John Woolman, Quaker Saint

by

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John Woolman, Quaker Saint was presented at Kendal Monthly Meeting in 1980 as *Introduction to Quakerism III*. Reprinted in 1981 with permission of Elizabeth Gray Vining by the Wider Quaker Fellowship, a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation, 1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102.

Many years ago when I first encountered John Woolman's *Journal* I had no idea of becoming a Friend. I was doing research on life in the back country of North Carolina in the 18th century for a book I was writing, *Meggy MacIntosh*. My husband had a set of the Harvard Classics, and I happened on, in the first volume, along with Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and William Penn's *Some Fruits of Solitude*, John Woolman's *Journal*. The bits about his travels in Virginia and North Carolina, while sparse in detail, still gave me a feeling of what it was like to make your way through the wilderness on horseback and the kind of hospitality that you might get along the trail. Neither the beauty and simplicity of his style nor the loftiness of his spirit touched me consciously at that time, but when I did read all the *Journal* some years later I found that he was already a friend whom I knew.

Other non-Friends besides the editors of the Harvard Classics have been deeply impressed by the literary and spiritual beauty of the *Journal*. Coleridge, Lamb, Emerson, Dreiser, all have paid high tribute to it.

In preparing for this morning I thought I knew John Woolman well but every time I approach him I get something new from him — and I hope you will too. It is an interesting coincidence that in the *Friends Journal* this week, the main article is on John Woolman and his message for our time, and three other articles mention him.

John Woolman was born in 1720 in Burlington County, New Jersey, the fourth child and first son of a Quaker farmer. His education consisted of ten years in the village school, followed by a life-time of reading. There were books in his own home, and later he had access to the libraries of wealthy and scholarly Friends in Philadelphia and Bordentown. He read not only the Quaker classics — Fox, Penn, Barclay, Sewell, Penington, — but also the *Imitation of Christ*, John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, the writings of Jacob Boehme, the German mystic, John Everard, the

Cambridge Platonist, and William Law, the author of the Anglican classic, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life.* And always the Bible, which he knew well and from which he quoted widely.

He was a lively and gregarious youth, full of fun and popular with the other young Friends. He has often been compared to St. Francis of Assisi. Obviously he was throughout his life a man of great personal charm and loving spirit. He could tell people truths that cut to the bone — labor with a tavern-keeper about serving liquor and with a southern planter about keeping slaves — and retain the affection of both.

He very early began, as he wrote, "to be acquainted with the operations of divine love" and for a number of years he was in conflict between his serious reflections and his natural tendency to, as he said, "promote mirth". Nevertheless, despite discouraging backslidings, he persisted in his inner struggle, and, as he wrote, "was early convinced 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 creation . . . To say we love God as unseen and at the same time exercise cruelty towards the least creature moving by his life or by life derived from him, was a contradiction in itself. I found no narrowness respecting sects and opinions but believed that sincere, upright-hearted people in every society who truly loved God were accepted of him."

Thus in simple, profound terms be expresses his philosophy of life and his religion and though he amplifies it elsewhere, this is the core of it.

When he was twenty he was employed by a shopkeeper in the nearby village of Mt. Holly to tend shop and to keep books. He lived alone in the shop, and read and thought in the evenings. On Sundays he went to meeting. Before long he was moved to speak — always a spiritual landmark for a young Friend. He said of this occasion, "Not keeping close to the divine opening I said more than was required of me." The memory of this afflicted him for some weeks, but later he recovered and by the time he was twenty-three his gift was recognized and he was recorded a minister by Burlington Monthly Meeting. He does not tell this in his Journal; this bit of information comes from the Meeting records.

After his ministry was recognized, he made many journeys in the ministry, all with the approval of the Monthly Meeting, and often with that of the Quarterly and Yearly Meetings as well.

