John Woolman and the Discovery of Truth

By Daniel A. Seeger

Offered as a contribution to the
Monday evening lecture series
held at Pendle Hill during
the Fall Term, 1994

John Woolman's *Journal* is a classic of devotional literature revered by people of many faiths and backgrounds. Like many of you I have read it once from cover to cover, and then have returned to it in sections from time to time as part of my spiritual exercises. When reading it as a devotional classic it is reasonable for each of us to respond to it in a somewhat different way according to our own nature and according to the place at which we have arrived in our spiritual journey. I have been struck mainly by the purity and simplicity of Woolman's attitudes, by his uncomplaining patience and endurance, his steadfastness in seeking a just and compassionate society, his charity for those who opposed him, his discipline of thinking clearly, logically and calmly about issues which exercised his spirit deeply, and his clear sense of servitude, his sense of obedience to the Divine Intent.

But when I was asked to consider offering a reflection on John Woolman as a part of this series of lectures, it occurred to me that I might re-read this great classic in a somewhat different way. Rather than re-reading it mainly as a model of personal spirituality, I thought it might be interesting to re-read the *Journal* and the essays with a view to seeing if they offered any illumination about two contemporary dilemmas which I consider to be among the most fundamental facing human society at the end of the twentieth century.

I would like, then, to proceed first to outline, even if only sketchily, what I consider these two dilemmas to be, and then to share with you what I found in this re-reading of John Woolman which is pertinent to them.

The first of these modern dilemmas is the breakdown of discourse about social and political ethics in our society. The most striking feature of contemporary public utterance about moral and spiritual questions impacting upon our common life is that so much of it is used to express disagreements. The most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed is their

seemingly interminable character.[1] Our democratic society is built upon the expectation that reasonable and fair-minded people, after a period of respectful discussion, will come to a meeting of minds, and having achieved such a meeting of minds, will work together so as to upbuild the social order in a way that gives expression to the democratically arrived at agreement.

Yet in our experience, whether we are talking about the Vietnam War, abortion, euthanasia, a system of health care, the relationship between men and women, homosexuality, capital punishment, immigration policy, or prayer in public schools, we see, in contrast to this optimistic expectation upon which our democratic society is built, a pattern of vituperation and contention which seems to have no end in sight. Moreover, many of these issues are such that we can scarcely expect a simple majority vote or a decision of the United States Supreme Court to put the matter to rest.

The problem, it seems to me, is that moral and spiritual claims, unlike factual claims, cannot be proven by testable hypotheses. Our rationalistic culture leads us to expect that truth is the product of logical reasoning. When we are dealing with intermediate truths or detailed truths, which rest on more fundamental premises, logical reasoning can indeed be of service, even in the moral and spiritual fields. But the model breaks down when we try to establish the fundamental premises themselves. Logic and rationalism is a way of getting to conclusions from premises; by its very nature logical argument cannot justify the premises upon which it rests. There is no way to justify through logic the ultimate starting point for moral and spiritual reasoning. The rational and enlightened founders of our Republic recognized this when they declared: "We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ." and then proceeded simply to announce the starting point of their thinking.

The reason why we are surrounded by an ethical chaos which has come to be called a "culture war" is that there are so many people who begin their moral reasoning from rival but incommensurable first premises, and we possess no rational way of weighing the claims of one against another.

Consider abortion. Everyone agrees that the government should not intrude into the intimate and personal aspects of our human existence; everyone agrees that life is sacred and that murder is wrong; everyone agrees that each individual deserves the protection of the community. Indeed these are hallmarks of our

---

[1]Paraphrased from page 6 of *After Virtue* by Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). For a fuller discussion of this modern dilemma see Chapters Two and Three in this same book.

civilization. But everyone cannot agree when a human life begins, they cannot agree whether a human fetus is to be included within these definitions and protections or not. Is there any amount rational democratic discourse which is going to generate agreement about whether or not a human life begins at conception, or whether a fetus remains not a person in the full sense until some later time when it finally becomes a pre-born infant?

