

Walking in the Light



John Woolman's Witness for Living in Right Relationship with *All* of Creation

*A Short Study Guide for the
2007–2008 Peace for Earth Walk*

by Louis Cox and Ruah Swennerfelt

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We felt loved and held by many and began our journey with hope and humility. No journey is made solo. We are a community, and through community we can change the world.

—Ruah and Louis

Earthcare and Soulcare

To close ourselves off from God's guiding presence brings us pain. Slaveholders knew that slavery was not really justifiable morally, just as we know today that degrading the environment, for example, is inexcusable. We may try hard to rationalize such a choice: Everybody does it. It's a dog-eat-dog world. My life is complicated enough already without having to worry about one more thing. The money this brings in makes it possible for me to give my family a nice vacation. At a deeper level, though, we are not so self-deceived. The truth gnaws at our comfort; we are not happy. When we suppress the light of God within us, we need to be redeemed from this situation.

When John Woolman traveled under the weight of religious concern to visit "such as kept slaves," these journeys had a double focus. He visited slavekeepers in order to labor with them regarding their practice of slavekeeping. His hope was both to help to bring an end to slavekeeping and to bring the captors to realize they were suppressing the Seed within themselves that was opposed to a practice so clearly contrary to truth. His intent was to assist in bringing the Inward Seed to birth in them.

—Michael Birkel
*A Near Sympathy, The Timeless
Quaker Wisdom of John Woolman*
Friends United Press, 2003

Introduction

ON NOVEMBER 1, 2007, we began a 1,400-mile (2,000-kilometer) "Peace for Earth Walk" from Vancouver, B.C. to San Diego, Calif. During the following six months, we talked with Friends meetings and churches about how John Woolman's call to live in right relationship with all Creation is as relevant in the 21st century as it was 250 years ago. Like Woolman, we traveled on foot and, as much as possible, stayed with Friends along the way.

Although Woolman is best known for his witness against slavery and other social injustices, he also was increasingly concerned about the spiritual health of the Religious Society of Friends. He felt that many Friends had lost touch with their witness to Truth and were getting caught up in materialism, overwork, and insensitivity toward non-human creatures.

Similarly, during our walk we sought to deepen and strengthen 21st century Friends' work for peace, justice, and Earthcare by focusing on the unifying spiritual foundation of these concerns. We tried to show how reverence for life cannot be separated from maintaining the integrity and health of ecological systems.

Our growing understanding of Woolman's vision has called us to make radical changes in our own lifestyles and to work for critical public policy changes. We hope that our words and actions during this journey will serve as a catalyst for others to take similar actions.

This booklet was written because we wanted to leave something with Friends along the way. We wanted our visit to be the beginning of a continuing relationship with those we encounter and hope that a spark will be kindled and that lives will be changed. We wanted to see all Friends united in the Spirit, crying out for a world that will sustain the future generations of all life on Earth.

Please visit our website, www.peaceforearth.org, to learn more about us and our lifestyle choices and to read the many journal entries we posted on our blog while we were on the road.

After Friends had abandoned the practice of slavery, they were asked to work in the political arena to help abolish slavery as an institution, and then to help former slaves become part of the larger society. At every juncture, Friends were required to examine their relationship with black people, to see if it was in keeping with Fox's admonition to "speak to that of God in everyone," and with Christ's great commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

God calls Friends today to similar action: we are asked to look into our hearts and...to recognize that our neighbor includes *the entire Earth community*. We, too, are being asked to give up habits and things which have made our lives seem easier, just as slaves appeared to make life easier for their owners.... We are being asked to acknowledge our interdependence with all Creation. And we are being asked to do things at a time in history when much of humanity still cannot accept other people as their "neighbors," much less accept the sacred nature of the rest of Creation.

—Lisa Lofland Gould
Friends, Slavery, and the Earth
Quaker Earthcare Witness

Some milestones in the life of John Woolman

1720. Born at Rancocas, Burlington County, New Jersey.
1741. Began working for a shopkeeper in Mount Holly, New Jersey and later became an apprentice tailor.
1742. Answered the call to public ministry and became a recorded minister in the Religious Society of Friends.
1746. Developed a retail trade while working independently as a tailor. Undertook his first journey to minister to Southern Quaker slaveholders.
1747. Visited Quakers in Long Island and New England.
1748. Visited Quakers in New Jersey and Maryland.
1749. Married Sarah Ellis.
1750. Birth of John and Sarah's daughter Mary.
1751. Visited Quakers in the upper part of New Jersey.
1753. Published "Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes."
1755. Composed and co-signed an epistle to Friends advocating pacifism. Also signed "An Epistle of Tender Love and Caution" making the case for refusing to pay war taxes.
1756. Visited Quakers on Long Island. Gave up his increasingly successful retail business to concentrate on tailoring and orchard-tending. Began composing his *Journal*.
1757. Visited Quakers in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina.
- 1758-59. Visited Quakers in Philadelphia area. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting adopted a Minute opposing slavery in 1758.
1760. Visited Quakers in New Jersey, and Long Island, and New England.
1761. Decided to give up wearing dyed clothing due to connection with slavery.
1762. Visited Indians at Wyalusing during the French & Indian War. Published "Considerations on Keeping Negroes: Part Second."
- 1763-64. Began writing "A Plea for the Poor."
- 1764-65. Visited Quakers near Mount Holly and along the New Jersey coast.
1766. Visited Quakers in Delaware, along the eastern shore of Maryland, and upper New Jersey. Went on foot as an expression of sympathy for mistreated animals.
1767. Journeyed on foot to visit Quakers in western Maryland, Philadelphia, and Mount Holly area.
1768. Journeyed on foot to visit Quakers in Maryland. Published "Considerations on Pure Wisdom and Human Policy."
- 1770-1772. Prepared his *Journal* for publication. Composed "Conversations on the True Harmony of Mankind."
1772. Sailed to England. Composed several short essays while at sea. Persuaded London Yearly Meeting to include opposition to slavery in its epistle. Died of smallpox in York, England.



