

THE QUAKER PATH OF PEACE: THE SIMPLE LIFE

by Charlotte Condia

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## **John Woolman Follows His Conscience**

John Woolman, eighteenth century mystic and social idealist, a Quaker and a man of peace, was at the house of a Lenape Indian in a small Indian village in Pennsylvania. This village was a dangerous place to be, but John felt that it was important to deliver a message of peace to the Lenape. The year was 1763; the English and the Lenape were at war. There were no English settlements in the area, only soldiers and Indians fighting.

The Lenape captured English forts and took some of the English prisoners, while they scalped and killed others. The English killed the wild animals that the Lenape depended on for their food. They burned Lenape villages and killed the people living there. John did not want to be killed or even worse, captured; however, he felt that he must bring the Lenape his message of peace. He spoke to them of his concern for their happiness. He wanted them to live without the fear of war. He wanted them to be friends both with the English and with their Indian neighbors. He wanted them all to live in harmony. The war went on despite John's efforts, but he was glad that he had gone.

John, born in 1720, more than fifty years before the Declaration of Independence, came from a family of thirteen children who all lived with their parents on a farm. John attended Meeting with his family on Sunday and Thursday.

Most of the people John knew while he was growing up were Quakers. Sometimes a person raised this way can't see other people's point of view; John could. He was a kind, pleasant, likeable man who lived his life in a peaceful way. He didn't try to put others down, didn't say mean things to people. He did stand up for what he believed though. When almost everyone took slavery for granted, he said that slavery was wrong.

John based his actions on love. The first sentence in his Journal is "I have often felt a motion of love to leave some hints in writing of my experience of the goodness of God." Many people talk about loving everyone but not many people, then or now, really base their lives on love. John is one of the few who did.

When in his late teens John became very ill, he thought that he was going to die. He promised God that if he got well, he would be a better person. He did get well and tried to keep his promise. He spoke for the first time in Meeting when he was in his early twenties. He knew then that God wanted him to live a special life.

What guidelines does Woolman give for following our conscience? Primarily he gives us the example of his life, for he always follows his conscience even if it is the hard thing to do. He is amazingly consistent. There are no ambiguities but perfect clarity about what he believes. One way to follow our conscience is to pay attention to the Light within who will lead us to the Truth. Following our conscience means doing what God wants us to do rather than what most people are doing. Following our conscience frequently involves doing something when most other people

think that we are wrong and are doing just the opposite. Unfortunately, following our conscience is not necessarily the popular thing to do. It means doing what is right no matter how hard the decision or however inconvenient. It means caring enough about these things to change our lives, rather than making up self-serving excuses for staying the same. And whatever else it may mean, following our conscience means behaving in a decent, honest way, with integrity.

The right to conscience must not be trivialized. An opinion, no matter how strongly held, is not necessarily conscience. Part of following our conscience means knowing what is important; knowing, also, that there is more than one way to serve God..

### **A Simple Life**

John learned to be a tailor to earn his living. His customers brought him cloth that they had woven themselves, and he made cloaks or bonnets from it. He could quilt a petticoat or plait a pair of bridle reins for a horse. He also owned a shop where he sold shirts, trimming for dresses, tea and chocolate. However, he felt that his shop was just doing too well; he was making too much money! It looked as though the shop was going to grow very large.

John believed that each person should live a simple life, taking only such food, clothes, and shelter as they really needed. Then it was everyone's job to share with others who did not have enough of these necessities. People were meant to make enough money for things they really needed. No more than that. John was happy with this plain way of living. He was not interested in luxuries and did not want to spend all his time making money for things he didn't need.

Working, and caring for our family and ourselves is part of God's plan for us, but not His whole plan. This part should not take all our time and energy. So John closed his shop and made his living as a tailor.

### **John Tries to Free the Slaves**

While he was doing other things, John was thinking about slavery which he knew was wrong. He didn't want people to be slaves; he could not pretend it was right. People were not to be bought and sold like cattle. Just because their parents were slaves, children were not to be kept as slaves. John felt so strongly that slavery was wrong that he changed the way he lived his life. He would not use products made by slaves. If everyone would do the same, he thought, the slave owners would not make any money. So they would stop buying slaves.

