The Spirit of John Woolman at Pendle Hill

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All of us carry within us a great question. In fact, our very life is a quest, a search, a pilgrimage. Sometimes we are more aware of this than at other times. Sometimes this question or this search is sharply etched in our consciousness, sometimes it is vague or subconscious. But when Saint Augustine refers to his life as a journey from darkness to light, we instinctively know what he means. When Jesus said that we cannot live by bread alone, we know he was referring to this great question at the center of our existence and to our need for a corresponding great answer.

This answer, this light, this enlightenment which we seek is indeed given to us. To some people it comes suddenly, in a blinding flash. Saint Paul was perhaps the first of innumerable Christian personages who leave us testimony to such sudden, life transforming occasions of vision and insight. But the sudden way is not the only way such spiritual knowledge comes to us. Saint Augustine speaks of a much more gradual and evolutionary transformation of his spiritual nature. But whether it comes upon one suddenly, or slowly and gradually, we know that it is possible to experience a Truth and a Goodness so profound that it transforms our nature and the way we live out our life in this world. Thus this connectedness with the divine, this sense of intimacy with the Creator, comes both as a kind of knowledge and as a transformed way of being, of acting.

Interestingly, people who have been given these transforming experiences, whether gradual or sudden, always tell us that they are indescribable! George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, speaks of what he called his "openings" as being "beyond what words can utter." Nevertheless, Fox proceeds to utter a great many words about the matter. This brings us to a second characteristic of people given this gift of absolute spirit: although they acknowledge that the experience is indescribable, they nevertheless are inspired to share it as best they can. They become evangelists. One of the great pitfalls of our life as religious communities is our tendency to take the words and vocabularies of such great spirits legally or literally, rather than regarding what they say as metaphor or poetry.

So, with today's topic we are addressing one of the most fascinating and compelling aspects of our adventure together as human beings -- our search for and response to spiritual truth, our identification of life's meaning, of the beliefs and spiritual experiences which define our very nature as persons. We will look at how John Woolman's life gave witness to Truth, and how Pendle Hill, the Quaker center for study and contemplation where I work, seeks in the present day to keep alive the same spirit which makes John Woolman's life so exemplary.

When Wilda de Cou and Gladys Gray were talking to me about coming, they suggested that although the name of John Woolman is heard a lot a lot here at Medford Leas, at least since parts of Medford Leas are named after him, many of you may not have had the chance actually to find out who, exactly, Woolman was. So even though some people here have undoubtedly read a lot about Woolman, I will begin by giving a brief description of him by way of orientation.

First, John Woolman lived here in Burlington County, New Jersey from 1720 until 1772. Thus he died a few years before the American Revolution and lived, approximately, one hundred years before the American Civil War. He was a member of Mount Holly Friends Meeting and was the fourth child in a family with thirteen

children, a family which was neither wealthy nor poor. After school he set up shop for himself in Mount Holly, his sales grew, and he began to prosper. The possibility of business ventures in Philadelphia opened up for him, and affluence seemed to lay before him.

But he sensed a danger that his business ventures would consume all his energies and leave little time for things of the Spirit, and so he deliberately cut back on his retailing business, eventually giving it up altogether and becoming a tailor, supplementing his income with teaching, surveying and drawing up legal documents, all of which permitted him to pursue his real calling in religious service. He was married to Sarah Ellis and they had a son and daughter, but only the daughter survived infancy.

As we know, the Quakers had no paid ministers or clergy. The congregations gathered then, as they do now, in silent waiting for a movement of the Spirit, and anyone who felt such a prompting from a divine source would rise and speak out of the silence. Thus, in a quite spontaneous fashion, anyone in a gathering for worship might assume, for a brief time, the responsibility of offering the sermon, or spoken ministry. It was also common, when a particular Friend's spoken ministry was found to be consistently responsive to and expressive of the spirit of Truth, that the meeting would minute, or record, the fact that they esteemed the Friend's gifts in ministry. Such a recording did not change the fact that speaking in worship was the responsibility of anyone whom the Spirit touched, nor did it mean that anyone got paid or that a professional or ordained ministry grew up; it only meant that the special gifts of some were recognized in a special way. Woolman was recorded as such a gifted minister by Mount Holly Meeting when he was twenty-three years old.

