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# **Mysticism and Activism: Learning from John Woolman**



**Michael Birkel**

**FWCC SPECIAL EDITION**

*1/20/2002*

*The Thirty-second Michener Quaker Lecture in Florida  
Arranged by the Dwight & Ardis Michener Memorial Fund*

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## Mysticism and Activism: Learning from John Woolman

John Woolman is one of the most popular of early Friends among both Quakers and other than Quakers. More than two hundred years after his death, people still read the writings of this abolitionist, this mystic, this gentle and radical social reformer. Readers often explain what attracts them to John Woolman in words like these:

*The courageous ethical stands he took, ahead of most in his time, as an advocate for justice for the poor, the enslaved, the mistreated native peoples of North America.*

*His gentle way of working with others to persuade them to change.*

*The profound religious experiences he records.*

His *Journal* tells not only of his outward activities but his reflections on the way the world is and the way it could be, on human nature and its shortcomings and potential. By example, his honest self-examination gently invites readers into reflection on their own lives. By its gentle honesty, the *Journal* breathes a kind of hospitality for the reader. We feel beckoned to the spiritual life.

Like other great works of religious literature, John Woolman's writings partake of both time and eternity. They grow out of a particular historical context, and yet they transcend centuries and cultures. And they speak to many sorts of people.

John Woolman is attractive both to contemplatives and to activists. He offers inspiration to both camps. "Camps" is unfortunately a good way to describe the two groups, because Quaker meetings (just like other religious communities) at times bifurcate along this divide and do a kind of polite battle with one another. Each group quietly maintains that its approach is the closer one to Truth and wishes that the other side would simply smarten up and agree.

A religious genius can often manage to hold together what divides the rest of us. John Woolman does not take sides on this issue. His life embraced both the inward life of the contemplative and the outward life of the social reformer. He saw no separation between the two. His example calls both sides to a deeper commitment without asking them to abandon either path.

Here is what I propose to do in our time together today. I would like to point our attention to some passages from John Woolman's writings, try to listen to them carefully, and consider their possible usefulness for us today. First we'll look at some passages from his writings to see how he finds the spiritual life to be a unity, an integrated life of both inward experience and outward action for social change. Next, we can turn our attention to the resources he finds for this integrated spiritual life. Then we'll see how he takes the language that he uses to describe his inward experience of worship and applies it to his outward labors for a just human society. We might say he dissolves the walls of the meetinghouse. Finally we can consider how his work might inspire

us to a unified life, one in which service is an expression of worship and worship is a form of action.

## The Unity of the Inward and Outward Life

In traditional Quaker journals, the author described a turning point, a conversion in her or his religious life. This decisive experience marks the transition to a more intentional spiritual life. In traditional Quaker language, it is a convincement. John Woolman offers these words as his account of that turning point toward a lifelong religious commitment. These words reveal what he understood to be the central truths of the religious life.

*I kept steady to meetings, spent First Days after noon chiefly in reading the Scriptures and other good books, and was early convinced in my mind that true religion consisted in an inward life, wherein the heart doth love and reverence God the Creator and learn to exercise true justice and goodness, not only toward all men but also toward the brute creatures; that as the mind was moved on an inward principle to love God as an invisible, incomprehensible being, on the same principle it was moved to love him in all his manifestations in the visible world; that as by his breath the flame of life was kindled in all animal and sensitive creatures, to say we love God as unseen and at the same time exercise cruelty toward the least creature moving by his life, or by life derived from him, was a contradiction in itself. (28)\**

True religion is both inward and outward. It is the same principle that moves the human spirit in both directions. The most repeated word in this passage is “love”—love for God, love

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\*Numbers in parentheses refer to the critical edition of John Woolman's *Journal* and longer essays: Moulton, Phillips P., editor. *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971; reprinted Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989). Numbers in italics in parentheses refer to an older edition, which also contained his shorter essays: Gummere, Amelia Mott, editor. *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman*. (New York: Macmillan, 1922).

