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Speaker key:

SM: Sarah McConnell, producer and host

AS: Audio Sample

LF: Lilia Fuquen

JT: Jinny Turman

SC: Susan Coombes

VC: Victor Tan Chen

Transcript:

00:00:00

[music]

SM From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. In the 1970s, a Woodstock song became the rallying cry for a back to the land movement.

[music]

In the face of a crashing economy, a small stampede of young people fled to West Virginia to live off their own labor.

JT Yeah. Well most of them I would say came from the mid-Atlantic and then some of the rust belt states. There were some people who ended up hearing about it from out in California as well.

[music]

SM In some ways, that back to the land movement never ended. And we could see it again as the pandemic reshapes our society.

JT And honestly I've been asked this before and I'm not sure that it's totally ever gone away.

SM But first, there's definitely a back to the garden thing happening now. People all over are planting vegetables and building raised beds, in part for the love of it but also anticipating food shortages. Lilia Fuquen is director of the Food and Community Program at Virginia Humanities. She's part of an effort to help people create immunity gardens in their window sills and backyards.

[music]

LF When we think about the timing of this, of coming up with immunity gardens in the throws of COVID-19 and how they're probably not going to get off the ground or get in the ground until a couple of months from now, what we're experiencing in this moment of May of 2020 in the middle of our stay at home order, what we are experiencing right now is a symptom of a larger illness. And what you do then is you take your vitamin C, you drink your tea, you try to boost your immune system and, as a society, that's what we need to be doing. We need to metaphorically be taking our vitamin C and drinking our tea. And one of those things is to be building and growing and tending and learning how to develop a relationship with an immunity garden because this is a long game. We're looking forward to at least next year and whatever unfolds after that. This is never a bad idea, to have an immunity garden is never a bad idea, so now's the time to start. Immunity gardens is a new name for an old thing. We haven't invented anything. It's just a reminder of something that much of our society has lost. We've lost touch with the fact that we can support our immunity through our relationships with plants. The hope is that immunity gardens will take root and they will become a system of reliance, of interdependence, that becomes so woven into the fabric of our community that people won't remember, 30 years from now, it's going to be hard to remember a time before immunity gardens were a part of their community. And with immunity gardens, we're encouraging people to focus their plant choices on foods and herbs that boost immunity. And this could be interpreted as the immune system of a particular individual or a whole system that boosts the immunity of an entire community. The COVID-19 pandemic is profoundly disrupting the food chain supply on a global scale in a way that we're not sure how that's gonna play out, but we already know that there's a shortage on seeds. And then there's the issue of actually getting food out into the market because people are not working in the fields the way they had been so there are harvests that are rotting in fields. So in the meantime, what people can do is practice gardening in any way that they can whether it's a window sill garden in their apartment or a backyard or a community garden. There are so many different ways of approaching it but learning how to tend the plants and use them, whether they're herbs for medicine or they are vegetables for food, this is the time to start working on developing that muscle memory and that will make it much easier to scale up a year from now. Things are going to be much different and probably very difficult in terms of food and medicine. Now is the time

