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June, 2022

In my last Newes Letter (September, 2021) I mentioned that I was still in the midst of transition. It is fair to say that we are still in transition, though it feels like we are just over the edge of the curve. But then again, who knows what new surprises may come our way!

I have not taught at Fuller all year, though I am still on the books as an adjunct professor. Late in 2021 a doctoral student from another seminary asked me to review his progress in a dissertation about new monasticism. I had such fun evaluating the dissertation just as I would as a professor but without the need to “grade” it. This winter I finished grading the final assignments for a cohort at Tyndale seminary I co-taught last summer. I remember wondering if these would be the last papers I would ever grade. I have now passed that class on to my co-teacher after two years of mentoring him into the position. I was thrilled last week to hear of the students’ joy at the June 2022 cohort he led solo. I look forward to teaching and even evaluating people’s projects and research in the years ahead, but without the need to provide grades.

Last NewesLetter I mentioned that my big project was finishing the book *Deep and Wide: Reflections on Socio-Political Engagement, Monasticism, and the Christian Life*.

I was hoping to complete the book in February. Well, I did not get it done by February, but by the end of March I had finished the manuscript and started the editorial and publication process. Now I am looking forward to seeing a book in print in early 2023. It was not an easy book to write (writing a book on politics, really?), and I ended up giving parts or all of the manuscript to over ten people to read and provide feedback. I am so grateful for the dialogue with friends of many viewpoints. I’ll let you know when it appears in print.

Each week during my book-writing process I posted a quote from



Thomas Merton on socio-political matters on the Spirituality Shoppe Facebook site. It was fun and I think a few people enjoyed following the quotes.

I still serve a number of networks of intentional Christian communities or new monastic groups. I do research and write papers for leaders on things like how nuns and monks have governed themselves or on writing constitutions for religious orders. I publish book reviews. I still meet one-on-one with a few people on a regular basis. A few folks have come to visit and then I devote a little extra time to listening. I give presentations through zoom meetings and now (yippee!) face-to-face. I led a conversation in Los Angeles in early March, 2021 for some folks asking questions about what they might learn from monastic and other alternative approaches to economic life. I also spoke twice at the Evangelical Theological Society meetings about Christianity and economic issues.

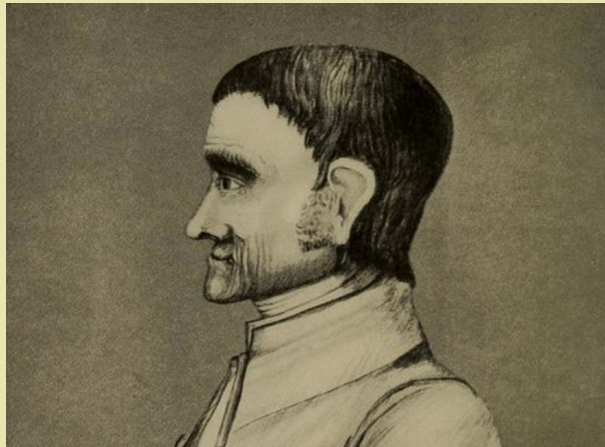
We have continued to use the ranch property as a place for small retreats. This piece of property is becoming something of a combination of cattle ranch, retreat center, second home, and wildlife sanctuary (we are careful to make the place welcome for natural life of all kinds). This spring and summer the fence repair work has been exceptionally difficult, with the consequence that we are living up here at least three days per week. We are grateful for the winter snow, though, even if it breaks the barbed wire fences. Oh, and by the way YouTube journalist Kirsten Dirksen did publish the video about our home and rhythm of life. You can find it at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDpZ4jED6zA&t=3s> or just go to YouTube and search “Dirksen Hand-Cranked Utopia”.

We have also begun to do more traveling and camping. There are so many beautiful places near our home. Cheri likes to hike and I like to study outdoors (I am currently writing this NewesLetter outside). The fun challenge of all the home, ranch, and camping life is to learn how to keep a semi-monastic rhythm of prayer, work, study, and community wherever I happen to be living at the time. It has taken a bit of experimenting (and investing in things like portable solar charger-battery systems) but we are learning.

Speaking of Cheri, I must say something about her work. We are increasingly partners in Spirituality Shoppe these days. Cheri maintains a blog at <https://soulsculpting.wordpress.com/> blending Christian perspective, empirically-based psychological wisdom and simple practices. She also manages a Facebook expression with a similar theme. Cheri also regularly facilitates a group on life skills at a recovery program/shelter nearby and is the primary leader of a couple of music groups, one that blends people with all kinds of abilities and disabilities. But her big accomplishment since the last NewesLetter is that she self-published a book of family devotions. It is called *Intentional Fun: The Pleasure of Pursuing Faith with Kids* and you can get it from [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com/). It really is a record of what we did with our kids when they were growing up. People are liking it!

One more thing I found myself saying “yes” to in November of 2021 was putting together an abbreviated version of the *Journal* of Society of Friends [Quaker] leader John Woolman (1720–1772) for The Urban Ministry Institute, a wonderful group who is publishing a series of spiritual classics as a way of training urban pastors.