Unit 1. John Woolman's life and writings —How relevant are they to Friends today?

MOST FRIENDS have at least a passing acquaintance with John Woolman, the 18th century Quaker from Mt. Holly, New Jersey, known best for his writings and traveling ministry in opposition to slavery. Few people seem to be aware, however, of the deep spiritual leadings behind Woolman's words and actions. Fewer still seem to experience directly the extraordinary attunement and obedience to the leadings of the Spirit that Woolman demonstrated throughout most of his life.

As we approached the task of summarizing the life and writings of John Woolman, our main challenge was to help Friends appreciate what could be gained from the words and deeds of someone who lived 250 years ago, in a very different cultural and political setting. The best way to begin, we decided, was to share how our own lives have been guided and enriched by John Woolman's example:

Ruah identifies closely with John Woolman's decision to leave a profitable mercantile business, choosing the slower-paced and more independent vocations of tailor and orchard keeper, in order to better attend to the life of the Spirit. Many years ago, after receiving a master's degree in business administration, Ruah went to work for an international accounting firm. She had been active in a Quaker Meeting and took this career opportunity only after discerning with other Friends whether it was an appropriate job for a Quaker. They concluded that she could make lots of money and still uphold Friends' Testimonies. But after three years and much agonizing, she felt alienated in the high-pressure corporate milieu and came to believe that climbing the corporate ladder to gain wealth and status was not compatible with her understanding of right livelihood. During this period she had been deepening her understanding and experience of Quaker values, and learning about the lives of Woolman and other exemplary Quakers helped her decide to leave that career path. Shifting to the not-for-profit sector, she found more meaning and satisfaction in her work, realizing that her personal interest was best served by being part of the solution for a healthy future for all of life.

Louis's first "ah-ha" moment came when he read in the *Journal* of John Woolman about a crisis of conscience that Woolman experienced as a young man: Woolman's employer, a shopkeeper, asked him to prepare a bill of sale for a Negro slave. He reluctantly complied, but later deeply regretted playing even a small part in perpetuating such a cruel and unjust system. He resolved to never again write such bills of sale. This marked the beginning of a life-long witness against human slavery. A short time later, Woolman published an essay titled "Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes" that was influential in persuading the Religious Society of Friends to eventually declare that slavery was inconsistent with the true Christian religion. He went on a number of long journeys to labor with individual Quaker slave owners, sharing his conviction that Friends would not need to exploit others in this way if they led lives that were simple in means and rich in ends. He also resisted the institution of slavery in his personal affairs and business practices by refusing to use products that he knew involved slave labor.

This account brought Louis back to the fall of 1964, when during his junior year in college he was in the process of registering to vote in his first national election—in one of the Southern states that still

imposed a “literacy test” on all prospective voters. (Such “Jim Crow” laws—widely regarded as blatant attempts to disenfranchise black voters—were eventually banished.) Louis was deeply troubled as he watched a black man in front of him being kept from registering just because he wasn’t able to pronounce a few lines from a printed page fluently enough to satisfy the clerk that he “knew how to read.” When Louis’s turn came, he saw that the test material had been selected from a part of the state constitution that was mostly convoluted legal jargon. Although he was able to easily pass this “literacy” test on the strength of his phonics skills, he hadn’t understood any better than the hapless black man what those lines meant. But despite the strong feelings that this injustice aroused, Louis did not speak up in protest or try later to change the system. He once attended a bi-racial conference, but still didn’t feel led to take any constructive actions, such as helping with voter registration in black communities, that Woolman would have considered obligatory.

Louis wonders today how his social conscience and moral convictions might have developed if he had had John Woolman’s courageous example to inspire and guide him. Louis says his current convictions about peace, social justice, and ecological issues began to crystallize only when he joined the Religious Society of Friends several years after college and began slowly realigning his lifestyle and career choices with the values that Woolman and others demonstrated in their lives.

Trying to account for the remarkable consistency of Woolman’s personal witness, we take note of the fact that he grew up in a close-knit Quaker community and could rely on the support of his family and faith community. Like many adolescents, he went through a period of rebellion and self-absorption, then discovered a strong spiritual calling, leading to his becoming a recorded minister in his early 20s. Life for most people of his era proceeded at a slow enough pace that those interested in living rightly and authentically had time to reflect on their values. Few Friends today enjoy enough of that kind of the social cohesion to help them fend off the influences of the dominant materialistic culture. And there are so many competing messages and conflicting demands on our time that we often have trouble distinguishing what Woolman knew as “the Voice of the True Shepherd” from conventional wisdom and popular culture.

But modern Friends enjoy some offsetting advantages that Quakers of the American Colonies didn’t have. We have large collections of Quaker writings, as well as Quaker institutions that are working to distill, disseminate, and act on their essential Truths. We have access to powerful communication systems that can help us overcome geographical separations. And most of us are free of the kind of back-breaking labor and worries about personal health and safety that haunted most people in the Colonial era, so that we have the opportunity to focus on many higher goals in life.

But for any of these things to make a real difference, we need to return to the kind of True Simplicity of thought and action that Woolman and others preached and practiced. Options may seem limited until we consider the simple step of switching off our televisions and computer games (or better yet, getting rid of them), staying out of the shopping malls, and just spending time getting to know our family and neighbors. A window to a new world opens up when we learn to let go of frenetic activity. We have time to enjoy meals together. In quiet moments, we begin to appreciate the beauties of nature and the blessings of the present moment. Later steps may lead to a career change or other major shift in lifestyle.