for neighbor, love for all God's creation. All these types of love come from the same source and are intimately interwoven: where one exists, the others are present also, at least when religion is truest to itself. Steeped in the Bible as he was, John Woolman may have meant for the attentive reader to hear an echo from the *First Epistle of John* (4:20), where it says that those who do not love a brother or sister whom they *have* seen cannot love God who is *unseen*. John Woolman equates love for others with justice and goodness; they are what love looks like in the visible world. Love is contrasted with cruelty. Finally, note that John Woolman identifies the sources of this insight: the experience of communal worship and the reading of spiritual books, especially the Bible.

The love that God gives to those who are open to it is universal in its scope. It particularly embraces the unloved who are pushed to the margins of society. God's love is zealous for justice for all God's creation. God's love is for all, but at the same time God's love is for justice for all. The claims of God on the faithful to behave in accordance with justice may require them to go against the grain in human communities which have injustice embedded in their very structures. They may even have to violate good manners, when it is considered too impolite to bring up such subjects. John Woolman successfully managed to advocate divine justice and to speak quite frankly, or as he put it in traditional Quaker language, to speak with great plainness. He did this without succumbing to the pitfall of self-righteousness because he kept his focus on God's love as the center of his encounter with others.

## **Resources for the Spiritual Life**

### ***Worship—A Feeling Sense of the Condition of Others***

Worship lay at the center of John Woolman's life. As for Friends throughout our history, the experience of meeting for worship for John Woolman was manifold. Meeting for worship can be joyful, consoling, disturbing, revealing. Here we can encounter our truest selves as limitlessly loved by God, but to come to that encounter we often first have to come face-to-face with the illusions we have about ourselves. These misperceptions can be many things, but often they are centered in our understanding of our relationship to God.

Here are two common misperceptions. They concern self-esteem. In the first, we see ourselves as so inflatedly important that we are responsible for more than our share of the world's burdens. If anything is wrong with the world, we must fix it. In its extreme form, this misperception leaves little room for God to do any of the work to redeem the world's problems. Ultimately this orientation does not trust God very much. It is a good thing to feel compassion for all who suffer, but as the saying goes, even Jesus only had to die on one cross.

The second misperception is that we don't matter at all. We're so unloveable that we can't really be sure that even God loves us. Again, the root of this attitude is insufficient trust in God, so though these two examples look quite different, early Friends would see them as related. Both are a block to deeper spiritual experience because we do not get beyond the focus on ourselves as individuals.

We need to be washed clean of these misperceptions. Earlier Friends used the word "purification" to describe this experience



of letting go of our off-center understandings of ourselves. For these Friends, this purification led the way to a powerfully renewing experience of God's love, which in turn opened the door to move beyond our individual selves. Here we can experience the collective dimension of meeting for worship.

By "dwelling deep" during worship, Friends in John Woolman's era discovered that they could come to a sense of the meeting as a whole, or of individuals in the meeting. As they came to this "*feeling sense of the condition of others*," they could bear the unspoken burdens of others. They could "travail" for the seed suffering in others and be like midwives in bringing this seed to birth. As they felt the suffering of others, they could suffer with them. This silent suffering with others in worship could bring about renewal in the inward life, a renewal so powerful that they dared to call it redemptive.

This discernment of the conditions of others and this suffering for their spiritual benefit was the silent task of ministry. Like spoken ministry, Friends engaged in it under a sense of divine leading. In John Woolman's words, wherever people are "*true ministers of Jesus Christ it is from the operation of his spirit upon their hearts, first purifying them and thus giving them a feeling sense of the conditions of others.*" (31)

Meeting for worship embraced more than suffering, of course. Friends also shared their deepest joys, both in and beyond words. The reason for my focus on entering into the suffering of others is so that we can see how this is connected with John Woolman's efforts to alleviate the suffering of those who bear the weight of oppression. But Quaker worship was not simply about suffering.

