanding of what a Joseph is. I learned about

transparency. I learned that all of the ten principles, words and principles were gleaned from these interactions with these healing agents.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

These community antibodies, and collectively, represent an immune system.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right. And and and two of the main principles that when they are working with, whether it is someone who is addicted to drugs or someone who has been involved with, other crime, violence that, the call to personal responsibility, that you take responsibility for your actions. You don't blame others. You don't look for an excuse. And that in changing their lives that they have to have their agency. They have to be in and they have to be the one making the decision.

**Robert Woodson:**

But a person who engages in such an approach to a person has social trust and moral authority.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

Some of the young people said, I knew Leon when he used to be a drug dealer. And if he can become redeemed and transformed, he then becomes a powerful witness to these young people.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

So a witness is more powerful than an advocate.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right. Because they've been part of it. They've experienced the awfulness of it, and have turned their own lives around.

**Robert Woodson:**

And experience will always triumph in argument.

**Jason Raia:**

So two, two quotes that I pulled that I I feel really encapsulate who you are and the work that you're doing. You said every life and every community has within it the capacity to improve itself. And then you said, help them strive to succeed above all reasonable expectations. That was a lesson I learned when I was teaching, that students would meet your expectations whatever they were. If you set low expectations for them, if you complained about how this kid just was never going to accomplish anything, they met that expectation, and they did exactly what you said they were going to do. If you set high expectations that they could achieve beyond what they had achieved so far. They often would meet those expectations too.

**Robert Woodson:**

They really do, but it's also another dimension to that. It is reciprocity. And that is you get something from those kids too. It isn't just one way.

**Jason Raia:**

Absolutely.

**Robert Woodson:**

You know, in my book, I asked one of my closest colleagues who helped me start the center, Carl Hardrick. Carl, I hear a lot of what you are talking about, what you've done for the kids, or what do they do for you?

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

And Carl told me this incredible story that in Hartford, his brother was beaten by these two guys. In the hospital, paralyzed from the neck down, and Carl went with him. He has Steve Holton with him, a little 16 year old ex-gang member, the leader who he had churned out. And his brother said, Carl, this is who hit me and beat me. I know you'll get them. And Carl was enraged, so he stormed out of the hospital. And young Steve Holton said to him, the call that what you told me doesn't mean anything. I'll get my gun and go with you.

But if what you said to me means anything, you'd call the police. Tell me which way you wanna roll. Carl said it just stopped him in his tracks and saved his life.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah.

**Robert Woodson:**

So we have got to give these young people an opportunity to know That they have value that can have the consequence of rescuing someone else.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Welfare reform. We talked a little bit about policy. There was a statistic you put in your book in a couple of your books. \$22 trillion spent in poverty programs since Johnson and the Great Society. And what's been the result?

**Robert Woodson:**

That we've got more poverty than we'd had before. Thomas Sowell, in his books, talks about in the black community, poverty dramatically reduced from 1940, by, I think, 82% down to 46%. I know the next decade had dropped down even further, almost 2-20 points, but it has leveled off since we had the war on poverty. Because 70¢ of every dollar went not to the poor, but professionals who serve the poor, they ask not which problems are solvable, but which ones are fundable this year.

**Jason Raia:**

So if there was one thing you would do differently, if there was one suggestion that you could make to Congress on what to fund, or how to best help, with welfare reform and and and fighting against poverty. What would what would you write down?

**Robert Woodson:**

Almost everything. You know, provide resources to people to make their own judgments as to where these children should go to school, who their lawyers ought to be instead of having some professionals make those decisions for you.

**Jason Raia:**

So as much as possible, put choice back in the hands.

**Robert Woodson:**

To the hands of the individual or the institutions. In our books, we talk about how all of these institutions of families and fraternal organizations in the black community, when the government was hostile to the black community, were able to rely upon all of these self-help organizations, fraternities, elderly care homes that the church ran our elderly facilities. But all of those were decimated during the sixties when the government came in with the \$22 trillion and and and just saturated the society with professional service providers. It just wreaked havoc on our society, particularly the black community.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. You talk about the, the, you know, Black Wall Street that existed, and and one of them was in Tulsa, Oklahoma. And I I find it fascinating of late that we've heard about the Tulsa race riots, which is incredibly important because even as a history teacher, it was an element of some history that I was not aware of until very recently. But what I find interesting is you talk about focusing on the success that made it a Black Wall Street.