John Woolman's *Journal* is one of my favorite books of all time and I am overjoyed at the opportunity to help make it available to a wider audience. My job is to select what to keep in the abridged version (I have to cut the book in half), to write an introduction and afterword, and to develop some study questions to accompany each chapter of the book. Since finishing *Deep and Wide* I have put much of my study time into this book and I am really enjoying the project, loving Woolman and his *Journal* more than ever.



Let me tell you why.

Reflections -

John Woolman loved the creatures of the earth. He writes in his *Journal* that he was “early convinced in my mind that true religion consisted in an inward life, wherein the heart doth love and reverence God the Creator and learn to exercise true justice and goodness, not only toward all men but also toward the brute creatures; that as the mind was moved on an inward principle to love God as an incomprehensible being, on the same principle it was moved to love him in all his manifestations in the visible world; that as by his breath the flame of life was kindled in all animal and sensitive creatures, to say that we love God as unseen and at the same time exercise cruelty toward the least creature moving by his life, or by life derived from him, was a contradiction in itself.”

Woolman's care for God's creatures was born early in his life. His father encouraged in his family “a spirit of tenderness, not only toward poor people, but also towards all creatures.” He recounts an occasion in his childhood where he violated this spirit of tenderness, throwing stones at a mother robin till he killed it. His grief over the mother and baby robins haunted him such that “for some hours I could think of little else but the cruelties I had committed.”

This same care was present the last year of his life. John Woolman died during a visit to England. He made entries in his journal till his final sickness and one of these entries regards the use of stagecoaches, a form of rapid transportation and communication in his day. He writes,

“Stagecoaches frequently go upwards of a hundred miles in 24 hours, and I have heard Friends say in several places that it is common for horses to be killed with hard driving, and many others driven till they grow blind. . . . I have had several offers of being assisted on my way in these stages, but I have not been in them, nor have I had freedom to send letters by these posts in the present way of their riding . . .”

Woolman cared for the creatures of the world. He also understood that the transportation and communication systems of his day, as they were practiced, frequently caused harm to some of those

creatures. In the face of this conflict between economic progress and ecological compassion, Woolman chose the way of compassion. He would have wished the stagecoach industry maintain their business while treating the horses with greater care, but in light of the present situation he chose simply to avoid contributing to a creature's harm by finding other ways to travel.

John Woolman also pursued a sincere relationship with God. He poured out his concerns to God. He writes of his early spiritual growth wherein "I sought deserts and lonely places, and there with tears did confess my sins to God and humbly craved His help. And I may say with reverence, He was near to me in my troubles, and in those times of humiliation opened my ear to discipline." Again, speaking of a time later in life, he writes, "Many were the afflictions which attended me, and in great abasement, with many tears, my cries were to the Almighty for His gracious and Fatherly assistance, and after a time of deep trial I was favoured to understand the state mentioned by the Psalmist more clearly than ever I had done before; to wit: "My soul is even as a weaned child" (Ps. 131:2).



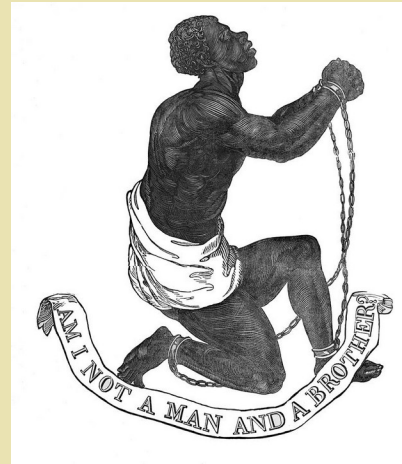
Woolman nurtured a rich sensitivity to the Spirit of God. He talks about his growing in Christian maturity as becoming "strengthened to distinguish the language of the pure Spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart." He often speaks of this aspect of his spirituality in the language of *depth*. He writes, "To forward this work the all-wise God is sometimes pleased, through outward distress, to bring us near the gates of death; that life being painful and afflicting, and the prospect of eternity opened before us, all earthly bonds may be loosened, and the mind prepared for that deep and sacred instruction which otherwise would not be received. Woolman's desire for spiritual depth shaped his ministry with others as well. For example, he encouraged others that, "It is good for thee to dwell deep, that thou mayest feel and understand the spirits of people." Author Richard Foster, quoting this passage in the first page of his landmark *Celebration of Discipline*, comments, "The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people." Amen.

John Woolman also cared for other people, particularly those who suffered. He wrote a *Plea for the Poor* near the end of his life. He lived during the Seven Years' War (1754–1763) when French settlers fought with British settlers, each side being supported by various Native American tribes. Some of the fighting was near his home. Woolman chose the unpopular response to the war effort of discouraging his fellow Friends from participation at all, and even to avoid paying taxes that financed war. Likewise, concerned with the situation of Native American populations, he went on a perilous journey to visit one of the tribes as an emissary of peace. One of my favorite sections of Woolman's *Journal* (too long to reproduce here) is a brilliant reflection regarding the effects of European expansion upon the economy and hardships of the Native populations. John Woolman was keenly aware of the interrelationship of socio-economic developments and human (and animal) suffering, and he often spoke of the need for followers of Christ to lead a plain and simple life.