For some of us today, this corporate sense of meeting for worship has diminished in our individualistic era. But such experiences are still known. It is rather common for people in many religious traditions who follow a contemplative practice to find themselves blessed at times with an intuitive sense of what another person might be thinking or feeling. Among Friends this extended to the corporate life of the meeting. A person might, as still happens today, feel that a particular message is given to the gathered body, without knowing to whom in particular or why. At other times a worshipper might sense that the community as a whole had begun to sink or center down into worship but had not yet reached the depths that were possible. Vocal ministry would encourage the worshippers to "dwell deep," to continue the journey toward a gathered meeting. In the 1940s Quaker writer Thomas Kelly described the gathered meeting this way.

*In the practice of group worship on the basis on silence come special times when the electric hush and solemnity and depth of power steals over the worshippers. A blanket of divine covering comes over the room, a stillness that can be felt is over all, and the worshippers are gathered into a unity and synthesis of life which is amazing indeed. A quickening Presence pervades us, breaking down some part of the special privacy and isolation of our individual lives and blending our spirits within a superindividual Life and Power. An objective, dynamic Presence enfolds us all, nourishes our souls, speaks glad, unutterable comfort within us, and quickens us in depths that had before been slumbering. The Burning Bush has been kindled in our midst, and we stand together on holy ground. (Thomas Kelly, "The Gathered Meeting," in *The Eternal Promise* [Richmond IN: Friends United Press, 1988], p. 86)*

In John Woolman's day, Friends would labor in the silence to assist this experience.

Milder forms of such experience were and still are known. In Quaker meetings for worship people still often have the experience of almost rising to speak but then hearing someone else offer substantially the same message—an experience of being tuned in to the same spiritual wavelength. What is important to notice is that earlier Friends did not become absorbed in such phenomena for their own sake. In their experience, the phenomena themselves were subservient to greater spiritual purposes, such as ministering to the suffering of others and assisting the community to come to a more vital spiritual life. Coming to a feeling sense of the condition of others was a divine gift, and therefore no reason to become proud. It was given to build up community and to increase love, not to make the recipient feel special and thus become diverted from more important matters in the inward life.

While we should not become distracted or preoccupied with unusual phenomena, the description of them in the writings of John Woolman and others is a useful reminder of the corporate experience of worship. It can encourage us to recover that collective quality of worship, whether or not it is accompanied by intuitions of the interior states of individuals or of the collected worshippers. The gathered meeting still happens among the faithful.

John Woolman enlarges this collective quality of worship to extend beyond the walls of the meetinghouse, eventually to embrace all human suffering and injustice. Herein lies his spiritual genius.

## *Meditative Reading—A Near Sympathy*

The second source of John Woolman's conviction was, as he put it, "*reading the Scriptures and other good books.*" His writings are stuffed with references to the Bible. We might say that Bible was his mother tongue, and he spoke it with fluency and poetic artistry. He read the Bible in a meditative way. From the early days of Quakerism Friends such as Robert Barclay had stated that

*God intends for us to read Scripture as though we were looking in a mirror. In this mirror we see the conditions and experiences of our spiritual ancestors, and we discover that their experience corresponds to ours. This can be a great comfort and strength for us.*

*Here is the great work of the Scriptures, and their usefulness to us: we witness them fulfilled in us.*

(Robert Barclay, *Apology*, Proposition 3, Section 5  
—my translation from the Latin)

To read the Scriptures is to look in a mirror and find our own inner life, both as individuals and as a community, reflected in the lives of our spiritual forebears. Reading the Scriptures is an experience of growing self-knowledge. The life experiences of Biblical characters are analogous to our own; their spiritual conditions are ours. Reading the Bible is therefore an event of self-discovery, as we are taught by the same Spirit that inspired the written words of Scripture.