This is where Woolman becomes most relevant to Friends today. He was able to make radical changes in his own life once he realized that wealth and luxury are idols that distract us from that holy calling, building the Peaceable Kingdom in big and small ways.

This brings to mind the metaphor of our lives as monuments, as reminders to future generations of what, at the soul-level, we ultimately stood for. Louis recalls an old *New Yorker* cartoon that satirized the spiritual poverty of a life dedicated primarily to material wealth: It pictured a grave stone with an epitaph that identified the deceased person only as the founder of a successful department store, followed by a directory of the goods offered on each floor.

For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?

—Mark 8:36

We don’t know exactly how John Woolman’s epitaph reads, but we know that his true monument is his legacy as a humble and faithful steward of the challenges and opportunities he was given. ❖

Questions for reflection and discussion on Unit 1

1. What do I think of Woolman's refusal to continue preparing bills of sale for negro slaves—perhaps at the risk of losing his job—even though he wasn't directly involved in the owning or trading of slaves and knew that someone else would gladly do the task if he didn't? Can I think of any difficult choices like that that might come up in my own employment situation? Have I been asked to make such choices in my own working life? Have I ever paid a price or made a sacrifice for making what I considered the right decision instead of the commercially expedient one?

2. In his *Journal*, Woolman tells of another spiritual turning point early in his life:

One day he and some other boys were idly slinging rocks at a robin that was trying to drive them away from her nest. When one of the stones happened to strike and kill the bird, Woolman was filled with remorse at what this careless act has caused. He then thought of the baby birds, who would die without the care of their mother. So he climbed up to the nest and killed all the hatchlings, which was the best way he could think of to minimize their suffering. He resolved from that point on to always be a protector of innocent life.

Have I ever committed a thoughtless act that I regretted so much that I turned over a new leaf and adopted a different code of behavior afterward? Have I ever tried to make amends for something I did that was hurtful or wasteful but was left with options that were neither easy or simple?

3. After reading how important it was to Woolman's spiritual witness to have the support of his family and faith community, what are some ways I can think of that can strengthen my ties with my family and faith community to further my spiritual growth? How can group and individual study of Woolman's life and thought help me to better hear and follow the voice of what Woolman knew as the "True Shepherd"? If I have experienced leadings similar to those Woolman had, what language do I use to describe them? What if anything have I done to follow up on those leadings?

A DEVIATION AMONGST US as a Society from that simplicity that there is in Christ becoming so general, and the trade from this island [England] to Africa for slaves, and other trades carried on through oppressive channels, and abundance of the inhabitants being employed in factories to support a trade in which there is unrighteousness, and some growing outwardly great by gain of this sort: the weight of this degeneracy hath lain so heavy upon me, the depth of this revolt been so evident, and desires in my heart been so ardent for reformation, so ardent that we might come to that right use of things where, living on a little, we might inhabit that holy mountain on which they neither *hurt nor destroy*! and may not only stand clear from oppressing our fellow creatures, but may be so disentangled from connections in interest with known oppressors, that in us may be fulfilled that prophecy: "Thou shalt be far from oppression" [Isaiah. 54:14].

—*The Journal of John Woolman*, Moulton Edition, p. 185



Unit 2. Parallels between world situations in Woolman's 18th century and our time

WHILE STUDYING Woolman's *Journal* and major essays, we realized why Woolman saw slavery more as a symptom of a profound spiritual disorder than as an issue to be fought in the political arena. Many Friends of his day were drifting away from their historic testimonies and were becoming caught up in the materialism of the larger culture. They seemed oblivious to any possible connection between injustice and strife in the world and their own pursuit of ease, luxury, and wealth.

But before presuming to remove the specks in his neighbors' eyes, Woolman was led to examine the moral implications of his own behavior and lifestyle. This prompted him to change what he did for a living, the way he dressed, and the way he traveled. He did these things not only for the sake of his spiritual health but also to be in solidarity with the poor and oppressed.

In his dealings with the Quaker slaveholders, Woolman found many of them already troubled by their reliance on the labor of other humans they claimed as property. Some may have believed, like Woolman, that this was inconsistent with Christian teachings. But they had gradually become entangled in the economics of the slave system and couldn't see a way out.

So instead of inviting resentment and denial by outright condemning what they were doing, Woolman asked these Friends to look inward. He invited them to consider whether they had become slaves to their own possessions and appetites. He asked them to consider whether their strivings were really bringing the kind of inner peace and well-being that Divine Wisdom had intended for them. In this gentle, sympathetic, and humble way, he helped many Friends to open their hearts and find ways to change.

Some Friends try to imagine what Woolman would say or do if he were among us today. We imagine that one of the first things he would say to us is, "*Don't put me on a pedestal as some kind of saint. I don't want you to get the idea that confronting the problems of the 21st century is the kind of work that only saints can do.*" Woolman also might acknowledge that he didn't necessarily have all the answers, and that Friends today may have a better understanding of some issues than did 18th century Friends. He would urge us to discern our own strengths and weaknesses. And surely, he would not be pointing an accusing finger at our shortcomings. He would urge us instead to always attune our lives to the Light within.

One way we try to keep Woolman accessible and relevant to our time is to consider several similarities between his situation and ours.

First, Woolman's lifetime overlapped the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, a development that was already worrying to many who were concerned with moral values. If some people were capable of enslaving others to satisfy their lust for power and wealth, how much more abusive could they become with the aid of vast amounts of mechanical power applied on an industrial scale?

