

JOHN WOOLMAN FOLLOWS HIS  
CONSCIENCE

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## John Woolman Follows His Conscience

### A Message of Peace

John Woolman, 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. The year was 1763 and the English and the Lenape were at war. The Lenape captured English forts. They 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.

Near the door of the house John saw a Lenape man with a tomahawk hidden under his coat. John went outside. As he walked slowly toward him, the man took the tomahawk into this hand. John didn't blame the man for doing this. He felt that the man was only getting ready to protect himself if John tried to hurt him. John continued walking slowly toward him, speaking in a pleasant way. John tried not to frighten him, and treated the Indian as a friend, not an enemy. The man understood some English, so he and John

were able to talk a little. He relaxed and seemed more friendly. He came into the house with John, sat down, and smoked his pipe.

John kept a Journal for many years. He wrote about this visit to the Lenape in it. John was concerned about the war between the English and the Lenape. After meeting several Lenape, he thought that he should go to visit them. He talked this over with his wife and family and the members of his Meeting. Then he decided to go.

John was able to get a Lenape guides, a man and three women. His destination was Wyalusing, an Indian town, 200 miles from Philadelphia.

After getting the supplies ready, John and the guides set out on horseback. The rain poured down causing the rivers and streams to rise. This made the trip difficult. The travelers had to cross the swollen rivers and streams in canoes, while the horse swam across.

By night everything was wet, the ground, the bushes, the blankets, the tent. John pitched the tent, then made a bed by piling up bushes and putting blankets on them. When he made a fire in front of the

open tent flap, he was able to get some sleep.

During the night one of the guide's horses wandered off. He spent most of the next day looking for it. By the time he found it and returned to the camp, it was too late to go on that day.

The next day was the wettest so far. John and the guides stayed in the tent trying to keep dry. But water ran through the tent and, if possible, everything got wetter.

Finally John and the guides could travel again and arrived at an Indian village. The Indians living there urged John to go home. He should return to safety, they said. It was too dangerous here. He was getting close to the frontier. There were no English settlements, only soldiers and Indians fighting. But John felt that it was important to deliver his message of peace. He continued his trip and finally reached Wyalusing.

The English called the Indians who lived at Wyalusing the Delaware. They named them after the Delaware River which ran through their territory. The Indians called themselves, Lenape, which means "genuine people." These "genuine people" made their

living by farming, hunting and fishing. The men cleared the land by burning the trees. The women planted corn, beans, and squash. They cared for the growing plants.

John did not speak the language of the Lenape, so he used an interpreter. He spoke his message in English, using short, simple sentences. This made it easier for the interpreter to explain what he said.

John spoke of his concern for the Lenape and for their happiness. He wanted them to live a life without the fear of war. He wanted them to be friends with both the English and their Indian neighbors. He wanted them all to live in harmony. John was pleased with the visit. He felt the Lenape had listened hard to his message.

A group of Lenape men wanted to trade their furs in a more peaceful and settled place. So they joined John for the return trip. They suggested that John should ride with the furs in the canoe, as the rivers and streams were still high. Lenape men who knew the safe places to cross the swollen rivers and streams would go on horseback. John gladly accepted their offer. He arrived home, safe and sound, after being away for three weeks.

## The Story of John's Life

John was born more than fifty years before the Declaration of Independence in 1720. He was part of a large family, one of thirteen children. He had six brothers and six sisters. They all lived with their parents on a farm. John attended Meeting with his family on Sunday and Thursday.

When John was four, he went to a small Quaker school. He could already read because his parents had taught him at home. When John grew up, one of the ways he made his living was by being a teacher. He opened his own school, maybe the first school in America for both boys and girls.

A painting, thought to be of John, shows him as a grownup. He is thin and has a sharp nose. He is clean shaven, with no beard.

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, however, could. He lived his life in a peaceful way. He was a kind, pleasant, likeable man. He didn't try to put others down. He didn't say mean things to people. He did stand up for what he believed, though.

When everyone took slavery for granted, he said that slavery was wrong.

John based his actions on love. Many people talk about everyone, but not many people, then or now, really base their lives on love. John is one of the few who did.

John had a hard time deciding what to do with his life. As a youngster, he was serious and interested in religion. But like everyone else he did things he wasn't supposed to. When he was rude to his mother, he got into a lot of trouble with his father.

In his late teens, John became very ill. He thought he was going to die. He promised God that if he got well, he would be a better person. He did get well and he 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.