Also, since Friends, being without a professional clergy, also had no on-going ecclesial bureaucracy to keep the church together, cohesion was provided through the practice of Friends "travelling in the ministry." Individual Friends would be given

a minute of endorsement from their own meeting to visit a meeting at some distant place, would go there, and during a sojourn share with her or his hosts out of the life and spiritual experiences of the home meeting, and when returning home would share what had been learned and experienced among the distant Friends. In this way (and in several other ways) the Religious Society of Friends was kept together in spite of the lack of the usual coordinating structures. John Woolman was designated repeatedly by his meeting to make such journey's in the ministry, and made some thirty such excursions between the ages of twenty three and the time of his death at age fifty–two.

Woolman is an enormously fascinating religious personage, and I must be careful not to use up all the time in speaking about even just a small aspect or facet of his life. But there are two more facts about his life which should be brought into view, at least. The first fact that his spiritual experiences led him to strong convictions on social issues, particularly the issue of poverty and economic exploitation, the issue of how European settlers treated Native Americans, and most especially, about the matter of slaveholding. John Woolman applied his gifts of spoken ministry and his many commissions to travel to the task of sensitizing people's consciences about injustice, most especially, but not exclusively, about the injustice of slavery. He saw that common practices regarding these social issues were offensive to Biblical, Christian and Quaker values. This may not seem so startling an idea to us nowadays, but we must remember that this was a long time ago, more than a century before the Civil War, and long before the Abolition Movement had gotten started, a time when slavery was so accepted a practice that even many members of Philadelphia Yearly meeting were slaveholders; a time when most European settlers felt little compunction about squeezing Native Americans off the land, their land, and slaughtering them if they resisted. John Woolman represented an avant garde spiritual sensibility of an extraordinarily radical sort. Furthermore, his efforts were key to the reformation of the entire Religious Society of Friends, which abolished all slaveholding among its own members shortly before Woolman's

premature death. Thus, one hundred years before the Civil War the Religious Society of Friends became the first Christian body to disallow slaveholding by its members.

The second important fact is that John Woolman kept a spiritual journal, or diary, which was published shortly after his death. He also wrote and published essays on the issues which concerned him. But the *Journal* in particular is of such a spiritual quality and content, and its beauty of diction and style are themselves so expressive the spiritual perspective being conveyed, that it has become a world-wide classic of devotional literature esteemed by people from every faith and background. I think it not an exaggeration to say that John Woolman's *Journal* ranks with *The Cloud of Unkowing* and *The Imitation of Christ* as a classic of Christian spirituality.

As we examine John Woolman's *Journal* and essays for clues about the way he discovered Truth and sought to transform society in ways expressive of Truth, four things about his spiritual life seem to me to stand out and to be instructive.

First, John Woolman was a doer, an activist. He was not only a thinker about spiritual and social questions, and not only a "feeler" of spiritual emotions and sentiments. John Woolman's thought and feeling was subjected to the test of first-hand observation, and also to the discipline of acting upon the beliefs which were given to him. He travelled widely and made careful and acute observations, so that when he wrote about the impact of social conditions on horses or stables boys or slaves he knew what he was talking about. Moreover, he took upon himself the responsibility of practicing what he preached. He preached simplicity: so he also led a simple life. Not only did he live modestly himself, but he changed his business rather than market superficial luxuries to others. He not only preached against slavery but he reimbursed slaves or their owners for services rendered to him as he travelled. He sought in various ways to eliminate from his life and personal use

anything he felt to be implicated in the slave trade, and so avoided the use of sugar, alcoholic beverages and dyed clothing.

Second, John Woolman's spirituality was a deeply felt spirituality, and although in some respects Woolman was a child of the European Enlightenment, his spirituality is not one characterized by the impersonal bleakness of pure reason. First and foremost is his feeling of love for the Quaker faith into which he was raised up and from which he derived spiritual nourishment throughout his life. John Woolman also always gives careful attention to his own feelings and to the feelings of others. He sees that the spiritual life involves the deliberate cultivation of feelings -- not just any feelings, but feelings of love and tenderness. He pays careful attention to stresses he feels, while also being careful not merely to pass these stresses along to other people. He rebukes himself, and even silences himself for several days, when he regards something he said as having lacked sufficient charity.

Woolman feels compassion for the victims of unjust social structures, but also feels compassion for these structures' beneficiaries. Thus, he feels compassion both for slaves and slaveholders. He frequently speaks of the love he bears for his travelling companions and for the members of his meeting. He rejoices when the strength of divine love is felt in a Quaker assembly. Finally, in the realm of feeling, it seems quite clear that when he senses a leading to undertake some ministry or project, the leading arises in his feelings, rather than in response to some rationally calculated strategy. He speaks of "feeling" a "call to visit" the Friends in a certain region or quarter, and of feeling easy in his mind about proposed undertakings.