to remember that our first medicine is not what we go to the pharmacy to pick up in plastic bottle that was shipped from overseas from a manufacturing plant—that really the first medicine could potentially be in our backyard or in a community garden or on our window sill. And that is what immunity gardens are working to do. Immunity gardens is working to put together sort of a template so that folks have a starting point and they can begin to, maybe with just three or four, maybe five herbs, learn how to tend these particular plants with these particular properties that are very easy and safe for them to tend and process and use as tea or a sav. Ways that they can help tend to themselves and their families. This project was born out of a conversation with a farm in Afton, at Farfields farm, which is a small regenerative agriculture project. And one of the very first questions that popped up at the beginning of this COVID-19 crisis was not only how can small farms help support those who are most vulnerable right now, those who are either unhomed or have lost their jobs or... you know, those who are really facing the most immediate crisis. So we were looking at food but then also the apothecary. There's an apothecary on that farm. And we were talking about how to scale up production but also how to get that out into the community. And this is a challenge. You know, working in community engagement during a stay at home order is a real challenge. And one of the things that popped up immediately was one very easy thing, is we can just encourage people to plant immunity gardens. People are seeing definitely that they need to be planting gardens and there's been this rush on seeds, so seeds, vegetable seeds are becoming scarce, and just like there was with toilet paper, there's this sort of hoarding mentality that's happening. So how to prepare for that, because, a year from now, if there aren't seeds available, that's when a whole different crisis hits. My dad is gardening a lot and he sent me a picture of his little tomato plants and these tiny little, they're not tiny actually, they're sort of adolescent. Almost adolescent. They're these small tender plants that were beginning to get whipped about in the wind and so what he did is he went into the yard and found a bunch of broken sticks and created a support system using old spent tree branches. And he sent me this picture and said something to the effect of, how beautiful it was to see these young plants leaning against these old spent branches. And that is a metaphor, well, I mean, it's just how gardening is, right? A gardener sees a need, finds a solution around them, and then uses the soil as a support system to make that connection between the strength and the weakness. And that is what a community is. A community is a tapestry, it's a weaving of strengths and weaknesses. And together, we lean in and support each other or find support and that is where right now it's become abundantly clear to everybody that the onus is on those who have the resources to grow food because we are in a moment where we do not know where our food is actually going to come from a year from now. Our local farms are the ones to be supporting. Our backyard gardens are where we should be spending our extra time. There are so many people who have lost their jobs. And many jobs are not going to be coming back any time soon. So there's this vast unemployment and really deep fear and need for food, need for security. Gardening, farming, and becoming members of a support network for themselves and their community is the best way to

fold in the resources and have everybody come together to feed ourselves from a hyper local source.

SM Lilia Fuquen is director of Food and Community at Virginia Humanities. Coming up next, back to the land in Appalachia.

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The 1960s and 70s brought the counterculture and civil rights movements and also ushered in a back to the land movement. Fed up with the Vietnam War and a sputtering economy, young Americans flocked to the countryside in the hopes of a simpler life, a longing expressed at the time with the song, Going Up the Country by Canned Heat, which played at Woodstock in 1969.

[music]

Jinny Turman is a history professor at the University of Virginia's College at Wise. She says back to the land movements have cropped up periodically throughout American history, and wonders that the pandemic might be sparking another one. Jinny, you've studied the back to the land movement of the 1970s where young people poured into West Virginia. What was drawing them there back then?

JT There were actually a combination of factors. The earliest people to set up either some kind of commune or go and purchase farms were folks who had already been working in West Virginia as part of the war on poverty. And so while we associate the back to the land movement with the 1970s, there were a few people who weren't necessarily from the state but they fell in love with the state while they were there, wanted to continue to serve and work alongside poor Appalachian residents, and decided to buy farms. And as it happened, farmland was going for a very low price in West Virginia because basically since the 1940s, the state had been losing population. So there were finding farms for the price of a truck.

SM Are you kidding? The price of a truck?

JT Yeah, yeah. Somebody in Wexel country I interviewed mentioned that, that they were able to get a piece of a land for a truck basically.

SM I read that there was a little land rush after an article in particular appeared in Mother Earth news.

JT Yeah. So Mother Earth news formed in 1970, and it was one of the probably early signals that this trend to go buy farms and start living self-sufficiently was really picking up steam. Mother Earth news caught wind of this little nucleus of people forming of an

alternative community in Lincoln County and they picked it up on a story on how to find land, and published it in Mother Earth news, published it in the School of Living's magazine called The Green Revolution; and then Mother Earth news picked it up for a radio ad. In the words of another historian who was part of the movement, Paul Saulstrom, it created a small stampede to the country. So they ended up with between 3 and 400 people moving to Lincoln County after that ad. So...

SM What was it about Lincoln County that was so attractive in particular in West Virginia?

JT Um, I think part of it what was the attraction to Lincoln Country was the cheap land, that was part of it. But it also, it wasn't really in the coal mining areas so it was still fairly clean and untouched by the surface mining that was occurring in some of its neighboring counties. A lot of the back to the landers would avoid the heaviest coal mining counties and they would go to the agricultural countries where there were already farmers, you know, still farming tobacco and things like that. So still a farming community largely.

SM And these people came from as far away as California?

JT Yeah, yeah, well most of them I would say came from the mid-Atlantic and then some of the rust belt states. There were people who ended up hearing about it from out in California as well, in the pacific northwest.

SM Were they so-called hippies, or something a little different back in the 70s?