**Robert Woodson:**

And provoked the envy.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. That but your focus is on that and then the rebuilding. And other people, professional historians and journalists and what have you in the last few years have focused on the tragedy of the race riots themselves.

**Robert Woodson:**

They are crucifixions.

**Jason Raia:**

Tell me more.

**Robert Woodson:**

They only believe in crucifixion. They don't believe in restoration. Resurrection. Now you could look at that. You could look at it and say, yeah. That was a crucifixion.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

But you can't because the story doesn't end there.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

The story only ends on Easter Sunday morning, but there's so many people who are crucifixionists.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**



And I reject that. I'm a resurrectionist. It doesn't mean but in order to be a resurrectionist, I had to believe in the crucifixion.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right. You have to you have to -

**Robert Woodson:**

-accept the fact that there was crucifixion.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. That these terrible things happen, that these race riots happen, that, you know, that that's that achievement. Those hotels and those businesses were destroyed.

**Robert Woodson:**

But that was one. The others were not.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

You had I'm in Durham, North Carolina, Black Bottom in Detroit, the Bronzeville section of Chicago. In our book, we list it. If blacks in 1919 in a Bronzeville section of Chicago could generate 731 black-owned businesses, and a \$100,000,000 in real estate assets. How can you blame redlining? There was no such thing as access to the banks back then.

**Jason Raia:**

They just created their own.

**Robert Woodson:**

They created our own through our own burial societies and our churches. Because we didn't have insurance. So along with the collections, we put into a burial fund, and that and that became our sources of capital.

**Jason Raia:**

One of the one other thing I want to talk about, before we get to your books, which I want to dive into a little bit more, but violence-free zones. I, I this has been a very successful program that, has prevented shootings in schools that but, again, it's based on these, these grassroots leaders who have come up through the violence and through the the problems within school systems and are contributing in important ways to to change that.

**Robert Woodson:**

Absolutely. If you have a school, for instance, of a 1000 kids, They are controlled by 10%, and that 10% by 10%. If you can get in and control that small number of kids who are dictating the actions of all those others, You can change a whole community, and that's what our youth advisers do. We hire young adults from the community suffering the problems, who are witnesses by their own action that redemption is possible. And, therefore, we call them credible messengers, and we take them and put them back into the school.

Just like when you have a snake bite, how do they treat snake bites? They take the venom of the snake. Right? And introduce it into the body.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

And that creates an antivenom. That's what antivenom is. It's the venom of the snake. It's the same principle. So the young adults circulate among the population in school, find out who that 10% cohort is, And they target them. And they go in, and as one of my youth advisers said, we sometimes have to wear our resumes on our chest. So they will walk up to a 16-year-old and say, where's your hall pass? And he says, I don't have a hall pass because I'm the head gangster here. He says, no, shorty. I'm the head gangster now. He said, well, I'll get my brother on you.

He said, here's my phone. Call him. You tell him Flip's here. See what your brother says. So he says, now that you know I'm not gonna dirty you, and you're not gonna dirty me. Let me tell you why I'm talking to you like this. What you've done is given this young, tough kid an excuse and a respectful way to be peaceful. He's always wanted to be peaceful.

But no one has shown him an avenue out of that predatory life that he can still earn the respect of those in his community. But only it takes someone from that community who understands that culture to be able to move around and influence people in such a way that it produces these kinds of outcomes. But because a lot of those change agents don't have college degrees. You know? And when they talk, they will sometimes break verbs, split infinitives, and dangle participles. We tend to discount what they say.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right. And that takes us to your book, *The Triumphs of Joseph*. I want you because you talk about being a Joseph or being a pharaoh. And they're and and they're both worthwhile, and they both have an important role to play. So recount the story of Joseph for us and how you see that as a model for changing communities for the better.

**Robert Woodson:**

Well, as you know, in Genesis, Joseph was born of 12 sons to his father. But he had the ability, he was his father's favorite, and his father gave him a cloak. And he was a little arrogant too.

**Jason Raia:**

Mhmm.