One of the crucial experiences of his shopkeeping was the time when his employer asked him to draw up a bill of sale of a Negro slave to an elderly Friend. The demand came upon him without warning. Taken by surprise and very much aware that it was his employer who was asking him to do it, he wrote out the document, but said outright that he "believed slavekeeping to be a practice inconsistant with the Christian religion."

He was never caught this way again, though he was several times asked to perform this service. He always refused. This was perhaps the experience that brought into sharp focus his convictions about slavery and started him on one of the three great concerns on which his outward life was focused. These concerns, though they took different forms, all came from the same stem: love for his fellow man: for the slave owner as well as the slave, for the Indian scalper as well as the scalped, for the poor and oppressed everywhere, the backwoods trader, the tenant farmer, the young sailor, the post-boy. He saw a connection between all the evils that they suffered from and he sought always to understand and explain their causes.

Obviously an efficient and a popular young man, he very soon realized that a profitable business career was open to him. He saw it, however, as "cumber" that would hamper him in the kind of life he wanted to lead. Accordingly he gave up shopkeeping and learned the trade of tailoring, for that he could control. "I was learning to be content with real conveniences that were not costly, so that a way of life free from much entanglements appeared best for me, though the income was small."

This is an important statement for understanding John Woolman's way of life. He never sold all his possessions in order to give the money to the poor. His was simplicity of life, not voluntary poverty. At the age of twenty-nine he married a "well-inclined damsel" named Sarah Ellis; they had a house with an orchard, which provided a supplement to the income he earned from tailoring. When their daughter Mary was married, he provided a house for her, too, close to his own. But the appointments in his house were simple, there were no silver dishes or silver spoons. At his death he left his wife Sarah provided for. He was aware of Jesus's admonition to the rich young man, who could not accept it and went sorrowfully away. Of that episode he wrote: "When our Saviour said to the rich youth, 'Go sell that thou hast and give to the poor,' though understandably it was his duty to do so, yet to confine this of selling all a duty on every Christian would be to limit the Holy One . . . It may not be the duty of everyone to commit at once their substance to other hands, but rather from time to time to look around amongst the numerous branches of the great family, as his stewards, who said, 'Leave thy fatherless children, I will preserve them alive; and let thy widows trust in me' (Jer. 49:11). But as disciples of Christ however entrusted with much goods they may not conform to sumptuous or luxurious living."

The same year that he began to work independently as a tailor he took three months off in the spring and traveled 1500 miles on horseback in Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina — the first of three journeys in the South. His friend and neighbor, Isaac Andrews, went with him. They went first to Quaker settlements in the western part of Virginia, Monocacy, Fairfax, Hopewell and Shenandoah, and then to other settlements in the eastern part of the state, where they found their exercise in general more painful. Friends had slaves in those days in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware, but this was his first experience of the great plantations of the South. Summing it all up he wrote:

"Two things were remarkable to me on this journey. First in regard to my entertainment. When I ate, drank and lodged free-cost with people who lived in ease on the hard labour of their slaves, I felt uneasy; and as my mind was inward to the Lord, I found, from place to place, this uneasiness return upon me at times through the whole visit. Where the masters bore a good share of the burden and lived frugal, so that their servants were well provided for and their labor moderate, I dwelt more easy; but where they lived in a costly way and laid heavy burdens on their slaves, my exercise was often great, and I frequently had conversations with them in private concerning it. Secondly, this trade of importing them from their native country being much encouraged amongst them and the white people and their children so generally living without much labour, was frequently the subject of my serious thoughts. And I saw in these southern provinces so many vices and corruptions increased by this trade and this way of life that it appeared to me as a dark gloominess hanging over the land, and though now many willingly run into it, yet in future the consequence will be grievous to posterity! I express it as it hath appeared to me, not at once or twice but

as a matter fixed on my mind."

These are the words and the insight of a young man of twenty-three — an extraordinary insight, it seems to me, and a prophecy that has been only too amply fulfilled.