JT Um, they received the label hippies from West Virginians who saw the long hair and the granny dresses and the beads, and some of the behavior...I mean some of them did smoke pot, started communes, things like that, so there were some who probably who would've accepted that label, but there were others who were more politically active, had been affiliated with the new left or anti-poverty, civil rights campaigns... Some of them expressed a little bit of resentment about that label too because they felt like what they were doing was a lot more serious than just going and partying and getting high.

SM So were there a lot of conflicts with the native West Virginians?

JT There could be, and initially, there were. And it really depended on where and what the circumstances were in the context. Because in places like Hinton, West Virginia, there were reports that between 68, 69, 70 that some communes getting burned out, shot at, things like that. There were other conflicts that emerged later on but it was typically related to land use and environmental care, conflicts over surface mining, conflicts over developments, things like that, that the media tended to pick up as an outside-insider conflict, but it was a lot more complicated than that.

SM Do you think most of those homesteaders who arrived in the 70s stayed or do you think they moved on?

JT Some of them did stay. I can't say a majority necessarily. For West Virginia, and places like Lincoln County, it didn't really have the infrastructure or the public funds to be able to provide a good quality of life. I mean, this is something that West Virginia is still struggling with. They didn't have money for basic roads. So if you wanted to go in the 70s and you were serious about farming, they quickly discovered that getting their produce out to urban markets could be really difficult, especially in the spring, when it rains all the time. So, there was that and then on, after they started having children, they found the public school systems lacking. And of course this was something that native Appalachians, native West Virginians had been fighting through the war on poverty was to try to get their public school systems more adequately funded and upgraded to just basic modern standards. And so a lot of the back to the landers grew frustrated in certain communities, certain counties, and would end up learning and going to places like Athens, Ohio where there was a bit more, there were more public resources to be able to live the kind of lifestyle and make a living from the land like they wanted to do, so.

SM Part of what was happening in the 70s was an economic downturn. You've written that, actually, there's back to the land movements tend to follow economic downturns. So has it happened since then?

JT Um, I would say yes. And it certainly bore out during the Great Depression on a large scale and then the 1970s with the stagflation and the energy shortages and all of that, and then we did see a bit of a back to the land resurgence in the 1990s as well. And you know, honestly, I've been asked this before and I'm not sure that it's totally ever gone away. Because people are finding it so hard to make their dollars stretch that there's always this idea...I've seen 20-somethings now, even, even before COVID, who were interested in trying to farm and trying to make a living, trying to make a living from the land basically. So I'm not sure it's totally gone away and that may say something about our general economic stability in our country among people who want to aspire to the middle class and just have difficulty doing it.

SM Do you think, in some ways, we're seeing the beginning of another one of these back to the land movements now because of coronavirus?

JT I think it's entirely possible, particularly with the current economic situation. It's possible that this could be a fleeting thing because a lot of people are just at home feeling a sense of insecurity and boredom and they want to get out...it's spring. "Let's try to plant some things." If you try to order seeds, you'll find out that a lot of seed catalogues are currently out stock. But at the same time, as this downturn, if it does tend to kind of sock in and last a while, yes, it's entirely possible that people are going to be relying on their survival instincts and wanting to produce more of their own food, learning to can,

learn to make bread, learn to store food, and it could spark a renewed interest in back to the land as a complete lifestyle, not just a temporary fix.

SM What made you want to look into this? Was there a personal connection for you with the back to the land movement?

JT There was. And there was always something. I don't know why and even as a kid, I was always fascinated with the 1960s. I would sit through my history classes and wait for them to talk about the 1960s which they never did because it was the 80s and they didn't see that as history. But as I got a little bit older and developed taste in music, I gravitated to the Grateful Dead, and I love counterculture just in general. And, as it turns out, my family is from Floyd and Patrick County, Virginia, and I remember going to visit my grandparents in Floyd, who lived right in downtown Floyd. And I noticed some cultural changes taking place in Floyd by the 1990s. And Floyd, in the 1970s and 80s, was your typical kind of dying agricultural community, if you looked at the downtown, most of the storefronts were empty. People were leaving. My dad left, my mom left [inaudible]. There just weren't many opportunities for people to try to make a living there. And by the 1990s, in part as a result of the back to the land population that had moved there, they started tapping into larger regional economic revitalization initiatives. So they got funds to start craft programs, they were tapping into the tourist market coming through the Blue Ridge Parkway, and so you see from native groups, the advent of the Friday night jamboree which is a cultural institution along the cricked road now. As well as a number of kind of countercultural stores, tie-dye shops, coffee shops, odd fellows cantina which is no longer there, but that was a restaurant started by some migrants. And then Floyd fest which was the big venue every July. I think that started back into 2001. And so those changes not only attracted my attention but also the media's. And really helped to put Floyd on the map as a new tourist destinations, kind of the Asheville of the... a small version of Asheville, North Carolina. The San Francisco of the south.