**Robert Woodson:**

And so he was despised by his brothers. And, he was out one day, and his brothers decided that they had to inform on them. And so they faked his death, sold him into slavery, killed a wild animal, and smeared his cloak of many colors and told the father that he was devoured by a wild animal. But so Joseph was sold by the Ishmaelites into slavery in Egypt, but he ended up in the house of Potiphar, the chief guard with the pharaoh, and he became the best prisoner. The best slave. And he also was very talented and a good steward. He's a very handsome young man and the Potiphar's wife, lusted for him, and but Joseph refused to have sex with her because he had horizontal

integrity and vertical integrity. He said it was, violate the trust that his master had in him, and also to sin against his God.

And so but she sent everybody out and came on to him and told everybody he was trying to rape her. So he went to jail for many years, but he became the best prisoner. And he interpreted the dreams of two of pharaoh's, servants, the cup bearer, and the wine taster. And they promised to help him, but they left him. Long story short, pharaoh had a dream that none of his naysayers, his soothsayers could interpret. And so the servant remembered Joseph could interpret dreams, so they brought Joseph up, cleaned him up, and said bow down to the god, pharaoh. He said, I can't bow down to anybody. But my God in heaven, so pharaoh knew he had integrity.

And he told pharaoh there'll be this time, he Farrell said, I understand you can interpret dreams. He says, no. God does that. So he'd become humble. But I am merely God's instrument. And he said there were 7 years of plenty, followed by 7 years of famine to save up 20%, first flat tax, and appoint an overseer.

And, of course, they appointed an overseer, and he appointed Joseph. But think about how radical that was for an Egyptian to reach across all of those in his court. To appoint a 31-year-old uneducated Hebrew shepherd and place him in charge, and and Egypt prospered. And then the story goes when his brothers returned and whatnot. But I use that as a metaphor because there are two types of Joseph in urban centers. There are people who are in poverty but not of poverty. They're raising children that are not dropping out of school.

They're in jail and on drugs. No one ever goes to the homes of the 30% of the people in there who are empowered to find out how they are able to thrive and survive when the 70% does not. There's no studies of that. The second type of Joseph of the kind you heard me describe, that they were fallen, they became prostitutes, and through God's grace, they became redeemed, and they are powerful witnesses. So those are your two types of Joseph in urban centers. And so but if it wasn't for the good pharaoh and a good pharaoh is a powerful person who's able to dream bad dreams in good times but also to take actions that contradict their culture and appoint some to establish a relationship.

So I look for wealthy pharaohs who have come together, funded, provided technical assistance to my Josephs, and we have rebuilt communities based upon these, these, these relationships.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. You you you talked about, you're gonna be doing a fundraiser soon for a school and

**Robert Woodson:**

In Chester, Pennsylvania.

**Jason Raia:**

In Chester, Pennsylvania. And you have invited some of -

**Robert Woodson:**

Pharaohs.

**Jason Raia:**

Your pharaohs to come and extend their support potentially to the students of this school and to this school as a way of recognizing that good things are happening there, and that's the kind of thing they ought to be supporting.

**Robert Woodson:**

Yes. Any organization, whether you're a think tank or any organization, all of us have funders

**Jason Raia:**

Mhmm.

**Robert Woodson:**

Who are pharaohs. I think we should be sharing some of those pharaohs with grassroots leaders.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

And we are doing it by demonstrating by our own action that the people who fund the Woodson Center they have multiple charities.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

Why don't you? Why don't we direct some of those charitable dollars to the people who are valued aligned with us? So I'm -

**Jason Raia:**

Right and and and you talked before we started recording about, one of the challenges of funding in the nonprofit world are those who look at politics and policy as the solution. And your experience over the last almost 50 years has told you something very different.

**Robert Woodson:**

Yeah. I mean, the one thing I will say about the left, they understand the need for a ground game, and conservatives don't do that. We will fund people to whine and complain about the problem, and they're gonna talk about it on Fox. And so we really, so we're trying to establish an alternative for people who really care about the restoration of this country by sharing some of your donors with the Joseph's in these communities so that we can change this country.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right. Those who are either already successful because I love that 30% then let's talk to the people who are keeping their kids in school, who are keeping their kids out of-

**Robert Woodson:**

Trouble.