This suggests a great richness of the interior life. To read the Bible is to realize that one is a participant in the great ongoing story of God's people. The Biblical story is recapitulated in the life of the believing reader. Each has his own exile, her own exodus. We have moments of feeling in exile, separated from the presence of God. We have experiences of exodus, of liberation from whatever it might be that holds us in bondage.

John Woolman's expression for this sense of intimate connection with the Biblical story and with the characters in it is "a near sympathy." His sympathetic and meditative reading of Scripture led him to identify with Biblical events and characters, such as the prophets Isaiah (124) and Jeremiah (26). His near sympathy with the prophets strengthened him in his own prophetic activity, since like them he spoke on God's behalf to a community that had compromised its commitment to human justice. The example of the prophets as courageous voices, as ministers led by the Spirit, and as persons cared for by God when delivering a message that was not welcome by the powerful was a source of comfort and consolation for John Woolman.

Reading the Bible this way opened him to the transforming love of God, just as meeting for worship did because in both he met the Spirit who gave forth the Scriptures and who was still available to lead the faithful.

## **The Outward Life**

Considering John Woolman as a Quaker prophet invites us to remember his life as a social reformer. He may be best known for his work to end the practice of slavery, a cause to which he gave decades of patient persistence. His activities were primarily among Friends, but through his writings he influenced many others of the injustice of slavery.

John Woolman's concern for justice led him to other causes as well. He was an advocate for just dealings with Native Americans. He was an acute analyst of economic injustice. Although he does not use the term "structural injustice," he describes the reality. He was a faithful friend of the poor. His commitment to the peace testimony found expression in resisting payment of war taxes. In

cause after cause that we might think of as very current, he was already there in the mid 1700s. This is one reason why social activists take such inspiration from his life and his writings.

One of John Woolman's keenest insights was into the relationships among the traditional Quaker testimonies that nourish our activism. Failure to lead a simple life ultimately leads to oppression of others, and this in turn can lead to war. So simplicity, equality, and peace are inseparably interwoven. But since the outward and inward life are woven of a single fabric, he does not stop with external analysis alone. The failure to lead a life of material simplicity has profound spiritual roots. Because we have not opened ourselves fully to the love of God, which is the only reality that ultimately satisfies the deepest desires of our souls, we seek to substitute money, success, power, or reputation. Because we can't satisfy a thirst for the infinite with something finite, we end up wanting more money, more success, and no amount is ever enough.

*...where the heart was set on greatness, success in business did not satisfy the craving, but that in common with an increase of wealth the desire of wealth increased. (35)*

In contrast to this insatiable desire for wealth, he writes of how opening ourselves to the guidance of Pure Wisdom (one of his favorite nicknames for God) we find our previously unbounded desires now bounded. They are fenced in. This is not so much a matter of heroic renunciation. Instead, as we experience the transforming power of God's love, we simply find that those other things are just not so interesting anymore. In the past we participated in the oppression of others because we wanted more than our fair share of earthly goods and were willing to enslave others to have them do our physical labor so that we could acquire these things. Now we find our lives centered in love: we are loved

by God and so we love others and dedicate ourselves to their welfare as well as our own. Again, the inward life and the outward life are inseparably united.

## Dissolving the Walls of the Meetinghouse

### *A Feeling Sense*

What has moved me so much in my reading of John Woolman has been how he applies the language of the inward life to describe his relationship with marginalized people, people who bear the weight of oppression and poverty.

As we've seen, he used the expressions "*a feeling sense of the condition of others*" and "*a near sympathy*" to describe powerful inward, spiritual experiences. He uses those same expressions to describe his sense of connection to the poor and oppressed.

During his travels to slaveholders, he wrote that God "*is preparing some to have a tender feeling of their condition,*" (that is, of the slaves), and that through the sight of oppressions witnessed in his travels, he was "*brought into a feeling of the state of the sufferers.*" (157, 164-65) At the close of his account of a difficult and dangerous journey that he made as a peace mission in a time of war to a settlement of the Delaware nation at Wyalusing, he wrote that he was thankful that as a consequence of these travels he acquired "*a lively feeling of the afflictions of my fellow creatures whose situation in life is difficult.*" (137).