But while John Woolman clearly regarded the emotional life and the center of feeling to be a critical dimension of spirituality and religion, it also seems clear that his views of this are not the same as certain modern schools of thought which emphasize the importance of emotional catharsis. Woolman never says something like "I was very upset about what those people were saying, so I got things off my

chest by giving them a piece of my mind, thereby narrowly averting for myself the afflictions of ulcers and neurosis." He clearly regards some feelings as coming from God, especially love, tenderness, compassion, humility and meekness, while other feelings, such as anger or pride, he regards as arising out of creaturely weakness or from the delusions of a civilization gone awry.

Third, Woolman is careful to cultivate the critical intellect. He thinks carefully about the interconnectedness of things and constructs reasoned arguments regarding his spiritual and social views. He skillfully merges facts and observations with spiritual ideals and principles. He takes the views of people who disagree with him quite seriously, and tries to demonstrate the truth of the situation by arguing carefully and reasonably from mutually acceptable fundamental premises. He draws lessons from history and from Scripture. He enters into various calculations in order to make points about the impact of the economic system.

So, the interconnectedness of thinking, feeling and doing in Woolman's spiritual approach supported his discovery of truth, and his discernment of ways to witness to this truth authentically so as to promote social transformation. Indeed, in the life of any individual, thinking, feeling and doing should supplement, stimulate and purify each other, forming a kind of check and balance system. Without these checks and balances one is vulnerable to the various disorders which can come to afflict the religious sensibility, especially the disorders of fanaticism and extremism.

I mentioned at the outset that there were four factors which undergirded Woolman's spiritual approach. The fourth factor is actually a matter which applies to the first three, and this is the matter of realizing that healthy spirituality involves an interaction between the public and private dimensions of thinking, feeling and doing. I believe that if we examine the matter with clear attention we will see that the triumph of Woolman's spiritual life is a triumph not only in the matter of his interconnecting thinking, feeling and doing in some private place within himself, but

also in his recognizing the importance of the interaction of private states of thought, feeling, and action with community insight. Woolman never suggests, for example, that the public world of Quaker institutions and procedures is a threat to the purity of his personal insights or his spirituality. Indeed the *Journal* repeatedly alludes to his respect for the good order of Friends, and no personal feeling or leading seems to be acted upon by him without having been cleared with Quaker elders or with his monthly meeting, or without having been affirmed with an appropriate travelling minute.

But this balance between private states of thinking and feeling and corporate discernment involves more than the following of good procedural order. Woolman clearly regards himself throughout as the product of a spiritual tradition to which he owes loyalty and respect. He regards the tutelage in truth that he received from his parents as critical in the formation of his own spirituality. He takes the Bible very seriously and sees in it the working out of great issues, the illumination of eternal themes in human destiny. He looks to Scripture as a way of dialoging with the past and as a source of inspiration.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a religious experience which is not in some sense derived and extrapolated from an inherited tradition. We may think of George Fox, for example, as a radical or revolutionary who had spiritual openings of a highly individualistic sort. Yet, we can scarcely believe that the idea, "Christ is the light of every person that cometh into the world" was simply a direct inspiration from the living God to the living Fox, discovered only later on by Fox to have been given by God also to the writer of the prologue to the Gospel of John seventeen centuries before.

One of the great mistakes of modern times is to exalt a purely personal religion of individual feeling and emotion, and to set it totally in contrast to thought and organization; to cherish individual states of mind or emotion at the expense of

the outer world of structures and arguments, which are perceived as a threat to the purity of the personal. But true religion takes spiritual maturity to be the fragile fruit of an interplay between the forces and factors of thinking, feeling and emotion in the private and the public realms. Humankind's spiritual health involves a carefully maintained relationship among personal experience, intellectual inquiry, and the good ordering of a movement or an institution. It is true that rational thought and institutionalism can be corrupted by an unfeeling and oppressively unreal rigidity, but a personal devotion or piety unshaped and unconstrained by public dialogue and by the illumination of the critical intellect is no less disastrously corrupted. Unchecked religious feelings or an overheated religious imagination can play host to a variety of spiritual maladies, including self-indulgence, idolatries of various sorts, meaningless revolt, and fanaticism. The spiritual health of individuals and communities grows out of the continual, costly, practical public quest for an appropriate balance and harmony among all the constituent elements of the spiritual life.

Woolman's strategy for opposing slavery seemed to take the form of occasional exhortations in public gatherings of Friends, but more frequently seemed to involve an intimate dialogue between individual persons. For three decades, Woolman visited Quaker slaveholders in their homes, urging them to consider seriously the unethical and unchristian aspects of their way of life. He did not self-righteously rail at them in public forums, but quietly yet insistently urged them to examine their responsibilities.