Those fears are being realized today. Advanced technologies and cheap fossil fuels have put previously unimaginable power in the hands of modern society. All the goods and services that are taken for

granted as part of daily life may sound like a utopian dream until we consider how it is affecting the quality of our lives and the rest of life on this planet. We are facing serious problems either because many of the resources we have come to depend on are nonrenewable or because we are consuming other resources faster than natural systems can regenerate them or process the resulting wastes. It has spurred an explosive growth of world population. It has drawn attention away from relationships and the life of the Spirit. And because power tends to become concentrated in the hands of a minority, billions of people are increasingly left behind in poverty and disempowerment and are vulnerable to exploitation. It is a great irony that the number of people living in various forms of involuntary servitude worldwide has actually increased since the official abolition of slavery in most countries.

So the Industrial Revolution, for all its benefits, has served to strengthen a culture of domination that encourages people to aspire to much more than their rightful share of the world's resources. That is why Woolman preached a life of spiritual and material simplicity, guided by a standard of "enough" and justice for all. For him, abolishing human slavery wasn't going far enough. Only by abolishing greed and lust for power will we cease to be threats to our neighbors or the wider Creation.

Second, Woolman lived in an era that sounds a lot like ours, when fewer and fewer members of the Religious Society of Friends seemed to be taking seriously the original Quaker vision of a Peaceable Kingdom on earth. Yet Woolman still believed that the Religious Society of Friends had a vital, transformative role to play in the world and that Love and Truth ultimately would prevail.

For Woolman, that meant steering a course between the shoals of two kinds of errors. One error is assuming that worldly powers have grown too powerful and we are too weak to make a difference. There are too many signs of hope for us to justify despair. Under the radar of the mainstream media are millions of dedicated activists and organizations who are building a new society to replace the current political and economic empire as it crumbles. The second error is its opposite, believing complacently that human knowledge and intellect are sufficient to solve the world's problems. Woolman's Journal reminds us that we must seek Divine Assistance to help us discern what can be changed, as well as to give us the courage to act.

A *third* thing we can learn from Woolman is how to balance contemplation with action. Many of us belong to Meetings that seem pulled in different directions. Some Friends invest a lot of time, money, and energy in a wide range of peace, social, and ecological issues. Meanwhile, it is often a different set of Friends who attend our Meetings' adult study series, prayer meetings, and Bible study classes. But we know from Woolman's writings that he was not split in that way. He was simultaneously a seeker of Truth and one who passionately expressed his beliefs and values in actions.

Fourth, Woolman's evolving consciousness and personal witness also offer a good lesson in the concept of continuing revelation. He was intimately acquainted with the Scriptures and was well aware of passages in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament that seemed to accept or condone slavery. But his familiarity with the Scriptures as a whole and guidance from the Light of Truth told him that the long-range thrust of the Judeo-Christian tradition was toward greater respect for the rights and dignity of all persons.

Many Friends today follow a similar approach to continuing revelation by treating Earthcare or Creation care as integral to peace and justice. The Hebrew Bible and New Testament may not have warned humans that they could be undermining the ecological integrity of the planet, for the simple reason that thousands of years ago the overall human impact on the environment was too slow for anyone to notice. But surely if Woolman were here today, he would regard the current deterioration of the earth's life-support system as a serious moral issue. He would assert that the Jewish and Christian religions as a whole grant no license to anyone to diminish or destroy any part of God's creation.

Like Woolman, we are dismayed at times at our society's seemingly headlong rush to self-destruction. We often catch ourselves imagining a time to come when our highways are littered with abandoned cars and potholes after the last of the recoverable oil has been used up, when our cities are wastelands because climate change and resource depletion have made it impossible for industrialized society to continue supporting the current population.

But in the spirit of Woolman, we also envision another kind of world, a peaceful and just society that lives in harmony with natural systems and depends on energy and food sources that are sustainable, a world where everyone is valued and no one is exploited. If we want future generations to live and prosper in a Peaceable Kingdom, like John Woolman we will have to consciously choose that path and work hard to make it happen.

This is why we believe that all Friends today are called to become witnesses like John Woolmans, not just to admire him. To do that we need to study his methods and practice putting them into action.

Here are a few assignments that we imagine Woolman might hand out if he were here to teach us today:

1. Witness face to face with someone about your deepest convictions about peace, justice, and Earthcare. Look for an opportunity to influence that person to change some aspect of his or her behavior.
2. Read Tom Small's pamphlet, *Freeing Ourselves from Possessions*, available from Quaker Earthcare Witness. Then take steps toward divesting yourself of some possessions that may be hindering your spiritual life.
3. Travel outside your normal social circle. Listen to those you visit to increase your empathy with those who have a different living conditions, different values, and different perspectives.
4. Plan to permanently change some aspect of your personal life that you are already convinced is not in keeping with Divine wisdom that may be harming others or the natural world.
5. Identify a complex issue related to right living in the 21st century, then enter into a process of discernment about an appropriate course of action. Seek the guidance of others in this discernment, possibly including a clearness committee.
6. Start a journal about your attempts over time to discern God's will for your life and to incorporate that understanding into the way you live. Share some of your entries with others in a study group. ❖

Questions for reflection and discussion on Unit 2

1. What similarities and differences do I see between the typical lifestyles of 18th century and 21st century Friends? Do I find North American Friends today to be less materialistic and status-oriented than the prevailing culture? Am I in accord with Friends' faith and practice when I aspire to a "normal" standard of living that is nevertheless out of the reach of much of the rest of humanity? How do such aspirations affect the quality of my spiritual life and my relationship with others and with the natural world?
2. Is working for the establishment of a Peaceable Kingdom on Earth a realistic goal in today's world? What aspects of modern life might make that more difficult to imagine or achieve?
3. In what ways am I witnessing the fulfillment of Woolman's predictions of "great injury to succeeding ages" because of the materialistic strivings of people in his day? What do I imagine the future will be like for our descendants if people continue to treat other people and the earth the way they do today?
4. Do I feel entangled by an economic system that compels me to act contrary to my beliefs and values?

