

On Mercy, Commitment, and Being Right:

John Woolman's Way of Prophetic Non-Attachment

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This is the Message from GOD, the God of Israel, to whom you sent me to present your prayer. He says, 'If you are ready to stick it out in this land, I will build you up and not drag you down, I will plant you and not pull you up like a weed. I feel deep compassion on account of the doom I have visited on you. You don't have to fear the king of Babylon. Your fears are for nothing. I'm on your side, ready to save and deliver you from anything he might do. I'll pour mercy on you. What's more, he will show you mercy! He'll let you come back to your very own land.

Jeremiah 42:9-12

Many of you know that I have a special (and some would say excessive) affection for people of faith in ages past; people who lived lives of absolute surrender to the voice of God, who walked against the tide of human opinion and, in so doing, became a foretaste of heaven on earth. And, most of all, I have a

special admiration for an unassuming colonial American tailor named John Woolman.

John Woolman is one of the most famous of American Quakers. He was born in 1720 near Mount Holly, New Jersey. He was raised in a devout Quaker family. Woolman is best known as an early antislavery advocate who helped to lead Quakers toward a corporate antislavery position. However, Woolman did not see the end of Quaker involvement in slavery during his lifetime. As a young man in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, slavery was generally accepted by many Quakers. Before 1750, Quaker slave-ownership rates in Philadelphia were about the same as the Philadelphia population as a whole (Marietta 115–116). Over the course of his life, Woolman repeatedly called his fellow Quakers to conform their outward lives to the reality of God's work in them, and for this he has been called the American Prophet.

Now the problem with talking about someone like Woolman is that he has become something of a hero for many Quakers and we kind of just assume that wherever he went people were persuaded to free their slaves and that the waters opened before him and he changed the course of history and he lived happily ever after. From the perspective of history we look at his record of monumental accomplishments and neglect to see his own uncertainty, and his 30 year struggle

to give voice to God's will with mercy and humility toward those who disagreed with him.

For some, Woolman's message is one of simplicity, for others it is one of equality and crossing racial and religious boundaries. I've found Woolman to be all of these, of course. But I've mostly found Woolman to be a deeply unsettling presence, the prick in my conscience that will not leave me alone, that challenges the way I demonize those who disagree with me, and that presents me with a vision of a world remade.

What distinguishes Woolman from myself is that where I am tempted to use my religious convictions as a bludgeon that is all too happy to create change through coercion, Woolman did not view Truth as something that can be wielded, but as something that consumes one's life and in that experience of being spiritually and holistically consumed leads to comprehensive transformation and healing. A transformation that goes beyond the victory of one opinion over another, but is enraptured in a social and spiritual revolution that is universal and eternal. In other words, for Woolman, the prophetic vocation was about being subject to something beyond himself, a message that had as its goal the union of God and humanity and the submission of all aspects of human affairs to the direct and inward voice of God. I have found Woolman's prophetic voice to be challenging and unwelcome because in its comprehensiveness it leaves me no

place to hide; it rejects the compartmentalized way I create boundaries around the places in my life and in my heart that I would rather leave untouched, protected, and hidden. It rejects the demonizing and partisanship that characterizes conflict within the church and beyond it.

I am not the first to find Woolman to be a troubling figure. While we might think of him as a luminary, a standout, the most authentic representative of eighteenth century Quakerism; the truth is that, in his own day, he was not esteemed differently from any number of other Quaker ministers. Not only that, many Quakers did not know what to do with him and many found his views and habits excessive.

To deal with some of his behaviors, soon after his death, he was edited and tamed. Gone were two supernatural visions. Cut out were references to refusing to pay war taxes and his criticisms of the British trans-Atlantic imperial economy. Some of his antislavery writings were watered down and abridged (Plank, "The First Person in Antislavery Literature," p. 77). The image of Woolman that resulted was of a pious model of lowliness, self-effacement and humility. John Woolman, meek and mild. A spirituality devoid of moral embodiment and socio-political transformation.

Not all of Woolman's ideas found acceptance during his life.

Many of his peers considered him to be “singular.” To be “singular” was not a good thing. The label meant that Woolman’s views in some areas were not prerequisite to be a good Quaker, and, in some cases, implied that Woolman was dangerously close to stepping outside the bounds of accepted Quaker behavior.

Upon meeting Woolman, one leading British Quaker was not overly impressed. He wrote:

"John Woolman is solid and weighty in his remarks. I wish he could be cured of some singularitys. But his real worth outweighs the trash"
(Cadbury, *John Woolman in England*, p. 6).

In this particular letter there is uncertainty whether or not the final word is “trash” or “husk,” but, in either case, many Quakers thought some of Woolman’s habits were unsupportable and should be discarded.

Perhaps the person most upset by Woolman’s “singularity” was Woolman himself. He knew he held different positions from others, he knew that people were making all sorts of assumptions about the motivations that underlie his conviction, and it caused him emotional turmoil. Some likely thought he was excessively pious, others thought he was an attention-seeker.

