

A Model of Spirituality in a Time of Tribalism

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: From the Journal of John Woolman

We are living in a time of divisiveness and insensitivity. This is not “Breaking News” to those of us gathered here this morning. One *New York Times* reporter called what we are living through as a time of *Tribalism*...Rich vs. Poor...White vs. Black and Brown...Well Educated vs. Poorly Educated, etc. Whatever you call it, it is uncomfortable, and it is tearing at the fragile fabric that holds us together as a society.

Lately, I have been thinking a lot about this time of tribalism, and the increasing callous disregard for the feelings and welfare of one another. Although this has been going on for a long time, it seems to have been magnified in recent years because of the terrible confrontation in Charlottesville nearly a year ago, and the horrific mass shootings which seem to be happening on a weekly basis. Can Quakers offer an antidote to such desensitizing and de-humanizing experiences? Is there a model of spirituality...someone to whom we can turn who offers a way of life that is counter to what we have been experiencing? I believe that there is...

As most of you know by now, one of my spiritual heroes is the Quaker, John Woolman. I have spoken about him here many times. He was an Eighteenth

Century Quaker who, I believe, models a spirituality that was never more needed than right now. What is it that makes John Woolman such a moving spiritual figure? Why is it that what he wrote over 200 years ago can touch and challenge our hearts today? I would suggest that it is because Woolman did not just talk about spiritual transformation—he *lived* spiritual transformation, day in and day out throughout his too brief life. Toward the beginning of his famous *Journal*, he writes about his transformation in this way: “*While I silently ponder on that change wrought in me, I find no language equal to convey to another any clear idea of it. I looked upon the works of God in this visible creation, and an awfulness covered me. My heart was tender and often contrite, and a universal love to my fellow creatures increased in me.*”

Here, in succinct form, Woolman captures the meaning of spiritual transformation. It finds expression in the *tenderizing of one’s heart*, and an increase in *universal love to one’s fellow creatures*. What does it mean to have one’s heart grow tender? What are the marks of such a process? How do I begin to experience, and how can our society experience that sense of awe which issues in a tender and contrite heart?

A profound sense of spiritual humility is clearly the first mark of a tender heart. Persons with tender hearts do not boast or intimidate...They are not braggarts or bullies. Tender hearts are not self-righteous or judgmental.

They do not insist on their own way by espousing certitudes that have not yet been tested by love and reflective thought. A sense of humility has been a part of the lives of all who seek to grow in Spirit and is one of the most important sign posts given to us by those who have traveled the path of spiritual growth before us. John Woolman possessed a humility born of a tender heart.

Another mark of a heart growing in love toward God and one another, and which is beautifully illustrated in the life of John Woolman, is *a sense of connection with human suffering*. Within the Christian tradition, a tender heart is a heart that is broken by what breaks the heart of Jesus.

John Woolman felt this connection with suffering in a profound way. In his *Journal*, he records a dream where he saw a mass of matter to the South and to the East. As he reflected upon this vision, he noted that he could see that this mass was human beings...human beings in great misery. The misery was so great that Woolman could hear their crying and their wails of pain. As he struggled to interpret this dream, Woolman was enlightened with the insight that he was “mixed with” these persons who were experiencing such great suffering...Their cries of pain were his cries of pain. They were spiritually connected. This connection issued in a life-long ministry of speaking out against slavery, particularly within the Society of Friends. His ministry was so effective that it is recorded that 60 years before the outbreak of the Civil

War, not one Quaker owned a slave. A sense of connection with human suffering is a part of a tender heart.

Woolman's tender heart was also expressed in his *caring for and sensitivity toward the entire created order*. An openness, acceptance and inclusivity to all of God's creation is a part of a tender heart. Woolman's heart would break if he were to see pictures of "big-game" hunters posing by lions, tigers and elephants that they had shot. When he traveled to England toward the end of his life, Woolman refused to ride in the carriages because the drivers would run their horses to death to meet their too tight schedules. A tender heart cares for the entire created order.

More so than any other person in the 350-year history of the Society of Friends, John Woolman lived the Quaker Testimonies...He lived a life of Simplicity...He worked for Peace in our diverse world...He lived a life of Integrity...He loved his Community and Meeting at Mt. Holly, New Jersey, and it was in this Meeting that he found support for his ministry...He worked tirelessly on issues of Equality, and he had a sense of Stewardship for God's earth and created order. If there was ever a need for the kind of spirituality that John Woolman lived, it is *now*.

In his writing, *A Plea for the Poor*, Woolman writes out of his tender heart and his increasing love for all. I close my message with these same loving words that I shared at the beginning: *“Our gracious Creator cares and provides for all his Creatures. His tender mercies are over all his works; and so far as his love influences our minds, so far as we become interested in his workmanship, and feel a desire to take hold of every opportunity to lessen the distresses of the afflicted and increase the happiness of the Creation. Here we have a prospect of one common interest, from which our own is inseparable, that to turn all of the treasures that we possess into the channel of Universal Love, becomes the business of our lives.*