**Jason Raia:**

Trouble, and find out what they are doing. How simple is that?

**Robert Woodson:**

We call them resilience studies.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Robert Woodson:**

There's no right now, people on the left or right of center never study the success of poor people.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. We study the problems, and this gets us back to the crucifixionists.

**Robert Woodson:**

Right.

**Jason Raia:**

You know, that we study the dropouts, and we try to figure out why they are dropping out instead of studying.

**Robert Woodson:**

What kind of crimes are they committing?

**Jason Raia:**

Right. So we tend to talk about, in, you know, America today, and particularly that's where we wanna talk about civic education, which we would define helping, young people, with civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions. This is the idea of what are the things they need to know about the Constitution, about the principles that

undergird our country, and as well as, the skills that allow them within their community to, help others, to respect others, to take personal responsibility. All of these participate in our system of government, to be productive members of society. These are all things we talk about. And the dispositions, this idea of patriotism, this idea that though, we understand that no country is perfect, no system of government is perfect, but there is this love of country that those are important principles. All of those are important to you. You and and and a couple years ago, the 1619 Project came out, from the New York Times, and purported to say, really, the country's, you know, rooted in slavery and racism starting with those first 20 slaves who came to Jamestown in 1619. And you responded with others, to say no. That's not it. That the founding in 1776 is what ought to unite us. I want you to talk about why that was important for you to respond to.

**Robert Woodson:**

Because none of us as individuals or as a nation should be defined by the worst of what we were. You know? Slavery is America's birth defect. None of us should be defined by a birth defect, but America is also a country of second chances, a country of redemption. And so it's important to be accurate in our description, not just -. And so we assembled since the messengers were Black, Hannah Nikole Jones (Nikole Hannah-Jones), we thought the messengers to offer a counter-proposal should be Black. But we didn't want to engage in tribal debate with them.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

We wanted to offer an inspirational and an aspirational alternative view. Not a single Black was ever tried for treason in this country. We fought in every war, but not a single Black was tried for treason because we understood that In the second World War, we used to. I remember that we used to have a double victory, victory against fascism abroad and racism in this country. And we all fought. We had our Black separate units, but we all fought. And so what we were, and so 1776, we developed a curriculum, that's now 30, 30 lessons. To date, it's been downloaded 130,000 times

**Jason Raia:**

Mhmm.



**Robert Woodson:**

In 50 states. There is just a thirst for accurate American history when it comes to race and slavery and Jim Crow.

**Jason Raia:**

And you would be the first to say that doesn't mean whitewashing it. That doesn't mean pretending it didn't happen. And but it does mean having this perspective that says, yes. These things happen, and we need to understand them. But also there were great accomplishment and achievement and that what the founders gave us was an aspiration to all men be created equal even though at that moment when Thomas Jefferson wrote it, It was certainly not equality before the law.

**Robert Woodson:**

Read what Frederick Douglass said in his second July 4th Address. And he talked about the need to support the founding values of this nation.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Robert Woodson:**

It is more important for Blacks to do that.

**Jason Raia:**

And Dr. King says the same thing.

**Robert Woodson:**

Dr. King said the same thing. And so what we're trying to do is just elevate that message, and take it to a whole different level.

**Jason Raia:**

So I want to sort of end this, with what may be a difficult question, but, how do you interact with someone who is part of that 1619 Project? I don't know if you've had the

opportunity, but because we're all here together as Americans, and we deeply disagree. And you talk in your book about radical grace. And that's really where I wanna end is because that to me, that idea of grace, and extending that to someone who maybe doesn't deserve it at all because that's what grace is. It's always extended to those who are undeserving of it. And yet it's so important, not only religiously, but I would argue in our politics today more than ever.

**Robert Woodson:**

Dr. King described it as agape love. He says, what we should seek is not the destruction of our enemy, but to change his heart. That you should do this and still protect yourself. We give an example in our book, radical grace with Robert Smalls. Robert Smalls was born a slave in Sumter, South Carolina. He found himself working on a southern supply ship. And one Friday night, he and six other crew members, when the, captain went abroad, he stole the boat, picked up the families of him, his family, and the six, put on the master's hat and maneuvered past five garrisons and then turned the ship over to the Union Navy.