It is a little difficult, from the vantage point of modern life, to visualize the context in which Woolman's witness took place. Woolman was given free board and lodging in the homes of the slaveholding Quakers with whom he was laboring. In other words, the sort of dialogue which Woolman undertook was made possible by the institutional framework of the Religious Society of Friends and by its ability to embrace both Woolman and the slaveholders with whom he had friendly but urgent

conversations. Woolman confessed this to be hard labor, but he also allowed that it often led to a deeper experience of closeness and of true gospel fellowship. Could we imagine today that liberal Quakers with a distaste for Christian vocabulary would provide home hospitality to travelling ministers from the Evangelical Quaker tradition who had come to persuade them of their need to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior? Or, to put the shoe on the other foot, would Bible-oriented and Christ-centered Friends welcome into their homes liberal Friends who came to exhort them about gay liberation, or about abortion as a matter of free choice?

In other words, Woolman's great work was certainly made possible by his personal virtues, his patience, his unfailing charity, and the tenderness and compassion into which he was cultivated and which he himself nourished in his own soul, but it was also made possible by the Quaker culture and institutions to which both he and slaveowners faithfully adhered. Woolman's care in clearing his ministry with authorized Friends' bodies was matched by the willingness of Quaker slaveholders to abide by the traditions of the travelling ministry, not only by giving lodging but by also undertaking attentive listening and dialogue. This dialogic search for Truth and the traditions of patience and civility which are implied by it have been to a considerable extent lost in modern times. Even our Quaker culture can come to resemble a worldly dynamic of impatience, polarization and intolerance.

Certainly a key task for an enterprise like Pendle Hill today is the building up and restoration of this dialogic culture by fostering the practice of deep listening, together with a manner of speaking which is at once both sensitive and prophetic. Pendle Hill should be a crossroads where our prayer, our devotion and our searching dialogue emulates Woolman's charity, integrity and responsibility. Above all, Pendle Hill must never become a place where secular trends regarding correct or fashionable ideas inhibit true sharing.

(EXTEMPORIZE)

Resident Program	Courses in Bible, Quakerism, Prayer, Contemporary Social Issues, Friends Testimonies, Journal Keeping Crafts Worship Community Meetings for Business Interfaith Studies and Practices
Extension Program	Travelling Ministry Social Issues, Friends Testimonies Devotional Retreats -- Prayer, Silence, Healing
Publications Program	Essays, Pamphlets, Books
Issues Program	Dialogic "Crossroads" Travelling Ministry

Conclusion

There is a wisdom which comes from God, created from eternity in the beginning, and remaining until eternity in the end. It is a wisdom which we are told the Creator has poured out on all his works to be with humankind forever as his gift. The scriptures tell us the story of God's discourse with his people and of the people's painful and gradual progress in achieving a more perfect grasp of this eternal gift, a more perfect grasp of the ways of Wisdom.

How, then do we discover this Wisdom, this Truth? And how do we advance justice and authentic social change in the face of so many failed revolutionary projects in the modern world?

Our ability, as spiritual people and as seekers after Divine Truth, to practice meekness, coolness, and stillness of spirit, to articulate the truth we see faithfully but circumspectly, to love each other steadfastly while addressing differences, to avoid the distancing each from the other which leads to alienation and even to hostility, and to wait *even* a hundred years for unity to emerge, *even* when dealing with issues

which most people find it normal to feel and act passionately about, is not something we can do out of simple human patience. It is not something we can do without the aid of the Holy Spirit. But if, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, we are able to practice these disciplines successfully, we make a gift not only to ourselves, and not only to our respective religious communities. For in a world where the center does not hold, a world in which a blood-dimmed tide has been loosed, a world where the worst are full of passionate intensity, we can make a witness that there is, indeed, another way. We acknowledge that feeling certain is not proof in itself that one is right; that many have felt certain, and many have killed for things which have turned out not to be so. Jonathan Swift lamented that people have just enough religion to make them hate each other, but not enough to make them love each other. By emulating John Woolman, by trying much, waiting much, and loving much, even when momentous issues are laid before us, we demonstrate that it is possible to have enough religion to overcome brokenness and fragmentation with reconciliation, to grow, to change, to know Truth, to live in peace and to build justice. So to live is to let our lives pour out teaching like prophesy; so to live is to help make of this world a place worthy for the children of God, so to live is to prepare a place where future generations can make their home.

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