The following winter, 1747, his eldest sister Elizabeth died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-one. He talks a good bit about her character and the early frivolity that she had overcome, but some of the really interesting things about Elizabeth Woolman he leaves out. In the same year in which John Woolman left home and went to Mt. Holly to work, Elizabeth also left and went to Haddonfield, where she had a house of her own, a maid and a tailoring business. She was called a "tailoress", which meant that she did not go to people's houses to sew, they came to her. When she died, after six years of freedom, she left John twelve pounds and her gold buttons. She left smaller sums to her other six brothers and four sisters, and in addition she left to her sister Hannah an impressive array of furniture, including china ware and silver spoons. It would be interesting to know more about Elizabeth. Did she get tired of helping to look after all those younger brothers and sisters at home? How did she dare to be a bachelor girl and set up a business for herself in the middle of the 18th century? Was it she or John who first had the idea of tailoring as a means of livelihood? She started first.

His experiences on his first southern journey led to his writing an essay which he called "Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes", the first of his attempts to reach other people with his ideas. It addressed for the most part the moral harm that the keeping of slaves did to the slave owners themselves; he drew extensively on Biblical insights about slavery, especially from the Prophets for his arguments. It is difficult to realize now, two centuries later, how completely slavery was taken for granted at that time, or how fresh were his insights, how independent his thought. He did nothing about publishing this essay, until his father, on his deathbed, asked him what he was going to do about it. Even then, it was three more years before he offered it to the Publications Committee of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.

The year after the publication of this essay, he made his second trip to the South. On this journey the fact that he accepted the hospitality of slave owners weighed even more heavily on him than before, and after what he called a time of deep trial, he came to the conclusion that he must not profit by the unpaid labor of slaves. He wrote:

"The way I did it was this: When I expected soon to leave a Friend's house where I had entertainment . . . I spoke to one of the heads of the family privately and desired them to accept pieces of silver and give them to such of their Negroes as they believed would make the best use of them; and at other times I gave them to the Negroes themselves, as the way looked clearer to me. As I expected to do this before I came out, I had provided a large number of small pieces, and thus to offer them to some who appeared to be wealthy people was a trial both to me and to them. But the fear of the Lord so covered me at times that that was made easier than I expected and few if any manifested any resentment at the offer and most of them after some talk accepted of them."

It was painful for a sensitive young man, but his native charm and his sincerity must have eased the way.

The following year Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, largely under his prodding, adopted a formal minute against buying or selling slaves and urged all their members

to free any slaves that they had. During the next five years John Woolman spent a great deal of time visiting Friends and pressing them to free their slaves. This was personal confrontation with Friends older than he was, and it was not easy.

His journey to New England, from May to September, 1760, was a crucial one in his life. It was at Newport, Rhode Island, at the time of New England Yearly Meeting, that he became most painfully aware of the slave trade, and the fact that there was a Quaker who was actively engaged in it struck him to the heart. He labored deeply with the members of the Yearly Meeting, and as a result the first protest against slavery in New England was issued at that session. But he carried the scars of this experience, and I believe that it was because of this that he made the drastic decision the following year, after a serious illness, to give up entirely the use of clothing that had been dyed. The rationale for this was that dye came from the plantations of the West Indies, where the slaves were dreadfully overworked. For the rest of his life he wore un-dyed clothing, including a white beaver hat. He never explained this even to his friends, but when questioned, said that he believed it was not in his own will.

Also following this experience came his second "Essay on the Keeping of Negroes". This one he did not hold back for several years but published at once. Nor did he give it to the Overseers of the Press to print and distribute, though they had read and approved it. He had it printed by Benjamin Franklin at his own expense and sold the copies for a small sum. His idea was that if people paid something for it they would read it. This paper more than the first one showed a knowledge of life in Africa and of the slave trade, about which he had obviously done a good deal of reading. It contains some very pointed passages. For example: "Great distance makes nothing in our favor. To willingly join with unrighteousness to the injury of men who live some thousand miles off is the same in substance as joining with it to the injury of our neighbors." And the moving passage:

"There is a principle, which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath had different names. It is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no religion nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever it takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren in the best sense of the expression."