The distress Woolman felt when he challenged the misguided notions of his peers was only mitigated by the intensity of divine revelations that were as real,

direct, and understandable to him as if they were given person-to-person.

Woolman's experience of God's revelatory presence led him to look for kindred spirits in the Hebrew prophets, and, especially, the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah, known as the reluctant prophet, was a model to Woolman of someone who would rather not be a prophet, thank you very much. Jeremiah wanted his message to go away and leave him alone. He wanted to be just like everybody else, he did not want to bear bad news against his neighbors. Like Jeremiah, the revelation of God to Woolman was one that challenged those dilutions of faithfulness and obedience that occur whenever humanity turns its energy into destructive egocentrisms, oppression, and negations of God's creative intent for human thriving. All those corruptions of divine-human intimacy that only lead to spiritual and social alienation.

Despite the momentousness and righteousness of Woolman's antislavery work, nowhere in his writings does he ever appear giddy to take prophetic stances that he knows would be opposed by his fellow colonists and Quakers. Woolman was not looking for a fight. Like the prophet Jeremiah he found the message God had given to him a burden, an exercise, a duty, a solemn calling that brought with it interpersonal turmoil and anxiety.

Woolman's genius was that he did not place himself over and above his peers, even in those places where his conviction was strong. Rather, the distance between his sense of God's leading and the apostasy he saw in the world around him caused him grief. He did not lambaste his fellow Quakers for their positions and for the oppressive systems they supported, he grieved for them. On several occasions he was reduced to tears when confronted with hardened hearts, and when he found himself under compunction from God to walk a different path than his acquaintances and friends (Woolman, *Journal*, pp. 72, 119). Woolman could not caricature or demean those who felt differently than him on the most controversial issues of his day, because he was committed to his community and he knew that his convictions were not his own invention. Since his vision for human faithfulness was given to him by God, they belonged to God and so it was to God that he entrusted them.

On one occasion, Woolman saw that he could not push his fellow Quakers any further, and, yet, they watered down the antislavery language he knew to be right. In a moment of spectacular trust in God, he said, "*[I] felt easy to leave all to him who alone is able to turn the hearts of the mighty and make way for the spreading of Truth in the earth by means agreeable to his infinite wisdom*" (Woolman, *Journal*, 66-67).

Later, on that same journey, Woolman described the type of prophetic non-attachment that invigorated both his obedience to the divine voice and his commitment to Quaker community:

*"I have had renewed evidences that to be faithful to the Lord and content with his will concerning me is a most necessary and useful lesson for me to be learning, looking less at the effects of my labour than at the pure motion and reality of the concern as it arises from heavenly love" (Woolman, *Journal*, p. 72).*

For Woolman, the message was authored by God, and, so, held by God. And its fulfillment, too, was in God's hands. Attentiveness to the Source of divine revelation was the litmus test for prophetic authenticity, and by placing his focus on God's voice Woolman embodied the spiritual transformation out of which his social vision arose. Woolman was deeply concerned with the issues of his day: high rents and interest rates, poverty, egregious wealth, alcoholism, the rapaciousness of the British trans-Atlantic imperial economy. But he did not merely have a list of issues on which he took public stands, as if they could all be isolated, fragmented, and compartmentalized. Woolman's prophetic voice was a comprehensive and unified whole: *"respond to the motion of love, respond to the motion of love, respond to the motion of love."* By pointing again and again to the spiritual root and cause that taught him what a world remade would look like,

Woolman avoided the pitfall of becoming merely a partisan. Like the Hebrew prophets, Woolman saw that the social degeneracies of his day were symptoms of spiritual alienation and rebellion. Woolman's challenge to his fellow colonists was to hearken back to the "pure motion and reality" of God's will.

Outside of a state of obedience within God's will, outside of the complete surrender of one's self to God, slavery happens. Economic and physical bondage happen. Greed happens. Woolman's letters show that not even his closest friends and allies escaped the unrelenting energy of his commission to call people back, over and over, to the presence of God and to warn them of the pride that put them in eternal jeopardy.

In the spirit of Jeremiah, Woolman was the reluctant prophet. Called to a testimony he did not want, with a message he would have rather ignored. Because he knew that his message was one that originated elsewhere, he could only grieve for those to whom he was sent, and grieve for the path he must walk. But his grief was also his vindication. He took assurance from the fact that his message caused him angst and was contrary to his own inclinations, because that validated for him that his message was not of his own but was from God.

Woolman's grief grounded his social witness in love for his people, his friends and neighbors, whom he often disagreed with. It was a love that believed

the apathetic, self-centered stagnation that passed for religion among some of his fellow Quakers was too small a thing and too puny a calling for a people sent by God to be in the vanguard of God's will for human destiny.

The prophet delegitimizes and rejects the present ordering of things while fostering and pointing to an alternative consciousness that energizes communities with its promise of another way of being toward which the community may faithfully move.

Woolman was committed to his Quaker community all the while challenging Quaker stagnation with a vision of the world he thought God was bringing about.