So the first dilemma upon which I sought to focus when reading John Woolman is the dilemma which arises from the failure of reason to solve spiritual and moral questions, and the need to sort out incommensurable first principles. Where does the truth come from? How do we determine the correct unpremised first premises? Does John Woolman's spiritual experience offer any clues?

The second dilemma of the modern age which I had in mind during this recent re-reading of Woolman is the dilemma of social transformation. Certainly never has the awareness been more widespread that the patterns and structures of societies -- the ways of thinking, the habits of behavior, the institutions -- generate present injustice and portend future disaster. I do not need to enumerate here the well known catalogue of impending catastrophes. Yet in the face of all this, in the face of the widespread consciousness that something is wrong, we seem to lack effective means of social transformation, even in democracies.

In reflecting upon the twentieth century different people have dubbed our era in different ways, depending upon the patterns which they see emerging: the century of total war; the American age; the Gandhian age; the post-modern world. I wonder if this twentieth century could also be dubbed the era of failed revolutionary projects. Certainly the latest attempt radically to transform human society, the attempt based upon the theories of Karl Marx, the attempt at social transformation which was expected to be matched by a transformation of human nature itself, now lies everywhere in ruins. What should be our attitude of mind and heart as one of the most spectacular commitments of thought and labor to the improvement of human life which has ever been attempted, an enterprise that at once challenged us, bewildered us and frightened us, lies mangled before our very eyes?

Although the Socialist revolution is the most spectacular example, one might wonder as well about other manifestations of this phenomenon. Just as the socialist movement was overwhelmed and ultimately ruined and discredited by Bolshevism, many other change movements have tended to be devoured by their extremist wings and have been inclined to dissipate in one form or another of disorder and ineffectiveness. Even before Martin Luther King's Jr.'s death, the signs of this were unmistakable in the Civil Rights movement, and we can observe

the phenomena as well, I believe, in the youth movement of the 1960s, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and feminist movement of more recent times. Most of these movements brought about significant gains in American society; it is not necessary to denegrate these considerable accomplishments to observe also that a disintegrative dynamic set in well before the desired agenda for change was completed.

I believe the descent of revolutionary projects into self-defeating extremism is not unrelated to the first dilemma of the collapse of moral discourse, but I hope this relationship will emerge more clearly later. For the moment the dilemma I posed in this re-reading of John Woolman was this: How do we discover a way of living the Truth, a way of bearing witness, which holds out the hope of authentic social transformation? Does John Woolman's life and spiritual persona offer us anything in the way of guidance about how to be good and successful revolutionaries, or good and successful social change agents?

As we examine John Woolman's *Journal* and essays for clues about the way he discovered Truth and sought to transform society in a way 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 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, such as sugar, spirits and dyed clothing.

Second, John Woolman's spirituality was a deeply felt spirituality and although, as John Lampen correctly asserted early in this series, 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 his own speaking as lacking sufficient charity.

Woolman feels compassion for the victims of unjust social structures, but also feels compassion for these structures' beneficiaries, such as 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 the leadings he senses to undertake some ministry or project arise 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 catharsis. Woolman never says something like "I was very upset about what Friends were saying. I was glad to get this 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 arise out of creaturely weakness or from the delusions of a civilization gone awry.

Finally, regarding feeling, the *Journal* seems to me to express not only a deep level of feeling but also a rather constant quality of feeling. Woolman's *Journal* offers something of a contrast to that of George Fox. While Woolman clearly records what he regards as ups and downs in his life of feeling, including remorse after offering spoken ministry insufficiently guided by the Spirit, distress at arid places in his spiritual journey, joy at "fresh and heavenly openings," loneliness for his wife, and gratitude for the companionship of Friends, it also seems to me that there is a basic steadiness and even-temperedness to this soul, an evenness which is also tender and sensitive.

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 without having been cleared with elders or with a 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.[2]

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 personal integrity and 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.