John would not use sugar, which was made by slaves. He would not wear clothes made from dyed cloth because slaves made the dye. When he traveled in the South, he walked in the sun instead of riding on his horse. He did this so that he could understand, in some small way, how hot it was for the slaves working in the fields. When he was the guest of Friends who owned slaves, he would have a quiet talk with the father of the family. He would explain to him why slavery was wrong. "We all have one Father. We are all God's children." He gave his reasons in a fair way. He didn't insult his host or say how terrible he was. In a pleasant, peaceful way he showed him that it was not right to own slaves.

Sometimes John would leave money for the slaves with the head of the family; sometimes he would give the money to the slaves themselves. He could not accept their hard work, their cleaning, cooking, waiting on him, for nothing. He did these things in a loving and kind way.

When John worked to free the slaves, he was following his conscience. (Just as he had followed his conscience when he took a message of peace to the Lenape.) It was not easy, but he was doing what he believed God wanted him to do. He did this even when most other people were doing the opposite.

John loved God and spent his life trying to do His will. In doing this he tried to keep a balance in his life. He knew that part of loving and serving God was caring for his family. But he also needed to spend time going to meeting and saying his prayers, getting to know God, loving Him. Then he needed to try to do something about the terrible evils in the world.

Most people would find it difficult to live exactly as John did but life can be lived in his spirit. His life shows what it means to follow one's conscience, and that one person can make a stand against evil and make a difference in the world.

His actions are peaceful, he approaches people in a kind, peasant way and explained his reasons for doing a particular thing. If he believes that something like slavery is wrong and violent, all of his actions support this belief. Even though it was inconvenient for him not to use sugar and he made himself a spectacle by wearing clothing made of undyed white fabric, he did not lose his resolve.

### **A Conversation about Slavery**

John's quiet talk with Friends who owned slaves might go something like this.

Woolman: You are a kind person who wishes to do what is right. We are brothers of the slaves. Hasn't one God made us all? All persons, slave and free, share many things. We all have similar problems and sicknesses, and finally we all will die.

Slave Owner: I treat my slaves well. My wife says that I am too kind.

Woolman: This is a real gift to be able to understand the feelings and troubles of others and be kind to them. But we are not good enough to have complete control over another person.

Slave owner: I may be kind but I have to have the slave labor to take care of my house, my fields and my animals.

Woolman: You have been given many possessions, house, land, horses. You must consider why God gave you these luxuries. What if you had been a slave all your life working at the most difficult and unpleasant jobs. You would see people relaxing and enjoying many luxuries based

on your hard work. You would have to spend Sunday growing potatoes so that you had enough to eat. Slaves are in a position where they have no say in their own lives.

Slave owner: I have spent a good deal of money for my slaves. I have some rights over them.

Woolman: The practice of slavery is wrong from the beginning. So the amount of money that you have spent is a poor argument. The man or woman who did not willingly give up their freedom had no choice in their slavery. When you buy a slave and pay the slave trader, you join hands with him and share his guilt for the terrible thing that he has done.

Slave owner: I cannot free my slaves. I have to leave them to my children.

Woolman: You may be kind to your slaves and treat them fairly, but your children are much less likely to do so.

Slave owner: I own the children born to my slaves.

Woolman: If you own a slave against his will, what right have you to keep his children in slavery? These children are no more slaves than if they were merchants' children who came from Africa on an English vessel.

Slave owner: Slaves are not fit for freedom.

Woolman: Slaves are human beings and are entitled to all the rights enjoyed by other men in America. Freedom is the natural right of all innocent men.

Slave owner: Slaves will only work when they are forced too. They are shiftless and childlike.

Woolman: If you had been kept a slave, treated as property, loaded with chains, sold in a market and kept in ignorance, you would also appear to be shiftless.

Slave owner: One white laborer can do as much in a day as two slaves.

Woolman: A free man can find satisfaction in providing for his family. The slave doesn't have the same reason. His wife and child may be separated from him without explanation. The slave must support those who are not his family and who claim him as property.

Slave owner: The slave's life may not be all that great here, but it was so wretched in Africa that they are better off here.

Woolman: The wars in Africa make it easier to bring back slaves. If pity were our real reason for buying slaves, we would treat them kindly and try to make their lives happy among us. When we purchase slaves, we want to help ourselves, not them. We buy slaves not to protect them from an inferior life or warfare but because we are lazy and wish to increase our wealth.

Slave owner: Slaves are immoral.

Woolman: Slavery encourages immorality. Slaves are not allowed to marry and the father of a child has no responsibility for him. Owners separate husbands and wives and take their children from them.