SM So that's a good thing, right? Everybody wins when outsiders come in, spend money, and build culture?

JT I would say it has its benefits. But there have been some drawbacks as well. And even as I ask some back to the landers to reflect on that legacy, some of them have said, well, we're proud of what we've done but it feels a bit gentrified as well. And, if you talked to people in Asheville, I'm sure they would say the same thing. That what ends up happening is once a town develops a certain cache, your rents go up, the costs of your taxes go up, and sometimes it can actually push people out. Maybe folks who were there to begin with can no longer afford to live in the houses that they were raised in or something like that. So there is kind of an ambivalent legacy. Anytime you have that kind of rapid development.

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SM And you saw that really with your own grandparents and their ancestors. They, actually, were natives to that area, and did to some extent live genuinely on that land, right?

JT They did, yes. My one grandparent still living, she's 97, and she still talks about life before electricity. So.

SM Is she the one who wrote a poem about the chestnut tree because she was recalling the times when she and her family would eat or sell chestnuts?

JT No, that was actually my maternal grandmother.

SM Oh, yeah, tell me about her.

JT Um, yeah! Eunice Yates Meg Alexander. She was a schoolteacher in [inaudible]. And was quite an artist and a poet. She painted lots of beautiful folk style portraits of life in Patrick Country, baptisms, farm life, things like that, and so she was very gifted with both words and images. She also made a bit of a name for herself as a ballad singer, and she liked to learn ballads from her students. And she also learned a few ballads from her family growing up and so you'll find her on Virginia Traditions, Virginia Humanities' folk label and I have to laugh because you can find her online, and I think my grandmother would not be okay with being online.

SM I love that she actually recorded some of these ballads. Let's play one now as we finish the interview.

JT Yeah. Let's play Wild Hog in the Woods.

[ballad singing]

SM Jinny Turman is a professor of history at the University of Virginia's College at Wise. And here's another distinctive voice who captured the spirit of the land in the era, John Prime.

[music]

Welcome back to With Good Reason with Virginia Humanities. I'm Sarah McConnell. Think back to a typical fun night out. You might hit up a new restaurant, catch a concert, then Uber home. Now think about all those workers—the babysitter, the cooks, the wait staff, the musicians, the Uber driver. What's happening to them now? Susan Coombs is a professor of management and entrepreneurship at Virginia Commonwealth University. She studies what used to be the growing gig economy and how that workforce is managing now. Susan, coronavirus is crushing the work world. Millions of newly laid off

workers have filed for unemployment. What about gig workers? What do you think coronavirus is doing to most of them?

- SC It's devastating the vast majority of the gig workforce. There can be ranging from musicians to babysitters to those in skilled trades like plumbers and electricians, those who do consulting work, face to face consulting type of work. They're the ones who are going off to the wayside because they can't be in large or even small groups anymore and they can't observe social distancing. So I think most of them are really scrambling right now.
- SM You've written about what happened to part time workers, gig workers, in the wake of the Great Recession from 2008. Only just 12 years ago. In some ways, there was a new kind of gig worker industry that was born after the Great Recession. They were both hurt and changed during that period. Can you talk about that a little?
- SC Well, you know, in the recession, people lose their jobs, obviously, and then they start scrambling for part time jobs to just sort of supplement their income and to get by. At that same time is where we started to see changes or introduction of a lot of small businesses that had a lot of online platforms that facilitated gig work like Uber or Lyft. All of a sudden, people are using this technology to get quick rides here and there, and so that facilitated people participating in that particular niche of gig work. So it is very dependant on what's going on in the economy, what's going on with the demands of the market as well as, you know, technological innovation.
- SM What do you think is happening now that was comparable to the Great Recession? Here we are again with a huge downturn in the economy. What lessons might we have learned from the experience of gig workers back then?
- SC Well I think you're going to see a similar decline and a lot of gig work that's been around for a long time. You know, we've talked about it for a long time like musicians or those with skilled trade or consulting or babysitting. That portion of the gig network is increasing and, because it's increasing, some of those gig workers, those other gig workers, who are now out of work, are jumping into that area too because of the opportunities for temporary employment there.
- SM Do you think that this downturn in the economy especially if it's very long lasting will permanently or for the long-haul change how companies see even full-time workers?
- SC I think it depends on the company. You know, some companies are doing what they're forced to be doing right now because of the particular circumstances. But when things start to return to the norm, when we start feeling a little bit more back at the equilibrium, a lot of those companies might just revert to the regular practices. On the other hand, I think a lot of other companies will be observing that, even though there's been demand