In Woolman we see received tradition, critical analysis, fact, theory, and personal responsibility all always offered up for clearing by the community of faith. This is a larger asceticism than simply an individual's turning away from all multiplicity and contingency in a single-minded quest for his or her own inner peace. A narrow-minded mysticism perceives the fragmented character of human existence -- the varied and endless demands made upon time, attention, energy, responsibility and affection by family, friends, work and society -- to be simply a distraction from or a threat to the development of personal wholeness. However, a larger and wider mysticism and asceticism recognizes in the discipline of these relationships and these demands the workshop in which personal wholeness, identity and integrity are forged. Quaker spirituality is first and foremost the spirituality of the householder. We must never look to religious experience primarily for balm and satisfaction, for relief, or for some kind of elevated private feeling set loose from institutional or intellectual challenge.

---

[2]This observation about George Fox's indebtedness to tradition was made by Friedrich von Hugel in his *Essays and Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion: Second Series* (London: J. M. Dent, 1926). See especially pages 61, 75 and 77.

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 a highly personalized and individualized dialogue between persons. For three decades, Woolman visited slaveholders, urging them to consider seriously the unethical and unchristian aspects of their way of life. He did not self-righteously rail at them but quietly yet insistently urged them to examine their responsibilities.[3]

I will return later to the aspect of patience, of liberation from a results-orientation, which this approach involved. But for the moment let us reflect that 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 unprogrammed Friends 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 here the

---

[3]Paraphrased from the Introduction to *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, edited by Phillips P. Moulton. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), page 8.

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.

I asked at the outset: Where does Truth come from? How do we determine the unpremised First Premises from which the search for intermediate and practical ways of knowing and acting Truth are derived. Here our situation is far more dire than was that of Woolman and his contemporaries. For it is quite clear from a reading of the *Journal* that the Christian tradition and Quaker culture, of which Woolman was a part, provided the bedrock from which the search for some specific truth, say the truth about proper relations between European settlers and Native Americans, could be derived. The Bible, the life and ministry of Jesus, and Quaker traditions provided a series of interrelated attitudes, habits and beliefs which was shared not only by Friends, but in some respects, at least, by most other people in the culture. This provided a kind of framework for dialogue, a starting place, a point of reference. More than two hundred years later, however, our social life, our political system, and our culture have been completely emancipated from their religious roots, an emancipation which has resulted in the progressive loss of consensus regarding moral truth. As a consequence, we seem to be experiencing a kind of persistent social disintegration. Today, familiarity with Christian teaching has faded, and the Biblical narratives and the vocabulary of Christian faith are no longer common cultural currency. As a universalist Friend with unorthodox religious views, let me hasten to acknowledge that in many respects this is a liberation and a blessing. But the down side is that there no longer exists a common language to form the basis of public culture.

If we lack a starting point for our public discourse, if we lack a common concept of the unpremised First Premise, we are left with the awkward and embarrassing reality that the debates which are tearing at our social fabric simply have no conclusion. In so far as God is dead and no longer can supply the answers to the fundamental, can no longer supply the first premises behind the knowledge of good and evil, the situation may portend not only God's funeral, but ours as well. Many people are coming to realize that the idea that the basic moral choices which face us individually and socially are simply a matter of individual taste is not only untenable, but ultimately calamitous. It is this realization which fuels the often frightening resurgence of fundamentalist and dogmatic religion in our national life.

Does the fact that today's public dialogue takes place in a much more fragmented spiritual and intellectual climate than was the case in John Woolman's day mean that Woolman has no relevance for us? I do not think so.

For John Woolman, by his example, shows us an excellent way to mediate between the extremes of the overcertainty, dogmatism and absolutism, the diseases of the religious sensibility, on the one hand, and on the other hand the nihilistic assumption underlying public culture in western societies that there is no Truth, that all values are merely a matter of different individuals' tastes, and that societies can survive in the long run without any common spiritual basis whatsoever.

To see how this is so, let us step back a little and examine the Quaker culture into which Woolman was born and to which he responded in such a splendid way. It is sometimes thought that Quakerism advanced a kind of individualistic spirituality, but this is very far from the truth. Quakers are more accurately described as having invented a kind of corporate mysticism, a highly disciplined procedure of discernment through which the prophetic function operates collectively.