About this time he may also have worked on the essay, "A Plea for the Poor," which was not published till twenty-one years after his death, when Dublin Yearly Meeting put it out under the title, "A Work of Remonstrance and Caution to the Rich." "Because it focuses on the deep pockets of poverty in the midst of affluence," says Phillips Moulton, "it is especially relevant to our situation today." It contains some of the most moving of his sentences. "To turn all we possess into the channel of universal love becomes the chief business of our lives . . . May we look upon our treasures and the furniture of our houses and the garments in which we array ourselves and try whether the seeds of war have any nourishment in our possessions or not."

The French and Indian War brought many problems to Philadelphia Quakers, whose policy of friendship with the Indians had maintained peace with them for three quarters of a century. When Pennsylvania engaged actively in the war, most of the Quakers in the Assembly, outnumbered, resigned. Many joined together to contribute to a fund for promoting peace with the Indians. But when the question of refusing taxes for the war came up, they were divided. John Woolman and twenty other prominent Friends urged tax refusal in a strong letter, but the Yearly Meeting

did not take action. Though Woolman himself refused to pay taxes for war, the collection of them was a hit or miss affair and he did not suffer distraint of property, though some others did. This is a troubling problem for Friends today, and few of us have the courage to refuse to pay the part of the income tax that goes for war or preparation for war.

In August, 1761, John Woolman met an Indian chief named Papunahang at Anthony Benezet's house in Philadelphia and from this meeting developed his desire to make a visit to Papunahang's town of Wyalusing, which lay in the wilderness 200 miles northwest of Philadelphia. "Having," as he wrote in his Journal, "many years felt love in my heart towards the natives of this land who dwell far back in the wilderness, whose ancestors were the owners and possessors in the land where we dwell and who for a very small consideration resigned their inheritance to us."

Six months later he laid his plan for a trip to visit them before his Monthly Meeting, and then the Quarterly and finally the Yearly Meeting, which duly approved. In May he met in Philadelphia an Indian man and three women who came from a place a little beyond Wyalusing and arranged for them to be his guides. The night before he was to start on his journey, he was awakened at midnight by a man who had come to tell him that there had been an Indian uprising near Pittsburgh and that a number of English people had been scalped and killed. He went back to bed somewhat shaken, but left on the next day just the same.

He met his guides at Samuel Foulke's home north of Philadelphia, where several Friends had gathered to start him on his trip. One of them, Benjamin Parvin, an Irish Friend thirty-five years old — Woolman himself was forty-three — volunteered to go all the way with him. John Woolman demurred, fearing for his safety, but Parvin was, as Woolman wrote, "fastened to the visit," and they went on together. Beyond Bethlehem, at Fort Allen, they met a trader — a white man — who had recently come from the Indian village of Wyoming — now one of the exits on the northern extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. From the trader's conversation Woolman heard how white men plied the Indian with rum, made him drunk and got his furs at reduced prices. Most liberals would condemn the greedy traders and stop there, but not John Woolman. He was perceptive enough to see beyond the obvious evil to the condition of the traders themselves. He saw that they were often poor people who had come to the frontier to escape from the high rents for land in the East and he reflected that if the landowners lived in less luxury and charged less for their land, their tenants could live comforably in honest employment and not get embroiled with the Indians.

They had a hard time getting over the Blue Ridge because of the roughness of the trail and the rain that fell steadily on them. Perhaps it was here that they killed four rattlesnakes.

Sitting in his tent on a rainy Sunday morning, Woolman thought about this expedition that he had undertaken. He wrote: "Love was the first motion and then a concern arose to spend some time with the Indians that I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they lived in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them or they be in any degree helped forward by my following the leading of Truth among them." He was not going as superior to inferior but as a fellow seeker.