for working from home, and a lot of companies have responded with, “well that would make us less effective and less efficient,” I think they’re going to recognize that, yeah, you’re actually going to see a high level of productivity, so maybe we can actually start modifying the models that we use. Maybe more people working from home a couple of times a week versus five times a week. I think it’s very dependent on the particular company culture and how willing they are to innovate and make those modifications once we actually get back to normal whatever normal is.

SM You know how it was said at one point in the 1900s, the good jobs were the ones at the big companies that gave great retirement benefits. More recently, the good jobs have been ones that give health benefits and contribute to your 401(k), that kind of thing. Do you think those good jobs will decline as companies see they can just hire a lot of people in their pajamas at home?

SC I think it depends on who they’re trying to employ. A lot of these companies are still going to need particular individuals for particular jobs and particular outcomes. Therefore, I still think those individuals, even though they’re not going into the office, I think they will still be able to make particular demands for the skill sets that they have. And companies will be willing to pay a certain amount but those companies also might not have to pay for actual physical space for that person to be there which would actually save the company money and then they might be able to pass those benefits onto the person making demands.

SM What about the rights and the ability of gig workers to agitate for better conditions, better pay? What do you see happening right now?

SC Right now, agitated is the exact current word. The ones who are on the front lines in various ways are becoming more and more agitated, not just because of things that they’ve been ticked off about in the past, like low pay or lack of benefits. Because we’re in this particular situation, I think that agitation can have more impact for those gig workers to get employers to listen to them and to respond. I don’t know if they’re necessarily responding accordingly, though, I was reading about what’s happening with Instacart, what’s happening in the past few weeks. They went on strike, they’re first on the lines when it comes to delivering food. They didn’t have access to hand sanitizer, they didn’t have access to personal protective equipment, and they were receiving the same amount of pay. Well Instacart has responded with, “okay, we’ll get you hand sanitizer and we’ll get your masks to wear and we’ll increase your pay a little bit,” but it’s still, for those workers, they’re still not feeling like that’s necessarily enough. They have an increased ability to have their demands heard, and to have a voice. It still rests squarely on the shoulders of the company to respond accordingly. And I think a lot of these workers are not responding to the degree they should be.

- SM Do you think we can afford these trillions that we're pumping out in relief money? I mean, do we have it or are we just printing dollars?
- SC I think we have it. If you give people money, they will spend money. People are not going to hoard this money and hide it away. It will act as a stimulus which will then...it's a trickle down effect. The more you get it out there into the hands of people that need it the most, the most it's going to benefit the economy. And if you put intelligent people on the job to figure out where this money is going to come from, then we can find it and we can get it into the hands of people who need it.
- SM Early on, I saw news pieces that suggested maybe this would be a V-shape to this extreme downturn in the economy, that we would plunge farther than the Great Recession but then shoot back up fairly quickly later when we had gotten a handle on what to do about coronavirus. More recently, I've heard that's not as likely. What do you and your colleagues think about that scenario, whether it's V or worse?
- SC I think it's going to be more like a set of W's, one after the other after the other, because there's only so much we can do to bounce back. And it's really not going to be bouncing, it's going to kind of be this slow lollapalooza back into opening things up, seeing what works, and then we also have to worry, you know, there have been reports that there are second waves where they thought, okay, things are getting better now, but all of a sudden they're seeing more spikes. We don't know how hard we're going to get hit by this virus and we don't know how many phases we're going to have to go through.
- SM What did you think of the sort of feeding frenzy that happened with the \$350 million stimulus for small businesses?
- SC There were a lot of people exploiting the situation or a lot of, let's just say, larger businesses, exploiting the situation, rather than being socially responsible and having that money go into the hands of those who need it most, whether it's private citizens or small businesses. So a lot of the groups or individuals that would help regulate that distribution have been removed from those positions. It's the small businesses that are going under, the small businesses that don't want to let the very few workers that they have lose their jobs.
- SM You actually have a biology background before you went into this field. I'm curious how that informs what you're thinking about this incredible moment we're in right now with coronavirus.
- SC Right. Yeah, I have an undergrad degree in biology and then I worked in a medical lab for quite a few years and a virology degree of a medical lab. And then I was also a veterinary technician for the last few years, so it's just, watching it from a scientific standpoint, it just astounds me how some people don't want to observe very common

