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Birkel's "A Near Sympathy: The Timeless Quaker Vision of John Woolman" - Book Review

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Gerald Sazama ("On Woolman's "Conversations", Ethics, and Economics") presents a thorough discussion and analysis of Woolman's "Conversations on the True Harmony of Mankind and How It May Be Promoted". Woolman's primary thinking on economics and social change is wonderfully condensed in this text, recently made available through the work of Sterling Olmsted. According to Sazama, Woolman is mainly interested in income distribution - fair wage and just price - and the kind of social changes that will lead to greater equity in the sharing of wealth. Of particular note is the fact that, unlike his contemporary, Adam Smith, who saw the organisation and operation of the economy as a matter of the 'invisible hand', Woolman saw it as a matter of human choice - property, financial and commercial relationships that are always subject to adjustment and change. Many other aspects of economic philosophy and practice are covered in this essay making it a good introduction to Woolman's thinking in this area.

Vernie Davis ("John Woolman and Structural Violence") contributes an excellent analysis of structural violence and the method of social change redress that Woolman practised and so well articulated. The richness and detail of this essay elude summary, but two points are particularly notable: Woolman pioneered the idea that oppression can be effectively countered by direct appeal for moral growth in the oppressors, and that those who have the opportunity to witness at that level should act accordingly. Woolman aimed to create cognitive dissonance (before it was so named) as a prompt to moral growth and social change. Secondly, his approach is proof against burn out. 'He reverses the means/ends perspective of Alinsky [radical social change strategist] because for Woolman the means are the end. The moral imperative for Woolman is to do what is right regardless of outcome'.

Susan Dean's essay, "The Figure of John Woolman in American Multicultural Studies", brings Woolman to the classroom. Dean describes how in her own teaching, and in American Studies generally, the reality of the European invasion into Aboriginal cultural regions is a prominent focus. Here again we meet the circumstance raised by Anne Myles noted above - the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between privilege and oppression and the insupportable structure of Western 'universals' in the context of multicultural reality. Right sharing economics is, perhaps, the answer to privilege and oppression, but what can be done about our precious 'universals'? Susan Dean suggests the following: "When the oneness of creation is felt, the barriers of finite will and understanding are dissolved". In this transformation "[we] experience the love that life makes possible. Deep love is the vital intelligence that Woolman holds out today to individuals who despair at the vision of cultural oppression that they see themselves born into. I think this intelligence is one that many of us are seeking at this time in our history, as we work to respect cultural relativism and be suspicious of false universals, but at the same time yearn to experience again a oneness beyond the reach of oppression". She goes on to describe the human-earth relationship that emerges from Native-American spirituality and suggests that if Woolman were among us today he would be in full dialogue with this world view.

Anne Dalke ("Fully Attending to the Spirit: John Woolman and the Practice of Quaker Pedagogy") presents a spirited account of teaching Woolman in the class-
The author stresses 'the power of imagination as a spiritual discipline', and cites Woolman as a particularly good example of this practice. Birkel writes; 'Imagination opens the way to perceiving how those who bear the burden of injustice feel. It is an invitation to identify with them and be in solidarity with them. This practice of imagination reaches what John Woolman calls the “pure witness” within people.' He develops this theme in the first chapter in a particularly effective way ('Integrity and Love'), and carries it through the book's subsequent chapters, 'Worship', 'Scripture', 'Suffering and Redemption', 'Nurturing Empathy', and 'Engaging the World'. *A Near Sympathy* carries forward the concerns of Woolman and recasts them for our time. From scholarship to devotion, this short and inviting book provides a good introduction to Woolman and extends Quaker studies on human solidarity and the integrity of Creation.

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