When they reached the Indian settlement at Wyoming they were told of battles to the west, and also that at Wyalusing — where they were going — an Indian runner had come with two English scalps in his hand and announced that there was war with

the English. They had themselves a frightening experience at Wyoming. They were lodged at the house of an aged and friendly Indian. An Indian warrior came to their door and John Woolman went out to speak with him. When he saw Woolman, the Indian took a tomahawk out from under his coat. Instead of retreating hastily into the house, John went forward toward him and spoke in a friendly way. Benjamin Parvin then joined him, the Indian came into the house and soon sat down and smoked his pipe. Woolman writes: "Though his taking his hatchet in his hand at the instant I drew near him had a disagreeable appearance, I believe he had no other intent than to be in readiness in case any violence was offered to him." Nevertheless, that night he lay awake wondering if this trip to the Indians was in right ordering. The next day they went on over the Lackawanna, through swamps and over hills, just missing three Indian warriors on their way to fight the English at Juniata.

After nine days' travel they reached Wyalusing, where they were well received. The people in this Indian town had already been more or less converted by a Moravian missionary from Bethlehem named David Zeisberger, who had heard of Woolman's coming and was there to receive him. There might easily have arisen some feeling of rivalry here, but Woolman was not there to take any converts away from the Moravians, and the two men got on well together. Some meetings had already been set up in a large building there, and Woolman and the Moravian shared them.

I am sure that Woolman's success at Wyalusing was due in part to the good relationship that Zeisberger already had with the Indians and I am surprised that Quaker writers have not acknowledged this more graciously. I found his name only in a footnote in Janet Whitney's biography of Woolman.

The only real problem during the three days that the two Quakers spent at Wyalusing was the language difficulty; the interpreters were in no way adequate. In the end Woolman suggested that he proceed without interpretation, but speaking very simply in short sentences, and relying a great on the shared silence itself. As a result of this, the Chief, Papunahang, said to him those moving words that have been so often quoted: "I love to feel where words come from."

Reflecting during one of the nights that he spent in Wyalusing, Woolman wrote: "I came to this place through much trouble, and through the mercies of God I believed that if I died on the journey it would be well with me, yet the thoughts of falling into the hands of Indian warriors was in times of weakness afflicting to me; and being of a tender constitution of body, the thought of captivity amongst them was at times grievous, as supposing that they, being strong and hardy, might demand of me beyond what I could well bear. But the Lord alone was my helper, and I believe that if I went into captivity it would be for some good end." And so thinking, be became "inwardly joyful."

On their way home they were accompanied by a number of Indians who were going to Bethlehem with furs to sell. It took them all five days to reach Bethlehem and there they parted in mutual friendship. They were home a couple of days later.

The rest of the decade of the 60's was occupied with another trip to the South, this time on foot so that he might "have a more lively feeling of the condition of the oppressed slave", and with laboring with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Friends who hung onto their slaves — all for the most humanitarian of excuses.

In 1770 he suffered a severe attack of pleurisy. It was at this time that he had a profoundly moving dream, which he did not put into his diary until two and a half years later. I unfortunately missed the Quaker hour on Public Radio recently in

which I am told someone read beautifully Woolman's account of this dream. I cannot do so well, but I think we should not skip it.

"In a time of sickness with the pleurisy a little upward of two years and a half ago, I was brought so near the gates of death that I forgot my name. Being then desirous to know who I was, I saw a mass of matter of a dull gloomy color, between the south and the east, and was informed that this mass was human beings in as great misery as they could be and live, and that I was mixed up with them and henceforth might not consider myself as a distinct or separate being. In this state I remained several hours. I then heard a soft melodious voice, more pure and harmonious than any voice I had heard with my ears before, and I believed it was the voice of an angel who spake to other angels. The words were, "John Woolman is dead." I soon remembered that I once was John Woolman, and being assured that I was alive in the body, I greatly wondered what that heavenly voice could mean. I believed beyond doubting that it was the voice of a holy angel, but as yet it was a mystery to me.