sense protocols. Like, stop gathering in large groups to protest the need to stay in your house to keep each other safe. You know, I find it fascinating and touching how many people not just care about keeping themselves healthy but are doing this to keep others healthy. And then it's also at the same time very disappointing to see those who are not following just some very basic things that they need to do to keep each other safe.

SM Susan Coombs, thank you for sharing your insights with me today on With Good Reason.

SC Oh, thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

[music].

00:39:12

SM Susan Coombs is a professor in the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Business. My next guest is Victor Tan Chen. He had a piece in the Atlantic last month about the unprecedented number of job losses during this pandemic. Victor is a professor of sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University, and the author of *Cut Loose: Jobless and Hopeless in an Unfair Economy*. Here's an interview we did with him in 2015 after the Great Recession.

VC You look at the official unemployment rates but there are so many people left out of that picture, right, there's people that are long-term unemployed, a quarter of that group has been out of work for six months or more. So many people have just dropped out of the labor market, they're not looking for work even though they want a job. And the quality of the jobs that we see out there, it has declined. The reason why I looked at unemployed auto workers is that they're a symbol for these middle class jobs, these good paying jobs that we had after World War II. And those have disappeared in so many communities in America. And now we're seeing a hollowing out of the middle of economy, the workforce, there, these good jobs that have disappeared.

SM In your book, *Cut Loose: Jobless and Hopeless in an Unfair Economy*, you refer to the auto workers that you've interviewed as my auto workers. Would you mind reading the opening paragraph?

VC Sure. Jon Hope lost his job in 2009. For 14 years, he had worked at a car plant in Detroit, heaving truck bumpers onto the practice balance of his lean muscled arms. And machine polishing away the wounds and the rough steel, readying them immersion in a chemical bath that would gild each piece with a thin layer of luminous chrome. It was a work of magic conjured up in fowl, fume drenched cavern and industrial alchemy that transform masses of cheap base metals into things of beauty and value.

- SM When he was laid off, he, at first, I think was fairly optimistic, you write. After a while, he didn't really have much income. He was living off his unemployment check, which he didn't want to have to do, and you quote him saying, "when you're not working, it's like being in jail, only you have to get your own food."
- VC Yeah, it's a joke that he, you know, he was a jovial person. He was trying to deal with this with a can-do American spirit and, you know, it was only later in our conversation that this kind of raw-ness within him of this sense of betrayal from his company, a sense of directionlessness, really came out in conversation and he broke down later in our conversation when we were talking about what he was going through. Work was a huge part of his identity and suddenly, in this economy, people do not have loyalty to their workers anymore. This is the nature of the game and so people that are being cut loose.
- SM I think that's wrong. I think that we should see each other in the workplace as an extended family and that we should work really hard with and with each other and for the cause, and then protect each other.
- VC Yeah. I think, Sarah, that we have more of a go-it-alone attitude. You know, during that period of time after World War II, we had this strong collective sensibility. And nowadays it's more of a sense that I get education, I get the skills I need, I do well, and there's not a sense that we're all in this together. And I think that is a cultural change that we need to address as well.
- SM Well look at you. You were successful in your educational career, you have a couple of Harvard degrees. When you look at a John Hope and when you're interviewing him, what have you reflected on about the difference between your circumstances and his?
- VS Yeah. In my family, my father was unemployed for decades. And so he was an engineer. He was a skilled, educated worker, but he lost his job in a downturn. And you know, he is an immigrant with poor English skills and one of my memories is of me and my brother helping him with his resumes, and he was never able to find another good paying job. He worked for a period of time as a janitor at an elementary school and driving a [inaudible] cab to and from the airport.
- SM Can you imagine that? An engineer? Somebody who trained to be an engineer that must do that?
- VC Yeah, well he worked in helping to build nuclear powerplants and that industry died out. And that's the situation for lots of industries in this country. We don't make things as much anymore.
- SM He immigrated here from where?