Essential to the Quaker understanding of unity-based discernment is Fox's conviction that "there is that of God in everyone." When a group comes together out of each member's sincere desire to find the best way to serve God in the here and now, each expects to find some manifestation of Truth in everyone else's remarks. In other words, since it is the same spirit that speaks in every heart, members expect to end their meetings united. In practice, this is a strenuous spiritual discipline requiring much patience. In the history of the Religious Society of Friends, some key problems have been labored over for as long as a century before unity was found. In fact, this was the case with the slavery issue so closely associated with the life and ministry of John Woolman.

Isaac Penington wrote beautifully of the virtues he regarded as essential for participation in a Quaker discernment process. "First is the pure fear of the Lord. This poises and guards the mind, keeping down fleshly confidence and conceitedness, making it wary and considerate, either of what it receives or rejects; of what it practices or forbears practicing. This causes it to wait much, try much, and consult much with the Lord, and with his ministers and people, and preserves out of suddenness and inconsiderateness of spirit. For truth is weighty, and will bear trial; and the more it is tried in the balance, the more manifest its nature and ways appear."

(Another) . . . "great help . . . is sobriety of judgment. Not to value or to set up my own judgment, or that which I account the judgment of life in me, above the judgment of others, or that which is indeed life in others. For the Lord has appeared to others as well as to me . . . there are others who are in the growth of his Truth, and in the purity and dominion of his life, far beyond me."

"The last is tenderness, meekness, coolness, and stillness of Spirit. These are of a uniting, preserving nature."

As Friends seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in discerning the unpremised First Premise, it is important that our corporate seeking for a way forward is not merely a search for a strategy of ecclesial politics through which some people's personal preferences can be made to prevail over other people's personal preferences. Rather, when any spiritual question arises, we are seeking both individually and corporately to attune ourselves to a Universal Order and a Universal Good.

The flaw of much traditional religion is to assume that our apprehension of this Universal Good or Universal Order is a static thing; that the faith which must sustain us has already been fully revealed for all time. It is due to this misconception that so many mainstream religious institutions seem periodically to become oppressively outdated and hollow. It is a misconception which leads to a kind of spiritual imperialism based on a sense of owning the complete Truth. For Friends, our devotion to Truth is not akin to clinging to a shrine, but is more like an endless pilgrimage of the heart based on our awareness that God's Truth is always somewhat beyond our secure apprehension. Moreover, we understand that the alignment with a Universal Good which we seek is a movement, it is not a static thing. There is motion, but it is orderly motion; it is not chaotic or random or discontinuous. In other words, this motion towards Truth is like a dance. The great breakthrough that Quakerism represents is that, with its special attitude towards scripture and ecclesial authority, with its emphasis on living spiritual experience, it is prepared to respond to this motion of the cosmic dance. We are not a spiritual fellowship which values rigidity.

But this forward movement, this reform from within, is not necessarily an easy thing. Not every change, not every evidence of flexibility, is necessarily a step towards Truth. With respect to such matters as same gender relationships, as the broadening of membership in our Religious Society to include people who are not Christians in the traditional sense, and the issue of abortion, we are discovering some of the pain and difficulty of practicing Quaker discernment, of trying to know whether a proposed new step is good or bad. We should not be surprised at this difficulty, for it was never promised to us that we would have a magic way forward. The challenge of the community's distinguishing a true leading from a false one is not without stress, and patience is required as we struggle for unity. One of the unambiguous messages of scripture is that God frequently speaks to us in the midst of our turmoils, stresses, and troubles. So we must never despair of the possibility of receiving a message.

In contemplating the process of discernment as historically experienced in

our Religious Society of Friends, it is particularly useful to look closely at the matter of the clearing of the Religious Society of Friends of slaveholding, a matter with which John Woolman's life and work was so directly connected.

