

“Our gracious Creator cares and provides for all his creatures. His tender mercies are over all his works; and so far as his love influences our minds, so far we become interested in his workmanship and feel a desire to take hold of every opportunity to lessen the distresses of the afflicted and increase the happiness of the creation. Here we have a prospect of one common interest from which our own is inseparable—that to turn all the treasures we possess into the channel of universal love becomes the business of our lives.”

—John Woolman (1720–1722)



“It would go a great way to caution and direct people in their use of the World, that they were better studied and known in the Creation of it. For how could Man find the Confidence to abuse it, while they should see the Great Creator stare them in the Face, in all and every Part thereof?”

—William Penn (1644–1718)



“But ask now the beasts and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee; Or speak to the earth, and it shall instruct thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee. Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this? In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind.”



—Job 12:7–10

“The Society of Friends is a small group and the amount which it has accomplished may appear quantitatively insignificant. Quaker work has, however, sometimes proved important because of its pioneering quality. Friends have not hesitated to support new and unpopular undertakings.”

—Howard Brinton (in *Friends for 300 Years*)

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Other QEW Publications

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Caring for Creation, Reflections on the Biblical Basis of Earthcare, by Lisa Lofland Gould

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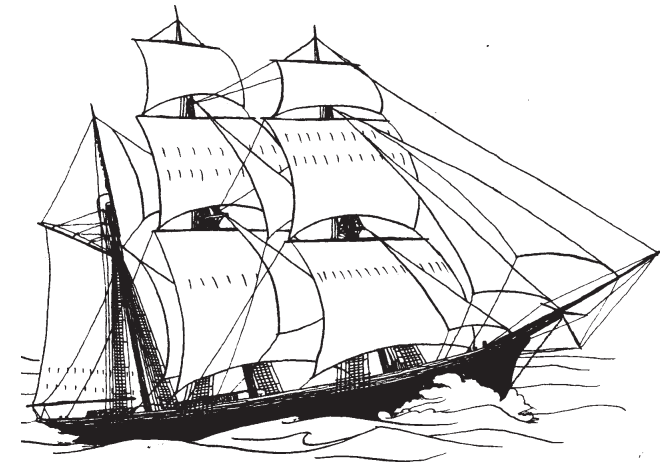
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Friends, Slavery, and the Earth

by Lisa Lofland Gould

“Do I, in all my proceedings, keep to that use of things which is agreeable to universal righteousness?”

—John Woolman



Friends, Slavery, and the Earth

Gift of God, Brotherhood, Justice, Integrity, Liberty, Jesus...fine words beloved by Friends...words also the names of ships in the slave trade. How disconnected from the sufferings of their human cargoes were the owners of those ships, how much denial did they hold in their hearts, to be able to give such names?

But as we look for splinters in the eyes of slave traders of the past, are we perhaps overlooking beams in our own eyes? Is it possible that today we are equally disconnected from an understanding of the suffering we bring to the whole of God's creation? *Behind what euphemisms do we hide the modern equivalent of the slave trade, our oppression of the Earth?*

Modern Friends are proud of the Quaker record on slavery. We point to George Fox's and William Penn's early words on treating Native Americans and slaves with kindness, to the witness of John Woolman, to Friends' participation in the Underground Railroad, to the southern Friends who migrated from slave-holding to free states, and to the many Friends whose words and actions had influence well beyond the Quaker community.

Fox, Penn, and Woolman wrote movingly of the human relationship with the rest of Creation. All were concerned about the spiritual degradation brought on by *wrong relationships*. In his *Journal*, John Woolman wrote of the spiritual effect of slavery on slaves, slave owners, and future generations. He asked Friends to stop using human beings as personal property, at the cost of both money and power.

Friends also were asked to take on work previously done by slaves, or pay fair wages for hired labor. They were asked to recognize black people as full human beings at a time when much of society considered them soulless creatures. They were asked to

examine every aspect of their lives to root out practices and purchases which utilized slave labor.

Early Friends searched their hearts and came to the corporate leading that they could no longer participate in any aspect of slavery. In a society in which much of the economy was based on slave labor, this must have been a very difficult decision to live by. As time passed and the initial difficulties were surmounted, however, surely those Friends who

changed the way they lived in response to this corporate leading found their lives more joyful. They had "come 'round

right" in relationships, and were freed from the terrible burden of guilt and empowered to positive action and lives of wholeness.

After Friends 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 examine our relationship with the rest of Creation, 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 called to examine our relationship with modern technology, to make conscious choices

about which technologies enhance our lives and which are superfluous or destructive. We are being asked to develop a new relationship with the land, one based on mutual respect and care rather than exploitation. We are being asked to acknowledge our inter-dependence with all Creation. And we are being asked to do these 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.

Today we are reminded constantly of the results of wrong relationships, as we hear the grim news of crime, pollution, drug abuse, racism, promiscuous sexuality, poverty, war, and despair. One-hundred thirty years after its abolition in America, we still reap the bitter fruits of slavery. *How long will we reap the fruit of our treatment of the Earth?* It is time that Friends seek to understand the spiritual consequences of our broken relationship with the rest of Creation, and how this broken relationship is affecting our human communities and the wider biological communities to which we belong. It is time we seek to mend this relationship and return to wholeness.

How many Friends have looked into their hearts and asked themselves, "If I had been living at the time of John Woolman, how would I have reacted to his message?" Friends have rested long on the laurels of Quaker participation in emancipation. In looking backwards so proudly, have we forgotten to look ahead at the new revelations we are offered? Two hundred years from now, will Friends be as proud of Quaker initiative in caring for the Earth?

Now is the time for Friends to explore these new revelations. We must move forward with joyful hearts to help heal our human communities, and to reconnect humanity to the rest of Creation.

