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RESPONSE TO REVIEWS OF THE TENDERING PRESENCE

MIKE HELLER

I am grateful for T. Canby Jones’ and Max Carter’s reviews of The Tendering Presence: Essays on John Woolman. Both reviews recognize the range and complexity in Woolman’s writings. To use Max Carter’s words, they both see the timeless value of Woolman’s writings as “a great resource in personal spiritual growth and in addressing pressing needs in the world.” To borrow from T. Canby Jones, Woolman has an amazing ability to speak from “that gift of grace that does not offend.” Each time I read Woolman’s Journal or essays I find new depth in my own spiritual understanding and a new appreciation for his courage and strength. Readers are drawn to Woolman by the way he expresses his experience of the inward spirit. Readers feel they can learn from this man whose words and actions are guided by “an inward tenderness, in which the heart is prepared to sympathize with others.”

When the Pendle Hill Book Committee deliberated about whether or not to publish The Tendering Presence, they received a report from an outside reader who questioned whether Quakers, who comprise most of the essays’ contributors, could ask the hard questions about a writer such as John Woolman, whom Quakers revere so highly. Much to the Pendle Hill committee’s credit they said, yes, Quakers can ask the hard questions, and, they took the risk of publishing the book. The essay collection provides readers with much of the best recent writing on Woolman. The essays in the collection ask questions about issues of spiritual discernment and psychology, the morality that Woolman models for readers, and the impact he can have on our efforts for peace, economic justice, and equality. The Tendering Presence takes scholarship on Woolman to a new depth and promotes further scholarship on Woolman.

I want to use this brief space to highlight areas of Woolman’s worth and to suggest that we now go further and ask even more hard questions. The essays in The Tendering Presence explore how our lives are transformed by spiritual experience, by the life of the mind in the context of religious thinking, and the role of humility in becoming a
“fool for God.” Woolman’s writings open a door for us, inviting us to let our lives be nurtured and transformed, and for us to ask students to consider such transformation touching their lives. The Woolman essays nudge me to take the next steps myself. How can I help deepen the experience of my students? How can I live that spiritual experience myself?

Woolman writes about a morality that is timeless and that seems more necessary to our survival today than even in his time. How can we speak from that morality to the issues that we face? Woolman sought to be guided by faith rather than expediency and profits. The challenge with which he presents us is to find our own way to practice the dissent needed to move our society toward change. As the essays demonstrate, his morality reaches from issues of discernment, to parenting, to economic policy. His witness continues to speak even as we see governments and institutions taking a myriad of actions which seem to undermine world peace and security. Woolman would be deeply saddened by our reliance on an “allegiance to the sword” rather than an allegiance to unifying love. Woolman’s writings point us toward a higher morality, even a more pragmatic morality, based upon the universal desire to partake in spiritual love and to work to alleviate human suffering.

Woolman does not tell the reader how to act, but rather he tells of his own spiritual journey and invites the reader to attend to his or her own journey. Each time I teach Woolman, he inspires me. He helps me to continue to expect good things to happen in my classes. Attention to an inward spiritual experience parallels the dynamics of the kind of teaching I want to practice. Yet Woolman is not easy for students to grasp, and I look for ways to help them get it. Reading Woolman for many of them is a very new way of looking at the world. Many of our students are hungry for genuine experiences that will touch and shape their lives. I look for approaches in the classroom that will help students see ways to value their inward lives and to let the inward experience guide their outward lives, to feel and respond to the source, which Woolman calls “the fountain of universal light and love,” and to let that source guide our imaginations and our witness in the world.

As I worked with the contributors to *The Tendering Presence*, I felt a sense of gratitude for each person’s sensitivity and expertise. The essays in the collection should help us ask the next hard questions about how we can speak and work in the prophetic river of life and spirit.