John's wife's name was Sarah. They lived in a pleasant white frame house with their daughter Mary. When John was away from home, he would send loving messages for Mary in his letters to Sarah.

## **A Simple Life**

John learned to be a tailor. His customers brought him cloth 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. 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 like the shop was going to grow very large.

John believed that each person should live a simple life. Each person should take only what he or she really needed. Each person should have food, clothes, and shelter. Then it was everyone's job to share with others who did not have enough food, clothes, and shelter. 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 had a small family. This meant that he needed less than people with large families. He was not interested in luxuries and did not want to spend all his time making money for things he didn't need.

He wanted to follow God's plan for his life. He believed that part of God's plan for each of us is to work and care for our family and ourselves. But this is not the whole plan. This 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. He didn't want people to be slaves. He knew slavery was wrong. He could not pretend it was right. People should not be bought and sold like cattle. Children of slaves should not be kept as just because their parents were.

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. It was made by slaves. He would not wear clothes made from dyed cloth. The dye was made by slaves.

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.

He would sometimes be 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 with a great deal of love and kindness.

### **John Follows His Conscience**

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.) This is not always an easy thing to do. He did what he believed God wanted him to do. He did this even when most other people were doing just 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 earning a living and 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 his life shows us the spirit in which our lives should be lived. He shows us what it means to follow our conscience. He inspires us to do better things in the world. He shows us that one person can make a stand against evil and make a difference.

## An ABC

### A B

John wanted ANIMALS to be treated well. He knew that God cared about Birds. God cares when any BIRD falls from the sky.

### C

John was a CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR. He would not join the army or fight in war. He tried to settle arguments in a peaceful way without using force.

### D

Slaves made the DYE used to color cloth. So John had his clothes made from undyed or white cloth. His clothes looked different from the dyed clothes of other Quakers. John didn't want to wear different clothes just to make people look at him. He wanted to show that no person should be a slave.

### E

John believed in EQUALITY for all people, slaves and free. All are equal before God. All are made in His Image. All are members of God's family. All are His children.

### F

John was a FRIEND, the name Quakers call themselves.

### G

John believed in a GENEROUS GOD, a GOD of wonderful GOODNESS.

### H

John tried to have HARMONY in his life, to keep a balance in his life. There was time for worship, family, work, and concern for others.

### I

John believed that God, the INNER LIGHT, lives in all of us.

### J

A JOURNAL is a book to write in each day. John kept one. He wrote in it about his experience of the goodness of God.

John made a number of JOURNEYS, trips to visit Friends. He often went far out into the country to see them. Sometimes he rode his horse and sometimes he traveled on foot.



## K

John was KIND and generous.

## L

John wrote about many things in his journal but mainly he wrote about God's wonderful LOVE.

## M

The Quaker MEETING HOUSE John attended with his family was plain. It didn't have any decorations. There was no organ or choir. There was a silence where John could wait for God to speak to him.

John and Sarah had to get permission to MARRY from their Yearly Meeting. Samuel Woolman, John's Father, said that he and John's mother thought that the MARRIAGE was a good idea. Sarah's family thought so too. The young couple were MARRIED a month later.

## N

John bought only NEEDFUL, useful things, not frivolous or useless things.

## O

John refused to take an OATH.

## P

John wrote a PRIMER, a beginning reading book. Maxims, which are short, easy sentences telling us how to behave, were used as examples of grammar and spelling.

The Sun is up, my Boy,  
Get out of thy Bed.  
Go thy way for the Cow,  
Let her eat the Hay.  
Now the Sun is set  
And the Cow is put up,  
The Boy may go to his Bed.

John was a PACIFIST. He did not like war. He always looked for peaceful ways to settle arguments.

John believes in a God of PROVIDENCE. A God who loved him and had a plan for his life.

## Q

John became a QUAKER minister when he was twenty-three years old.

## R

RELIGION is about important things.

## S

John was content with a SIMPLE life style, a plain way of living.

John wanted to SHARE with others who did not have enough to meet their real needs.

T  
John would not pay TAXES that were used for war.

U  
God is a UNIVERSAL God. He loves and cares for everyone.

V  
All people are VALUABLE because God the Light lives within them.

W  
John sometimes wrote WILLS for Quakers. If a man owned slave and wanted to leave them to his children, John could not write the Will.

X  
John's life is an EXCELLENT, EXAMPLE of how to follow your conscience.

Y

John died in YORK, England in 1772.

Z  
John had a ZEST for life; he enjoyed it.

THE END

Draw a picture of John or write your own alphabet.