First, Friends were the first community of people in western history corporately to espouse and practice the abolition of slavery. Slavery has been practiced in our culture beginning with the ancient Hebrews. Through the centuries, the institution of slavery has enjoyed the support of religious bodies who could cite much scriptural authority in favor of their views. Although in Biblical writings the escape of the Hebrews from their own enslavement by the Egyptians is regarded as a good thing, nowhere is slavery in general forbidden in the Bible. In fact, the theme there is often one of telling people to be obedient and respectful to their masters. At any rate, slavery experienced a kind of grand climax with the expansion of western Europeans into the New World. To inquire why the institution of slavery did finally fall into universal disfavor is to address a singularly momentous change in history, a change for which Friends were in the avant garde.[4]

It is also interesting to note that although Friends were in the avant garde of abolition, and although they had cleared our Religious Society of slaveholding a hundred years before the horrors of the Civil War, Quakerism was nevertheless itself one hundred years old before clearness about the matter was reached! It seems to me that this is one of the most riveting aspects of the matter to contemplate. How could Friends have taken so long to achieve clearness about so transparent an evil? Or, referring again to Isaac Penington, what does it mean to avoid suddenness and inconsiderateness of spirit, to wait much, to be meek and cool, when sitting in contemplation of my Quaker neighbor's practice of buying and selling human beings as (his) private property? Is this some grotesque mismatch between a picturesque sectarian refinement and a monstrous social evil? What meaning can this one hundred years of patient threshing over slavery have for us today as we ponder issues like abortion, or same gender unions?

---

[4] For a more thorough discussion of the abolition of slavery within the Religious Society of Friends, see *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1708–1783* by Jack D. Marietta (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), especially pages 111–128. Basing his conclusions on an extensive study of other scholarly research about the problem of slavery in European and American culture, Marietta states unequivocally that Friends were the first community of people in western history corporately to espouse and practice the abolition of slavery. Others have pointed out to me, however, that Anabaptists and Mennonites opposed slavery earlier than Friends did, and indeed members of those movements are thought never to have owned slaves. Marietta and his sources may base their assertions on the fact that Friends were the first people corporately to reverse themselves and to change their attitudes and practice. It is also possible that a climate of anti-slavery attitudes existed in the other groups without their ever having passed official denomination-wide policy statements. Perhaps more research needs to be done about this.

To answer this question, I would like to tell you about a very personal experience. This may seem like a digression, but I believe that it illuminates this matter of waiting for a century for clearness to be reached. This personal experience brings us back to the matter of the search for Truth and for social transformation.

As many of you know, I have a foster son who is a Cambodian refugee. His name is Tuot. Tuot was eleven years old when the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia. It was the practice of the Khmer Rouge, when they were not actually killing people, to segregate the populace according to age, thus breaking up families. Tuot was put in a children's labor camp, administered by teenagers with automatic weapons. After long days of grueling work, Tuot was taught in evening classes that he was no longer the child of his parents, that now he was the government's child. The government, moreover, would instruct its children how to organize and operate a just society. The most vivid recollection Tuot has of those years is of his crying himself to sleep in longing and loneliness for the parents from whom he had been separated. He was forced to sing songs in praise of this revolution while, unbeknownst to him, the father from whom he had been separated was being executed by the Khmer Rouge.

One Saturday I was helping Tuot cram for the final exam for a course in classics which he was taking at Brooklyn College. We began reading aloud the various parts of Plato's *Republic* which had been assigned. This reading aloud was my primitive way of being sure that not too much was lost due to language difficulties. It had probably been thirty years since I had last looked at Plato's *Republic*. Tuot and I were both carried along in our reading, uplifted by the spirituality, by the clarity, and by the wisdom of this inquiry into the nature of the good life, and into the sort of social order which would make the good life possible, which would bring out the best in human nature. And as we read along, we marveled at this pre-Christian Christianity, at this philosophy so compelling that early Christians expropriated large amounts of it to explain their own faith to themselves.