The word *right* is commonly used relative to our possessions. We say a *right* of property to such a dividend of a province or a clear, indisputable *right* to the land within such certain bounds. Thus this word is continued as remembrancer of the original intent of dividing the land by boundaries, and implies that it was designed to be equitably or rightly divided, to be divided according to righteousness. In this—that is, in equity and righteousness—consists the strength of our claims. If we trace an unrighteous claim and find gifts or grants to be proved by sufficient seals and witnesses, this gives not the claimant a *right*, for that which is opposite to righteousness is wrong, and the nature of it must be changed before it can be *right*.

—A *Plea for the Poor*, Moulton Edition, p. 261

Unit 3. What does it mean to live in right relationship? How are we called to make a difference?

JOHN WOOLMAN called his generation to live in right relationship with *all* of Creation as he witnessed against the evils of slavery, oppression, and materialism—which he warned were causing injury to future generations. We discern a similar dynamic of greed and thoughtlessness in today’s global environmental crisis.

In speaking to non-Quakers, we may choose the more secular term “sustainable living” to convey roughly the same idea as “right relationship.” Indeed, many of the world’s social and ecological problems stem from practices that are manifestly unsustainable—misusing nonrenewable resources, treating soil, air, and water as commodities to be sold to the highest bidder, and generally disregarding the needs and rights of future generations. We are all complicit and therefore accountable for damage being done in our name.

But living in right relationship with all of Creation goes a step further in suggesting why so many humans today seem unwilling and unable to change their ways, even when they are aware of the size and effects of their ecological footprints, in terms of their choices of housing, transportation, diet, and family size. Take for example the man who comments to a co-worker that he and his wife have decided to have a third, and then a fourth, child not only because they enjoy raising children but *because they can afford them*. The co-worker resists the temptation to ask, “Yes, but can the planet afford them?” (The same point could be raised about someone’s “personal” decision to buy a grander house, a larger car, or costlier foods at whatever level their income can sustain.)

The assumption that we have a right to as much of a common resource as we can use, is what Wendell Berry calls “a kind of moral simplicity,” based on our ability to ignore the claims of others and of posterity.

True sustainability means transcending a narrow calculation of self-interest and weighing the effect of our actions on a larger scale, seeking right relationship to the wider community—and ultimately the Earth community. In right relationship there is less conflict between individual and community because we are more aware of our common values and common destiny. (There will always be differences in lifestyle and level of consumption. Consider, for example, the material needs of a family with young children compared to those of a single retired person.) But we can commit ourselves as a community to find ways for everyone in the wider community to be fed, clothed, and housed, and to be generally fulfilled, and for all the children to be loved (including those of the future and of other species), without debasing and crippling God’s glorious creation in the process.

How do we work towards such a life? As Friends we have many guides—scripture, Jesus, George Fox, John Woolman, Thomas Kelly, and Elizabeth Watson, to name a few. But there is a foundation to our lives as Friends. That is a foundation based in prayer.

A life committed to experiencing the presence of God is a life in which prayer prevails.

—New England Yearly Meeting Faith & Practice

Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord God, whereby thou wilt receive his strength and power from whence life comes, to allay all tempests, against blusterings and storms. That is it which mould up into patience, into innocency, into soberness, into stillness, into stayedness, into quietness, up to God, with his power.

—George Fox, *Journal*

Keep alert and pray. Otherwise temptation will overpower you. For though the spirit is willing enough, the body is weak!

—Matthew 26:41

Jesus set an example for the life we desire. We read of his departure to the wilderness to pray and his retreats for prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Mother Theresa was asked how she found the time to

pray for four hours each day and she answered that she couldn't do the work without the prayer.

In our attempt to live a right-ordered life we must begin with prayer. Prayer can take many forms and isn't necessarily confined to worship on Sundays or a moment on our knees. Many Friends find solace outdoors and feel closest to the Divine while walking, gardening, or meditating outside. Some Friends have a daily practice of scripture or other devotional readings and some time for quiet reflection. Whatever your choice, devote some regular time to becoming centered in that which is called by many names—be it the Light, Christ, God, Truth, or the Ground of Being.

The challenge to living a right-ordered life is that it is so different from what the dominant culture portrays as a happy life. It's never easy to be different and the temptations abound for riches or the "superfluities" that John Woolman wrote about. That's where community comes in. Our Friends community can be our source of strength. We can search together for what constitutes a meaningful connection to Spirit in the 21st century. Corporate worship, religious education, study groups, clearness committees, and oversight committees are a few examples of possible guidance and support.

We believe that through prayer and corporate discernment we will be led to make a difference in the world, even if that is limited to just your worship community or neighborhood. Where there is suffering there is a possibility to live out Christ's message of love and compassion.

How we are called is different for each of us. But how can we go on flagrantly over-using the world's resources when it deprives others of the basic necessities of life? Don't our Testimonies lead us to a simple life where we strive for integrity, equality, and peace in the world?