Slave owner: Slaves have the mark of Cain.

Woolman: The color of a man's skin has nothing to do with what is right or just.

Slave owner: Slavery was established by God.

Woolman: Slaves have souls and their souls are as valuable as our own. God did not create them to be slaves, but to live for ever. Slavery does not agree with Christianity. Christ would not have owned a slave. The effect of slavery on you is very bad. You live a lazy and immoral life, become abusive and often inflict terrible punishments upon your slaves.

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## THE PATH OF QUAKER PEACE: THE SIMPLE LIFE

...love clothes my mind. Woolman Journal

### A Personal Point of View

At a Quaker discussion on how to live a simple life, a 400 square foot living space was suggested as a fair share. So I bought an old 10 by 40 trailer. That didn't seem much space for just me and the person suggesting it had, I am sure, meant it for a small family. I have to admit that the first thing I thought about was adding a porch.

A simple life is an important part of following the path to Quaker peace. A simple life has God as its center and one main direction, to serve Him. It is a plan, consciously made, to have the physical part of life under discipline so that there will be more time for the spiritual: time to say one's prayers and meditate, time for family, time to read or study. But garden, house and job are also ways of loving God and showing this love. I should, of course, have some concern for the well being of others as well as my own.

God is a God of order, balance and harmony. I need balance, order and harmony in my life. I need to serve God and do His will. Part of this service, but not all of it, is earning a living and caring for my family. I shouldn't use all our time and energy doing this though. It seems to me that John Woolman, the best example of living the simple life, makes it sound easier than it is. But John's life shows me the spirit in which mine should be lived. He pricks my conscience and inspires me to do better things in the world.

### **My Fair Share of the World's Resources**

As there get to be more and more people and fewer and fewer resources in the world, there is more competition, more violence expended to acquire them. The peaceful way is sharing. There would be plenty to go around if I would take only my fair share, what I need, and share with others who do not have enough. I have to have material possessions but they should not determine my worth as a person; possessions should not be the most important thing in my life.

A simple life is one of the few peaceful alternatives that gives all people the possibility of a life of dignity and respect. A simple life is a peaceful answer to both individual problems and the world's ills. If I lived a simple life, the world would work much better, be a more peaceful place. A simple life is not a life of poverty though. I don't want to be poor or cold or hungry and I don't want anyone else to be either. Instead I must try to live on the lowest economic level consistent with what God wants me to do. I need to buy useful, necessary things, recycle everything I can.

Of course, I must only take my share in the first place and leave the shares of others alone. Living in the United States makes this difficult to do as we use a great proportion of the world's resources. But I must try to do this if I want peace, not war, some chance for people's dreams to come true for themselves and their children.

I should give back to the earth whatever I can by recycling, composting, improving the soil. For many persons, living the simple life means that there is a reverence for nature, seeing God in His works. With this reverence comes a responsibility for the proper use of the world's resources. One aspect of being created in the Image of God is that I try to make ecologically sound decisions – organic gardening, no more poisons, recycle, compost. Along with this reverence for nature may be the wish to be as self-sufficient as possible.

My goals must be realistic. Like cutting down on the amount of trash I produce. As there is no public recycling system where I live, I must set up my own. Of course, if I buy anything, get a newspaper, magazines, I will have trash. The amount of trash that my husband, our cat Vashti and I can accumulate in one week seems enormous. However, if I cut this by 50%, I will have done a good thing. If everyone would do this, it would be wonderful.

A simple life plan includes sharing food and clothing with others as I have it to spare and others need it. But often in our society today the need is for money or the need can most easily be met by giving money.

The genius of Quakerism is that it doesn't ask me to sell all that I have and give to the poor. Instead it says keep for oneself only that which is needful. Give the rest away. The Quaker religion is a practical one. It doesn't ask me to make myself a ward of the state. However, this puts a tremendous responsibility on me. If I call the shots, listen to MY conscience, go with MY experience, decide just what is needful and what MY share is and how much I should share with others, it's easy to be very SELFISH, to make all MY decisions to MY advantage. (George Fox says that I won't do this if I apply to that which is pure within me.)