VC From Taiwan. And he came from a poor rural background as well. He didn't have a father because his father died in a fire and he had a tough situation. He tried to come to America and make something of himself. And that American dream didn't work out the way he had planned.

SM In the course of doing all the research for your book on the jobless situation in America, what can you share with us that we may not understand is at the root of what we're experiencing right now in terms of misery and economic buying power?

VC Yeah, we don't really look at how judgmental a culture is today. We have made a lot of progress in terms of making sure things like gender and race and sexual orientation don't matter as much in people's success. But we are very judgemental when it comes to not doing well in the work world, in the school world and so on. And so, for my workers, for the ones that fell down this ladder, they feel like losers in a society that values willing at all costs.

SM Is this all NAFTA related? Is this just globalization or is there some other force at play also?

VC It's partly globalization but it's also these political decisions made to hair back protections for ordinary workers, making it harder to organize, making sure that people at the very top of our society pay less in taxes as a portion of their income. And I think these kinds of political decisions have hurt the middle class in this country.

SM So what has happened in recent decades? What sort of safety net has been rolled back without us fully noticing?

VC Yes, well, we have things like job retraining that are not funded as well as they could be in spite of all the rhetoric about helping individuals get education. We have things like unemployment insurance which was extended for a brief period of time during the Great Recession but then dwindled to a worse situation than what we had even before the Great Recession.

SM Really?

VC Yes, in states like Michigan it used to be 26 weeks, half a year that you would get unemployment benefits. It's been cut to 20 weeks. So it's even less support in terms of government support. But, you know, that said, some states have chosen to really push stronger protections for their workers, raising things like the minimum wage and so I think these political choices do make a difference and we should not think that these things are inevitable.

SM How bad is the situation not just for blue collar workers in the steel and auto and other industries, but also for white collar workers?

VC Yeah, well one of the stories in recent years is how these white collar, good jobs have been disappearing because jobs like being an accountant have been automated away. And you can even see it in white collar professional jobs. Like, take lawyers and doctors, right? Lawyers are seeing their work, for instance, in document review, sent over to India, automated by sophisticated computer programs. Even being contracted away to specialized firms that pay their lawyers less. So if this is happening for lawyers, imagine what's going to happen to the rest of us who don't have such high levels of education.

SM So the rest of us in your case would be professors at public colleges. What sort of security is there for professors at colleges compared to recent decades?

VC There's less security. And it's become a much more unequal situation. Half of the faculty at universities are part-timers. There's a lot of inequality. There's people, winners, like myself, who have a job who hopefully will get tenure at some later point, then there's people lower down the...well, half of the faculty who do not have that luxury or even the potential of that luxury.

SM Is there an argument to be made if you're not a bleeding heart liberal for why America should pay very close attention to income inequality?

VC Yes. I think a number of evangelical Christian leaders have talked in recent years...For instances, David Platts, about the shortcomings of the American dream. That maybe we're so focused on this game of acquisition and status that we lose sight of the important things in life and I think that rampant inequality focuses us intently on where we are in that pecking order and it is a very stressful kind of existence and I think that we can do better and that I think that other people across the political spectrum recognize this in Sweden, Norway, Finland, they have done more in terms of creating a safety net that protects families that fall into things like unemployment or that make it even harder to become unemployed in the first place. Countries like Germany do a better job of training less educated workers through apprenticeship programs that give them good skills for good jobs. I mean, there are economic costs but there are also social costs. How many people saw their marriages fall apart because they could not contribute anymore? That has a huge consequence for families and for communities that are dealing with long term unemployment. And we might not see that in big cities but that is a big problem throughout this country.

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center, researching and developing the treatments of tomorrow, UVAhealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Matt Darroch, Allison Byrne, Lauren Francis, and Jamal Millner. For the podcast, go to withgoodreasonradio.org. I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening and I hope you and your family are safe.