And he was celebrated throughout the North. Lincoln, as a result of that, allowed Blacks to fight in the Civil War, But also he became the first commissioned officer. And, eventually, when the war was over, he became a wealthy businessman, served in Congress for 20 years, but also purchased a plantation on which he was a slave and took in the destitute attitude of the family of the slave's wife and children. Even allowing her to sleep in her bed because she was delusional didn't realize slavery had ended.

That's an act of radical grace. And there are other examples. There were 20 blacks who were born slaves, who died millionaires. Several of them purchased a plantation on which they were slaves. Only in America could you have stories of not only restoration, but flourishing in the face of slavery and Jim Crow. Only in America would you have this.

**Jason Raia:**

I wanna throw one more quote at you, and I promise, this will be the last one. You say America is in need of a revival.

**Robert Woodson:**

Absolutely. That-

**Jason Raia:**

I mean, we think about the great revivals of the 19th Century and those, you know, the tents and, you know, people coming from all over. You know, what do you mean?

**Robert Woodson:**

I mean, the biggest crisis facing America is not racial. We must deracialize race. It is the moral and spiritual freefall that is consuming our children according to the Harvard study, at the highest rate of death cause of death in the Black community is homicide for children. In Appalachia, it's prescription drugs. And in Silicon Valley, it's suicide among teenagers. It's six times, and national average.

**Jason Raia:**

Mhmm.

**Robert Woodson:**

And so in order for us to fix that, we're gonna have to put aside this racial antagonism and come together to figure out why there is such a hold in the hearts of our children to the point where they are denigrating their life and they are for taking it. If you devalue your life, then you'll either take your someone else's or you'll take your own. It's a different size of the same coin.

**Jason Raia:**

This has long been, my biggest concern with gun violence is, why is it? There are so many people who are willing to turn to violence as the answer to whatever the problem is. And then until we start looking at that problem, we're not gonna solve this. And I I think that you're referring to the you know, that this is an epidemic at this point with young people.

**Robert Woodson:**

But my position is if people born living in toxic drug infested crime ridden neighborhoods can find redemption and restoration and peace, they have something to teach everybody.

**Jason Raia:**

Amen.

**Robert Woodson:**

In society.

**Jason Raia:**

We always end with a quiz. So we'll just run through these and whatever answer pops into your head is always the right one. So, excluding Washington and Lincoln, who's your favorite president?

**Robert Woodson:**

Who's my favorite president? Probably Teddy Roosevelt.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay. What's one thing you would want every American to learn more about?

**Robert Woodson:**

Their faith in God.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay. If you had not chosen, your career is in, working in poverty and civil rights. What do you think you would have become?

**Robert Woodson:**

Probably an astronaut.

**Jason Raia:**

I love it. What pet peeve noises you the most?

**Robert Woodson:**

That people can't see the importance of grace, where they're locked into anger and despair. They don't see the glory of grace.

**Jason Raia:**

What one thing about you would most people be surprised to learn?

**Robert Woodson:**

That I that I like, gospel, bluegrass music.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Robert Woodson:**

And opera.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah. Oh, I love it.

**Robert Woodson:**

Opera and country bluegrass. I listen to bluegrass, country, opera.

**Jason Raia:**

That's great. That's a combination. What one lesson from your life would you most like to share with young people?

**Robert Woodson:**

That no matter how tough life is, that you should embrace it. Be faithful to your future.

**Jason Raia:**

If you can meet just one historical person, who might it be?

**Robert Woodson:**

Probably Frederick Douglass.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay. And final question, we ask this of everybody, bourbon or scotch?

**Robert Woodson:**

Wine.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay. Fair enough. Fair enough.

**Robert Woodson:**

Too old to drink that other stuff.

**Jason Raia:**

So thanks to our guest, Robert Woodson. Can't wait to have you back. Thank you for doing this with us.

**Robert Woodson:**

Well, thank you for taking the time.

**Jason Raia:**

Absolutely. I also wanna thank our producers, Lara Kennedy and Sarah Rasmussen, and a special shout out to friends of the pod, Bill Franz, and Bob Gleason. Please subscribe, follow, rate, and review *George Washington Slept Here* wherever you listen to podcasts and tell your friends. And until then next time. Thank you!