Some synonyms for simple are unadorned, unaffected, free from deceit, unpretentious, plain living and high thinking. Uncomplicated is another synonym. No water in the kitchen, hauling it to cook and wash up is not the simple life. It's complicated, a labor intensive way of living. No checklist, no universal formula exists that specifies what is a simple life and what is not. A belief that the primary reward of work should be well-being rather than money, making some time for creative thought and activity, are often components of such a life. But the simple life is not about me and what I want. It is a way of making the world work in a peaceful way and of sharing the world's resources.

One thing that the simple life is not is nostalgia for the past. Quakerism is a here and now religion - no little old ladies in bonnets. Whatever I am doing about the simple life should have meaning right now.

Almost all Friends claim that they are living a simple life. The idea of what constitutes this life varies from person to person. In the house of one Friend the Persian carpets are so thick that the visitor sinks down in them, while at the home of another an orange crate is a chair.

The best Quaker example of how to live a simple life is John Woolman, eighteenth century mystic and social reformer. Woolman writes that a person living the simple life may have the

tools he needs. If this is a computer or other electronic gear and it is needful, fine. But this can't be used as a loophole to buy any gadget that catches my eye.

The choice to live a simple life is really a luxury. It is a great and wonderful gift to be able to choose. Only because I have way too much can I chose to live with less. Many people have a life of poverty. This really isn't a choice; it rarely is a simple life. Abundance makes simplicity possible.

If I am to live a simple life I must be committed to loving God, putting Him first in my life. My hope is to live a life that is unselfish in serving God and others.

### **Sharing Books**

When my gardening became limited to raking leaves, my sharing took the form of getting very easy books for first graders – some of whom came from Spanish speaking homes where there were no books – who were having a hard time learning to read. I thought that if I got the child a very easy book and helped him or her to read it and when they could read it very well, then they would take it home to read to Mother or Grandmother. This would make reading, and school in general, easier for them. Learning to read well and do well in school makes it easier for a child to live a peaceful life.

When I first started collecting books, for a short time, the parishioners of an Episcopal church gave me a number of books. I was able to trade them at a used books store for appropriate books for the children and for the library at their school. This gave me a very good start. My husband and a friend have helped me since the beginning and continue until the present. The number of books I have been able to give to children has grown from a few copies to hundreds of copies.

### **The Connection of Things**

I parked my 10 by 40 mobile home on a small mesa in Hillsboro, New Mexico in possibly the most beautiful spot in the state. The natural environment determines the economic base for Hillsboro and for Kingston, a neighboring village twelve miles west and one thousand feet higher. The area is a grassland and has been since the Early Holocene. In the middle Holocene it became dryer and became desert-grassland. Today it is desert grassland and Chihuahuan Desert scrub. Late in the nineteenth century American miners found gold and silver here. With minerals and grass, mining and cattle ranching are the traditional means of livelihood. Today tourism is also important.

Early in 1877 prospectors found gold ore along Percha Creek, which runs through Hillsboro and Kingston. The excitement of these discoveries encouraged further prospecting along the several branches of the creek. More gold was found, also some silver. Hillsboro and Kingston, typical prosperous mining towns, had saloons on every corner, open twenty four hours a day. Lawlessness was business as usual. This prosperity took a downturn in 1893 with the devaluation of silver. Hillsboro fared better than Kingston because it depended more on gold than silver.

When I lived in Hillsboro, the owners of a nearby copper mine tried to re-open it. Today a mining operation needs lots of water. A concern about opening the mine is the "take down," or lowering of the water table and the possible draining of the aquifers. But jobs are essential, too. Even the simplest life has to be funded in some way. A sensible, common sense balance between the protection of the environment and the necessity for jobs and products is needed.

Quakers have always believed that every person has value, is wholesome and good, because God lives within them. John Woolman thought that people were noble. This puts a tremendous responsibility\* on each individual to be informed and show some concern. If I am going to live in a world with fewer resources and more people, I will have to call on all that is noble, wholesome, and good within me to use natural resources and water in a way that is best for everyone.

John Woolman wrote about the connection between people's actions and their effect upon the environment. Both historically and today, mining and ranching have altered land and water. A special recent problem is the use of water from the lake for irrigation. If the water in Percha Creek is polluted when it flows into Elephant Butte Lake, this effects the quality of irrigation water used for chilies and pecans downstream. There is a connection between water and how much there is of it, how many people use it, for what reasons. A deep snow pack in Colorado – which, when it melts, supplies the water for Elephant Butte Lake – is connected with having or not having a garden, watering your fruit trees, being able to hose off your patio and what is more,. the kind of job you can find locally.

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