We can make a difference in one person's life or in many lives. We can exchange our incandescent light bulbs for compact fluorescents, or we can downsize our whole home. We can drive less (walking, biking, carpooling, or using public transportation more) or we can give up our car or purchase a low-emissions, high mileage car. We can make more time for our family or we can change our jobs and have more time for volunteering as well. We can't do any of these without the support of others, nudging us along on our journeys. You can share support and example with someone who is making similar changes, much in the same way a twelve-step program works. Maybe that's what we need, a twelve-step program for consumers!

You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is inwardly for God? Margaret Fell's testimony to George Fox in Fox's *Journal*.

As Friends we are called to find our own words, our own path, our own life. This begins with prayer, then grows into discernment, personally and corporately, and then into action. Our lives are meant to be balanced between prayer and action. Neither is more precious or more important. We are not whole without both. ❖

Questions for reflection and discussion on Unit 3

1. John Woolman warned Friends against the habit of acquiring "superfluities," that is, more possessions than are needed for a healthy, comfortable existence. Can I readily identify any such superfluities in my home? In my closets? In my kitchen? In my garage? In my yard? What distinguishes them from things I really need? What led me to acquire them? How might the material and spiritual quality of my life be enhanced if I let go of these superfluities? What would be a responsible way to begin doing that?
2. What are some ways that my consumption habits may be helping to degrade the earth's ecological integrity and/or increase suffering for humans and other species? What are some of the ways that I can immediately change those habits to make a difference?
3. How would my life be different if I were living in right relationship with all of Creation? What is standing in the way?
4. How can I make more time for prayer or reflection. How would this improve my life?



Unit 4. What would John Woolman say to us today about caring for *all* of Creation?

WOOLMAN'S MINISTRY to 18th century Friends was not simply a criticism that they had strayed from the original vision and discipline of early Friends. He was also proclaiming that the time had come for Friends to expand and deepen their understanding of right living beyond human-to-human relationships. Predictably, his message proved to be unpopular with those who were comfortable with their current habits and thinking and didn't want to change.

This was similar to the ministry of George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, who provoked denial and resistance from some listeners when he called 17th century Christians to inaugurate a "new Creation" by developing a personal relationship with the same Holy Spirit that had empowered the early Church. Woolman's ministry also echoed that of Jesus, who promised that God's kingdom would come when clean hearts and minds became more important than outward conformity to the letter of the law—antagonizing the Jewish religious establishment of his day.

But there was another reason that Woolman sometimes encountered barriers in sharing his vision with Friends: his *appearance*, as is described below in an excerpt from a letter about Woolman dated August 9, 1772 :

Our very valuable Friends John Woolman and Sarah Morris were at this meeting yesterday... [and those present] whom I apprehend went away well satisfied with what they heard from the man whose uncouth appearance will be likely to prejudice many. But he is certainly a very deep minister that searches things quite to the bottom, greatly exercised in a life of self-denial and humility. ...Perhaps it may be intended to wean many from the things which outwardly adorn the body, and likewise other luxuries and delicacies, to much prevailing amongst those in exalted stations as to this world's enjoyments, besides the testimony he finds it a duty to bear against the iniquitous trading in Negroes that so deeply affected his mind as to make his tears...

Woolman was very concerned about how his principled clothing choices might draw negative attention to himself. His *Journal* reflects his discernment about whether such actions were coming from his ego or from a true understanding of right living. His clothing was described as follows, also from a 1772 letter:

He was remarkable for the singularity of his dress. His shoes were of uncured leather, tied with leather strings, his stockings of white yarn, his coat, waistcoat, and breeches of a strong kind of cloth undyed, the natural color of the wool, the buttons of wood with brass shanks; his shirts of cotton unbleached... fastened at the neck with three large buttons of the same stuff, without either cravat or handkerchief about his neck; his hat a very good one was white, his countenance grave, sensible and expressive...

When Woolman traveled to England in 1772, the reception he received initially was very frosty because of his unkempt and unusual appearance. We reveal this side of Woolman in order to hold up a mirror to our own response to such "singular" people. If Woolman were to come to our Meeting today, dressed as the letter above described him, would we be welcoming? Are we prone to dismiss messages from those with whose behavior and appearance we are uncomfortable?

Why did he continue to dress in such an attention-getting way? Although he was uncomfortable with the attention that his attire was drawing, he felt he had to oppose in a concrete way the slave labor that created the dyes used in his day. He was also concerned about how much time and attention many Friends were devoting to their clothing and possessions, which he felt drew them away from a rightly ordered life. He asked:

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 these our possessions or not.

—A Plea for the Poor

Because he knew deeply that the earth was intricately connected with all of life and was a gift from God, he was clear that caring for Creation—the treatment of animals as well as the land—was part of his ministry. Consider the following two excerpts from his *Journal*:

I considered that the formation of the earth, the seas, the islands, bays, and rivers, the motions of the winds and great waters, which cause bars and shoals in particular places, were all the works of him who is perfect wisdom and goodness; and as people attend to his heavenly instruction and put their trust in him, he provides for them in all parts where he gives them a being.

Thus he whose tender mercies are over all his works hath placed a principle in the human mind which incites to exercise goodness toward every living creature....

We read elsewhere that in his later life Woolman finally stopped sending letters by the regular postal service, because his conscience was bothered by the way the horses and riders were overworked.

We believe that Woolman today would also care about the treatment of animals that are raised for food. He would no doubt oppose “factory farms” and admonish Friends to only eat meat which one knows has had humane treatment.

We believe that Woolman would care about the treatment of the soils and that he would encourage eating vegetables and fruits only from growers who practiced sustainable farming.

We believe that Woolman today would be just as concerned about the continuing practice of purchasing new clothes while not questioning the working conditions in which they were made. Woolman repeatedly expressed compassion for the plight of common workers, whether they were slaves, indentured servants, or simply underpaid and mistreated employees.