Nowhere was this awareness more present than when it came to the issue of slavery. If John Woolman has any notoriety in history it is because he convinced the critical mass of the Society of Friends to abolish slavery from their midst one hundred years before the United States ruled for emancipation. He believed that "liberty was the natural right of all men equally," and he spoke repeatedly regarding how our need for "superfluities" (like rum) perpetuated harsh treatment of slaves. Woolman ultimately

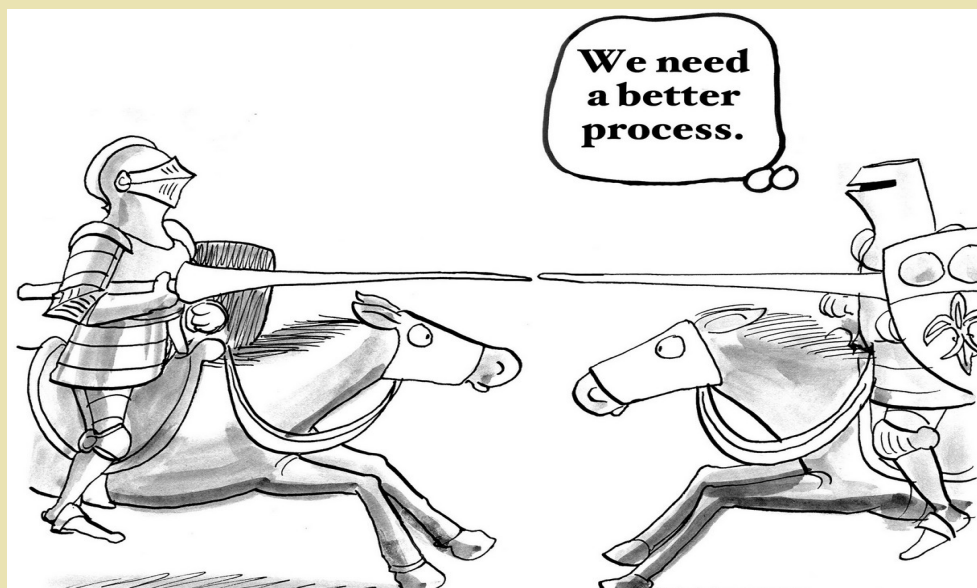
chose to avoid selling slave-produced goods in his mercantile shop and boycotted many goods personally, pioneering a practice of fair-trade exchange.

What has especially moved me in my recent reading of the *Journal*, however, is to realize just how John Woolman succeeded in his abolitionist project. He organized no demonstrations. He attempted a couple times to have statements read in government assemblies, but they achieved little. He did write a couple of essays on the topic and these had some influence. His comments in the many Quaker meetings he visited probably had more influence still. But as an editor of his journal states, “although Woolman’s opposition to slavery was expressed in many ways, his preferred approach was a personal confrontation with individuals.”



You read this again and again in the *Journal*: “I joined with my friends Daniel Stanton and John Scarborough in visiting Friends who had slaves.” “We visited some sick people and some widows and their families, and the other part of our time was mostly employed in visiting such who had slaves.” “I found an increasing concern on my mind to visit some active members in our Society who had slaves.” And again and again. The point is this: John Woolman made his impact by talking personally with people who disagreed with him, people who had a strong economic interest in keeping their slaves. This was not easy and Woolman frequently tells of the difficulties he experienced in these visits. Yet he persevered in walking straight into conflict with his fellow church-members. No wonder he writes that “it is good for thee to dwell deep, that thou mayest feel and understand the spirits of people”!

One other thing I have been doing lately is reading books about conflict. Family conflict, church conflict, political disagreements, military conflicts and more. I wrote an article for our local newspaper commenting on a few of my favorite books on the topic (you can find it at https://www.montrosepress.com/religion-conflict-resolution-a-book-report/article_1e4c89a0-d2dc-11ec-9763-43523b81ff56.html or just Google “Howard Conflict Resolution Montrose Daily Press”).



One thing I think I am learning from all this—and especially from John Woolman—is that love does not always mean “nice.” Love steps into conflict where it is appropriate. Love that is born of a deep dwelling with the Spirit of God is not out to accomplish one’s own agenda, but neither does it abdicate from the responsibility of encouraging one another to love and good works.

I have only touched the surface. John Woolman lived a life of integrity in the midst of conflicts right and left: political divisions, interpersonal tensions, church factions, ecological conflicts, and much more. Woolman took the hard road of living what he believed even when it cost him economically or socially. His *Journal* is a sincere and precious record of that life. Perhaps you will want to take a look, or experiment with his practices, sometime. If you want to read his *Journal* and major essays, I recommend the edition edited by Phillips P. Moulton (Friends United Press). I will let you know when my abridged version is in print.

May the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit be with you all.
By God’s Grace,

Evan B. Howard