And as we read groups of pages, here and there, according to the assignments, we eventually came to that aspect of Plato's prescription for the ideal society where the children would not be raised by their parents, would not even know where their parents were, but would be placed in the care of guardians who, on behalf of the state, would inculcate them with the practice of rhetoric and the discipline of mathematics so that eventually these children would be fit citizens to participate in and to govern the ideal society.

I should have remembered that this was coming along, but I did not. Tuot and I were both stunned. Suddenly there seemed to be laid out before our eyes,

from the fifth century B.C. through the Khmer Rouge, the entire tragic story of humankind's utopian aspirations, the entire panorama of people so in the grip of visions of what human life ought to be that they felt compelled to implement these visions on their own schedule, rather than on God's schedule. Not only did we contemplate the totalitarianism of Plato and the Khmer Rouge, but the genocidal wars against idol worshippers described in the Bible, the torture of heretics throughout Christian history, the American Civil War and the European holocaust. Indeed, just look at the world of the last three decades: Protestants and Catholics killing each other in Northern Ireland, Muslims and Jews killing each other in the Middle East, Sunis and Shiites killing each other in the Persian Gulf, Buddhists and Hindus killing each other in Sri Lanka.

The simple fact is that people cannot be so pliable about the really deep questions in life that they can be expected to negotiate about them amiably, or to trust them to an election. The tragedy of the American Civil War is an illustration of this. Truly inestimable things like slavery, abortion, the values which uphold the family, or freedom and dignity for sexual minorities, can scarcely be entrusted to elections unless you are willing to have it either way, unless you believe that since there is no Truth, whatever the majority prefers, although it is merely a matter of taste, nevertheless should hold sway on that account alone. Santayana observed of liberal democracy that it only works if the questions at issue are relatively minor matters. This is why we see again and again that people either become indifferent to issues of faith, lapsing into a kind of lukewarm relativism, or else they are apt to wind up in fratricidal strife. It is why, although we cannot live by bread alone, our spiritual convictions so often in history have led to repression and violence.

Our ability as Friends 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 the discipline of our discernment process successfully, we make a gift not only to ourselves, and not only to the Religious Society of Friends. 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. Indeed, the disciplines of our discernment process are an integral part of our peace testimony and of our social transformation strategy. 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 love, to know Truth, to live in peace and to build justice.

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 her works to be with humankind forever as her gift. The scriptures tell us the story of God's discourse with her 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, the Truth? How do we apprehend the unpremised First Premise which must serve as the foundation for public discourse on spiritual and moral issues?

And how do we advance authentic social change in the face of so many failed revolutionary projects?

The Quaker discernment process, undergirded by the conscientious practice of the virtues described by Penington and so magnificently practiced by Woolman, is the key. For the unpremised First Premise comes only from God, not from ourselves, and God's Wisdom can be discerned in worshipful, patient, corporate deliberation. We find our way closer to the Truth, closer to authentic living, closer to meaningful social transformation, as a result of searching dialogue. Dialogue in this deep sense consists of speaking the Truth as we understand it and in listening to others as they speak from their understanding. It is in the continual costly, practical, public quest for an appropriate balance and harmony among thinking, feeling, and doing that Wisdom emerges.

When this balance is sought in the spirit of love and tenderness which John Woolman so beautifully represents, revelation and community happen, and social change follows naturally, but not without patient effort. But as through worship the more profound possibilities of our human nature become visible to us, we are enabled gradually to grow into what we know we are meant to be. And in the same measure to which we come alive to our own possibilities, we become alive and alert as well to the needs of others. Thus we discover a way of life worthy of our profoundest enthusiasm, a way of life which is nonviolent, sensitive and caring, a way of life which tirelessly finds concrete, practical ways to move the human estate closer to the City of God. By living this way of life fully and faithfully we in fact do not labor for ourselves alone. For so to live is to let our

lives pour out teaching like prophesy; so to live is to prepare a place worthy of all people, so to live is to build a new society, so to live is to prepare a place where future generations can make their home.

Daniel A. Seeger
Wallingford, Pennsylvania
December 5, 1994

D:\wpdata\dan\woolman2.lec
(Single spaced format)