We believe that Woolman would ask Friends to stop purchasing chocolate from regions where the chocolate industry is known to use child slaves. We believe that he would also encourage Friends to purchase “Fair Trade” products to assure that the workers were paid fairly and that the land was cared for sustainably.

Woolman’s ministry also addressed what he saw as Friends working too much themselves in pursuit of lives of ease and luxury, which also led to people and animals being used in harmful and degrading ways. Woolman expressed it this way in his *Journal*:

By giving way to a desire after delicacies, and things fetched far, many men appear to be employed unnecessarily; many ships built by much labor are lost; many people brought to an untimely end; ... many people busied in that which serves chiefly to please a wandering desire, who might better be employed in those affairs which are of real service, and ease the burdens of such poor honest people, who to answer the demands of others are often necessitated to exceed the bounds of healthful agreeable exercise.

We believe that Woolman today would encourage Friends to slow down in their lives, work less for money, spend more time in prayer and reflection, and strive more for communion with the Spirit than for superfluous possessions.

His concerns reached further, as depicted in the following excerpt from his *Journal*:

Having of late traveled often in wet weather through narrow streets in towns and villages, where dirtiness under foot and the scent arising from that filth which more or less infects the air of thickly settled towns, and I, being but weakly, have felt distress both in body and mind with that which is impure. In these journeys I have

been where much cloth hath been dyed and sundry times walked over ground where much of their dye-stuffs have drained away.

...Some who are great carry delicacy to a great height themselves, and yet the real cleanliness is not generally promoted. Dyes being invented partly to please the eye and partly to hid[e] dirt, I have felt in this weak state, traveling in dirtiness and affected with unwholesome scents, a strong desire that the nature of dyeing cloth to hide dirt may be more fully considered.

We believe that Woolman would advocate for a scent-free environment in all our public spaces. Are we not risking our own and others' health by exposure to substances whose effects are largely unknown? Are we not covering over what is natural, or hiding the "dirt"?

Finally, we believe that Woolman would encourage simplifying and altering our lives to use less fossil fuels, thus taking away the occasion of armed conflicts in oil-producing regions.❖

Questions for reflection and discussion on Unit 4

1. How is my view of or attitude toward the natural world affected by seeing it through the lens of Woolman's conviction that (a) our task in life is to glorify the Creator and (b) that we should be trustful that God will provide for our needs without having to lay up treasures on earth?
2. How might the prospects for a healthy planet for future generations and other species be enhanced by my decision to live more slowly and deliberately?

As servants of God, what land or estate we hold, we hold under him as his gift; and in applying the profits it is our duty to act consistent with the design of our benefactor. Imperfect men may give on motives of misguided affection, but Perfect Wisdom and Goodness gives agreeable to his own nature. Nor is this gift absolute, but conditional, for us to occupy as dutiful children and not otherwise, for he alone is the true proprietor. "The world," saith he, "is mine, and the fullness thereof." [Psalms 24:1].

—*A Plea for the Poor*, Moulton Edition, p. 256



Unit 5. Tools and Resources for Change

AS PAUL HAWKEN so eloquently points out in his 2007 book *Blessed Unrest*, there are millions of people around the world who are working for a healthier, saner, and more just world. This is a movement that is very organic, without a single leader, but a movement nonetheless. In other words, we are not alone in our work to care for Creation. That is what is so encouraging. Since we travel frequently on behalf of Quaker Earthcare Witness, we have the opportunity to learn how many Friends are involved in this work, how many Friends care deeply about the future of the planet and all of life on it.

Therefore it is not difficult to locate tools and resources for change in the world today. What is difficult is deciding which, because of space limitations, to leave out.

Learning together

Remember that we can't effectively do this work alone. Meeting in small groups helps to build community, and community is what supports us. There are many fine resources to use to learn together:

1. *Earthcare for Friends* is the basic learning tool from QEW. Included in its 18 chapters are scripture suggestions, hymns, learning units, and activities about a wide range of ecological topics. This faith-based curriculum can be ordered through www.quakerearthcare.org. It is also available at FGC Books.
2. *Earthcare for Children* is the companion book to *Earthcare for Friends* for working with children ages 5–12. This book has been a success in many First Day Schools across North America. It is also available from QEW and from FGC Books.
3. The Northwest Earth Institute, www.nwei.org, has compiled a number of curricula about the serious issues of the day. NWEI provides helpful suggestions for structuring the sessions. We have been part of an NWEI discussion group in our town for three years and have found it to be challenging and enriching. We will continue to meet even after we've completed all the materials available through NWEI. Although the materials aren't religious, participants bring to it what is most important to them.
4. *The Low Carbon Diet: Lose 5,000 Pounds in 30 days*, by Joseph Gershon is a terrific way to be supported in your efforts to reduce your carbon footprint. In a non-threatening and non-judgmental way, this book takes you step-by-step through an analysis of how you produce carbon dioxide and then how to reduce it.
5. *Your Money or Your Life*, by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, both the book and the accompanying curriculum. This book may change your life as it helps you understand your relationship to time, money, spending, and saving. You can read it on your own, but working through the curriculum with others may motivate you to act on what you learn.

Organizations and their websites

Trying to sort through websites can be overwhelming, but there are some that are really valuable. Not wanting to be too daunting, we've selected several that we find helpful. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, and we're sure you can think of many more.

1. Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW), 173-B N. Prospect St., Burlington VT 05401-1607, 802/658-0308, www.quakerearthcare.org.
2. Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), 245 Second St., NE, Washington DC 20002, 800/630-1330, www.fcnl.org.
3. Strawberry Creek Friends Meeting's Deeper Ecology Study Group, www.dimeagallon.org.
4. Pacific Yearly Meeting Committee on Unity with Nature, <http://members.aol.com/quakernature/index.html>.
5. The National Religious Partnership for the Environment, 49 South Pleasant St., Suite 301, Amherst MA 01002, 413/253-1515, www.nrpe.org.
6. Evangelical Environmental Network, 4485 Tench Rd., Suite 850, Suwanee GA 30024, 678/541-0747, www.creationcare.org.
7. The Regeneration Project (home of Interfaith Power & Light), P.O. Box 29336, The Presidio, San Francisco CA 94129, 415/561-4891, www.theregenerationproject.org.
8. Equal Exchange, 50 United Dr., West Bridgewater MA 02379, 774/776-7400, www.equalexchange.com.
9. Take Back Your Time, www.simpleliving.net/timeday.
10. The Center for a New American Dream (CNAD), 6930 Carroll Ave., Suite 900, Takoma Park MD 20912, 877/68-DREAM, www.newdream.org.
11. Energy Star, www.energystar.gov.
12. Population Action International, 1300 19th St. NW, Second Floor, Washington DC 20036, www.populationaction.org.
13. Union of Concerned Scientists, 2 Brattle Sq., Cambridge MA 02238-9105, 617/547-5552, www.ucsusa.org.

Books

Now, this was even more difficult to sort through the thousands of books about caring for the earth! We have selected those that have a spiritual/religious foundation or whose authors have often written from a religious or spiritual perspective.

Adams, Anne, ed. *The Creation Was Opened to Me*. London: Britain Yearly Meeting, Quaker Green Action.
 Becker, Stan, et al. *Population Is People, A Friends Perspective*. 2000. Burlington, Vt.: Quaker Earthcare Witness.

Berry, Thomas. *The Dream of the Earth*. 1988. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.

Coelho, Mary. *Awakening Universe, Emerging Personhood*. 2002. Lima, Ohio: Wyndham Hall Press.

Corbett, Jim. *Sanctuary for All Life, the Cowbalah of Jim Corbett*. 2005. Berthoud, Colo.: Howling Dog Press.

Gould, Lisa Lofland. *Caring for Creation: Reflections on the Biblical Basis of Earthcare*. 1999. Burlington, Vt.: Quaker Earthcare Witness.

McKibben, Bill. *Deep Economy*, 2007. New York: Henry Holt & Co.

———*Hope, Human and Wild*. 1995. St. Paul, Minn.: Hungry Mind Books.

———*Hundred Dollar Holiday*. 1998. New York: Simon & Schuster.

———*The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation*. 2005. Cambridge, Mass.: Crowley Publications.

Muller, Wayne. *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*. New York: Bantam Books.

Roberts, Elizabeth. *Earth Prayers from Around the World*. 1991. San Francisco: Harper.

Schut, Michael, ed. *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life, A Christian Perspective*. 1999. Denver: Living the Good News.

Spring, Cindy and Anthony Manousos, eds. *EarthLight: Spiritual Wisdom for an Ecological Age*. 2007. Los Angeles: Friends Bulletin.

Suzuki, David. *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature*. 1997. Vancouver, British Columbia: Greystone Books.

- Swimme, Brian and Thomas Berry. *The Universe Story*. 1992. San Francisco: Harper.
- Wallace, Mark. *Finding God in the Singing River*. 2005. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Wink, Walter. *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence*. 1986. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Whitmire, Catherine. *Plain Living: A Quaker Path to Simplicity*. 2001. Notre Dame, Ind.: Sorin Books.
- Books, booklets, and other writings about John Woolman that we have found helpful**
- Birkel, Michael L. *A Near Sympathy: The Timeless Quaker Wisdom of John Woolman*. 2003. Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press.
- . *Mysticism and Activism: Learning from John Woolman*, 2002. Melbourne Beach, Fla.: Southeastern Yearly Meeting.
- Dodson, Shirley, ed. *John Woolman's Spirituality and Our Contemporary Witness, A Study Guide*. 1995. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Religious Education Committee and Pendle Hill.
- Helmuth, Keith. *If John Woolman Were Among Us: Reflections on the Ecology of Flush Toilets and Motor Vehicles*. 1989. Argenta, British Columbia. Canadian Quaker Pamphlet Series #32.
- Morse, David. *Testimony: John Woolman on Today's Global Economy*. 2001. Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications #356.
- Moulton, Phillips P. ed. *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*. 1989. Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press.
- Olmsted, Sterling and Mike Heller, eds. *John Woolman—A Nonviolence and Social Change Source Book*. 1997. Wilmington, Ohio: Wilmington College Peace Resource Center.

Periodicals

- Creation Care magazine*, www.creationcare.org.
- Friends Bulletin*, www.westernquaker.net.
- Friends Journal, Quaker Thought and Life Today*. www.friendsjournal.org.
- Tikkun Magazine*, www.tikkun.org
- Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures*, www.yesmagazine.org.
- Quaker Life*, www.fum.org/QL/.

To lay aside curious, costly attire and use that only which is plain and serviceable, to cease from all superfluities and too much strong drink, are agreeable to the doctrines of our blessed Redeemer, and if in the integrity of our hearts we do so, we in some degree contribute toward lessening that business which hath its foundation in a wrong spirit; and as some well-inclined people are entangled in such business and at times desirous of being freed from it, our ceasing from these things may be made helpful to them.... He who created the earth and hath provided sustenance for millions of people in past ages is now as attentive to the necessities of his children as ever....

—*A Plea for the Poor*, Moulton Edition, p. 259