The core of Woolman's prophetic voice was his consistent call to return to the experience of spiritual light and life without which Quaker action was nothing more than religious performance. Woolman attacked those practices and habits that hindered the activity of the Spirit in the world, that oppressed the soul, and that contradicted the divine intent for human faithfulness. In the apocalypse of the heart, Woolman believed the Spirit of Christ would so transform the individual as to show them an alternative vision of society, a perfected and just ordering that reflected God's ultimate intent for human destiny, but available now, on earth, through human faithfulness. Woolman said of this vision in 1772:

“In the harmonious Spirit of Society, Christ is all in all.

*“Here it is that Old Things are past [sic] away, all Things are new, (491) all things are of God; and the Desire for outward Riches is at an End” (Woolman, “On Loving Our Neighbors as Ourselves,” in Gummere, *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman*, p. 491-492).*

The social dimensions of Woolman’s prophetic voice found cohesion in a vision of a world made new, where greed, schism and oppressive practices were no longer possible because their root cause was no longer viable in the new world of absolute human dependency on God.

The more I know of Woolman the more uncomfortable I am with him, because to take him seriously is to let him question the assumptions I take for granted. Woolman challenges the individualism that preempts true corporate discernment and listening. Woolman exposes the way I replace the leadership of Christ with self-justifications.

And most of all, I look at the heroic convictions Woolman held and I want to be so like him. I want to be the one taking the stand that people will honor. I want to be the one leading the charge. I want to be the one whose voice echoes through the generations. And in that conceit, I make the fatal mistake. For Woolman, it’s

not about the impact a person has, it's about following Christ. If Christ is the leader, we can take our stand in peace knowing our efforts are sustained by God and not by us and that it is God who will establish Truth on earth in God's own timing. We can leave all to God who alone changes the hearts of men.

Friends, every generation has a challenge to face. Like Woolman, we are looking with expectancy for the transformation of what is into consistency with what may be, and like Woolman we hope that what we do now might be a foretaste of the love we desire to become the norm for human walking on the earth.

I want to submit to you this morning that the grace and mercy Woolman directed toward his fellow Quakers who disagreed with him, was not incidental to the antislavery progress that occurred as a result of his ministry. And I want to submit to you that if there was ever a time when people feel justified in writing other people off it is in our own day. Our Yearly Meeting is wrestling with important issues of human sexuality and biblical interpretation and it is to be expected that we sometimes get hot under the collar. The lines in our Yearly Meeting are drawn just like they are in every other church in the country.

But Friends, we are not called to be like every other church in the country. We are peacemakers. "We are loudly silent, assertively contemplative, and humbly prophetic" and if there was ever a time that our Yearly Meeting and our world

needed a group of people to reject the rhetoric that divides and the impatience that puts false boundaries around the Spirit, it is now!

Woolman's message presents us with an alternative to the discord and suspicion that often characterizes divisions in the church. Like the prophet Jeremiah, Woolman was absolutely committed to his Quaker community, even when they rejected his message. On multiple occasions Woolman reiterated the conviction that while he did not know how people could extricate themselves from slavery, the constrictions of wealth, and the pride that underlie it all, he had faith that God would provide a way out. The act of resignation to God's will, itself, would provide the map for change, redemption, and transformation. Again and again, Woolman held up the prospect that the new world God was establishing on earth was one characterized by an intimate and direct hear-and-obey relationship with humanity, and, again and again, he declared that the path toward the implementation of that vision was to turn, even now, and respond to that Transforming Presence. He called colonists, and us, to become subjects to the one voice out of which any voice that is prophetic must spring; to the one thing that upends and redefines all others, and recreates the world with spiritual resources that can only be truly known in a life transformed.

Woolman found his prophetic voice in the commissioning that he felt could only come from a divine source, directed into human community. Like the Hebrew

prophets who remained in community with Israel even as they rejected their warnings, Woolman did not seek to break fellowship with his Quaker community even when they were dead wrong. What we see in Woolman is that the prophetic voice is not primarily seen in the oppositional positions a person takes, but in the community a person builds. A prophetic voice is legitimated by one's advocacy of issues relating to deeper spiritual growth and by the enhancement of the community in which one has been placed. Often this will mean taking the long view, like Woolman did. Taking the long view means finding a place to stand and to have a voice, but it opens the door for grace and community and to trust that the work of Truth is ultimately unstoppable, but that it cannot be forced. It will mean turning the other cheek when offended, hurt, or maligned in the course of following Christ.

The way Woolman has exercised his prophetic voice is a helpful corrective to my own tendency to be strident in those places where I form positions of opposition to others that I would like to think are prophetic but that have at least some footing in self-righteousness and my own enculturation. While we don't often associate humility with being prophetic, Woolman and Jeremiah before him, are examples of just that. When the prophetic voice arises from a humble heart it has the power to build community, preserve dignity, and point to the social and interpersonal transformation that is capable of achieving the impossible.