"I was then carried in spirit to the mines, where poor oppressed people were digging rich treasures for those called Christians, and heard them blaspheme the name of Christ, at which I was grieved, for his name to me was precious. Then I was informed that these heathens were told that those who oppressed them were the followers of Christ, and they said amongst themselves, 'If Christ directed them to use us in this sort, then Christ is a cruel tyrant.'

"All this time the song of the angel remained a mystery, and in the morning my dear wife and some others coming to my bedside, I asked them if they knew who I was; and they, telling me I was John Woolman, thought I was only light-headed, for I told them not what the angel said, nor was I disposed to talk much to anyone, but was very desirous to get to sleep that I might understand this mystery.

"My tongue was often so dry that I could not speak till I had moved it about and gathered some moisture, and as I lay still for a time, at length I felt divine power prepare my mouth that I could speak, and then I said, 'I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me and the life I now live in the flesh is by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.' Then the mystery was opened, I perceived there was joy in heaven over a sinner who had repented and that that language *John Woolman is dead* meant no more than the death of my own will."

In 1772 he felt that he was called to make a religious visit to England and to go by steerage. In spite of protests from other Friends and especially from Samuel Emlen and some others who were going in the cabin of the same ship, he persisted. It was a passage of five weeks, with a terrifying storm in the middle of it. Fortunately John Woolman was an excellent sailor. The chief result of this experience seems to have been his realization of the kind of life on shipboard led by young sailors, the dangers and discomforts they endured. One of these boys was James Nayler, a great nephew of the famous James Nayler who wrote that beautiful passage beginning, "There is a spirit . . ."

Woolman, having arrived in London, went straight to the Yearly Meeting of Ministers and Elders then in session. He wore of course his strange white homespun clothes and white beaver hat. He does not tell in his Journal what happened at the Meeting. He wrote only, "My heart was humbly contrite."

He had reason to be welcomed cordially at the Meeting, for he was an important member of the corresponding meeting in Philadelphia, and he had of course a

traveling minute, which he presented to the Clerk. The story which Janet Whitney tells of his reception is dramatic and possibly apocryphal. But it is also probably true that his strange white garments at first disguised him and that after a cool reception, he spoke and was recognized in his authentic power.

During Woolman's visit, London Yearly Meeting, like New England before it, made its first public protest against slavery.

After a few days in London, Woolman went on a trip through England to York visiting Meetings along the way. He went on foot because he could not bear the cruelty to both horses and horse boys that stage coach travel involved.

When he reached York, he was stricken with smallpox, that most dreaded disease. He was nursed devotedly through the ten days of his illness by Esther Tuke, a beautiful young woman, who survived to start the first Friends boarding school for girls in England and, later, with her husband, William Tuke, to establish the York Retreat, the first asylum for the insane in which the treatment was loving instead of brutal.

A beautiful and moving account of John Woolman's illness and death was written by the Friends who were with him and appears in the biographies of him.

It is just a little over two hundred years since he died. We all know his story; we've most of us read his *Journal.* We quote his words frequently. The beauty of his life and the purity of his spirit, the clarity of his vision, remain fresh and compelling. He speaks to us today, as he spoke to his contemporaries, for his truths were not only of his own century but stand for all time.

Elizabeth Gray Vining was born in Philadelphia shortly after the turn of the century. She was graduated from Bryn Mawr College, and in the years that followed, under the names of Elizabeth Janet Gray and Elizabeth Gray Vining, she wrote many books for adults and children, including the Newberry Award winner *Adam of the Road.*

During and immediately after World War II, Elizabeth Vining worked for the American Friends Service Committee. In 1946 she was appointed tutor to Crown Prince Akihito of Japan and later wrote the widely read *Windows for the Crown Prince.* She is the author of several novels and biographies, and her autobiography, *Quiet Pilgrimage,* was published in 1970.