Later, while sailing to England, John Woolman declined to ride in the relative comfort of the ship's cabins and chose instead, to the dismay of many, to ride in steerage, the lower level of the ship where the sailors lodged in cramped quarters with poor ventilation and no privacy. There he came to have a feeling sense

of the condition of the suffering sailors. He writes of God's kindness "*in some degree bringing me to feel that which many thousands of my fellow creatures [the sailors] often suffer*" (173). He found his heart enlarged to yearn to enter into such an understanding of all suffering people:

*Desires were now renewed in me to embrace every opportunity of being inwardly acquainted with the hardships and difficulties of my fellow creatures and to labor in his [God's] love for the spreading of pure universal righteousness in the earth. (172)*

In a sense, John Woolman dissolved the walls of the meetinghouse. What he and others experienced in worship, entering into "*a feeling sense of the condition of others,*" was extended to life outside the meetinghouse. The intimate connection he felt to other worshipers widened to include all humankind. His inward experiences in communal worship prepared him for this, and this extension beyond the meetinghouse is his particular gift to us as his spiritual heirs.

Here we might come to understand one motivation for some of John Woolman's unusual behavior, as well as for some of his travels. When he journeyed on the dusty colonial roads during the Maryland summer heat and humidity to visit slaveholders, he traveled on foot so that he "*might have a more lively feeling of the condition of the oppressed slaves.*" (145) His journey to Wyalusing and travel in steerage to England had a similar motivation. John Woolman's refusal to use sugar and "silver vessels" and to wear dyed clothing can also be in part explained by this desire to attain to a feeling state of the condition of the oppressed, to enter gently and with the utmost respect into their suffering state and thereby participate in God's efforts to redeem the world from injustice.



## A Near Sympathy

During his visit to the Delaware settlement at Wyalusing, he writes

*I was led to meditate on the manifold difficulties of these Indians . . . and a near sympathy with them was raised in me; and my heart being enlarged in the love of Christ, I thought that the affectionate care of a good man for his only brother in affliction does not exceed what I then felt for that people. (134)*

It is, to say the least, rare for one of European descent to express such a depth of love for the native peoples of this land in that (or, sadly, any) time.

Yet such sympathy was, in John Woolman's understanding, originally a human inclination. Early on in his *Journal*, he writes of sympathy as a divine gift and a natural human disposition, yet also a delicate gift and one easily lost through inattention:

*[God] whose tender mercies are over all his works hath placed a principle in the human mind which incites us to exercise goodness toward every living creature; and this being singly attended to, people become tender-hearted and sympathizing, but being frequently and totally rejected, the mind shuts itself up in a contrary disposition. (25)*

For John Woolman the fundamental sins of greed and the desire for reputation and for honor are the chief villains in drawing human beings away from this sympathizing principle, but he admits that cultural conventions also present obstacles. In "*Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes, Part 2*," he notes that "*The blacks seem far from being our kinsfolks*" because of their condition as slaves. Therefore an "*open friendship with a person of so vile a stock in the common esteem*" would be regarded as a disgrace socially because they "*have neither honours, riches, outward magnificence or power, their*

*dress coarse and often ragged, their employ drudgery and much in the dirt. . . so that in their present situation there is not much to engage the friendship or move the affection of selfish men.*" Yet, he continues, for "*such who live in the spirit of true charity, to sympathize with the afflicted in the lowest stations of life is a thing familiar to them.*" (226) It is familiar to them because their encounter with God in worship and in sympathetic reading of Scripture has prepared their heart for sympathy with the oppressed.

John Woolman's method of reading Scripture offers the understanding that it is only divine love which prepares the heart for sympathy, but to overcome the obstacles which our culture places in the way, it is essential to use the imagination. In his antislavery essays, he encourages his reader to "*consider ourselves present as spectators*" to the cruelties of slave life: our children stolen, wars in Africa promoted by the slave trade, raiding parties to carry off captives, and so on. Such acts of imagination "*move us with grief. And did we attend to these scenes in Africa in like manner as if they were transacted in our presence,*" we would "*sympathize with them [enslaved Africans] in all their afflictions and miseries as we do with our children or friends.*" (232-233)

John Woolman shows that he has prepared himself for just this sort of sympathetic imagination when, contrary to his own social conditioning within a racist culture, he can identify the slaves of African descent as members of his family:

*The Lord in the Riches of his Goodness, is leading some unto the Feeling of the Condition of this People, who cannot rest without labouring as their Advocates; of which in some Measure I have had Experience: for, in the Movings of his Love in my Heart, these poor Sufferers have been brought near me.*

*The unoffending Aged and Infirm made to labour too hard, kept on a Diet less comfortable than their weak State required, and*

*exposed to great Difficulties under hard-hearted Men, to whose Sufferings I have often been a Witness, and under the Heart-melting Power of Divine Love, their Misery hath felt to me like the Misery of my Parents (500).*

John Woolman goes on to express the same sympathy for young slaves for whom “*my Mind hath often been affected, as with the Afflictions of my Children*” (500). Likewise he extends such loving sympathy to the oppressed sailors while on route to England: “*I often feel a tenderness of heart toward these poor lads and at times look at them as though they were my children according to the flesh*” (167).

John Woolman explicitly relates this sympathy to the experience of love toward all, a love which blossoms when one encounters divine love.

### **Action as Worship, Worship Becomes Action: The Integrated Life**

John Woolman was a careful writer. He scrupulously revised his works. If we find the same expressions used to describe inward, transformative experiences and the motivation for his actions to reform society, this is no accident. He hoped that a careful reader would notice the connections he was drawing by means of this common language. He intended us to notice that he was dissolving the walls of the meetinghouse and portraying activism (he would call it ministry, which Quaker activism at its best always has been) and worship as inseparable.

What can we draw from John Woolman's words and the example of his eloquent life?

For one thing, the legacy of John Woolman invites us to be open to recovering more fully the collective dimension of our meeting for worship. We are summoned to “dwell deep.”

For another, we are invited to see our activism as a species of worship. For activists, this is an invitation to root our activism more fully in the transforming power of meeting for worship and the love of God we encounter there. For those who are more of a contemplative than an activist orientation, it challenges us to broaden our understanding of the boundaries of the meetinghouse, and the boundaries of worship itself.

Next, John Woolman’s life and example encourage us to see worship as a form of action—that the events and experiences within meeting for worship can truly exert an influence on the wider world. Prayer is not just wishful thinking; it can effect results. It can further the cause of justice.

Finally, we are invited to see that the ideal spiritual life is an integrated one. When religion is truest to itself, we are moved “*on an inward principle to love God as an invisible, incomprehensible being.*” “*On the same principle*” we are moved to “*learn to exercise true justice and goodness toward all*” creation. This is John Woolman’s enduring gift to us.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Birkel is Professor of Religion at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, where he teaches courses in Quakerism,

Biblical Studies, Church History, and Spirituality. He has translated monastic texts from Greek and Latin and has edited two books: *The Lamb's War*, a collection of essays in Quaker history to honor Hugh Barbour, and *The Inward Teacher*, a gathering of essays on Quaker education to celebrate Paul Lacey.



Michael has traveled widely among Friends as a speaker and retreat leader.

His Michener Lecture printed here has since grown into a book on the spirituality of John Woolman: *A Near Sympathy: The Timeless Quaker Wisdom of John Woolman*, Friends United Press, ISBN 0-944350-63-1.

## **About the Wider Quaker Fellowship**

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