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# The Spiritual Formation of Young John Woolman

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## The Spiritual Formation of Young John Woolman

*Paul Anderson*

WHEN WE THINK OF JOHN WOOLMAN'S CONTRIBUTION, we might think first about his advocacy for the poor and his opposition of slavery. But whence did his concerns emerge, and how did his spiritual sensitivities develop? A remarkable thing about many Quaker autobiographies is the fact that one can trace early on in the experience of an eventual leader the clear promptings of the Deity, coupled with the individual's responses of faith. Certainly it was true for George Fox and others, but the narrated memory of childhood openings and reflections upon youthful spiritual development is even clearer in the *Journal of John Woolman*. The thesis could even be argued that young Woolman's spiritual openings formed the pattern for his later social concerns—either in content or in process—but the interest of this essay is other. It seeks to examine the spiritual formation of young John Woolman with the particular interest of finding out what can be learned about the spiritual development and experience of children and young adults—then and now.

Of course, distinguishing the historical Woolman from the narrated Woolman may be a finally impossible venture, but for the purpose of this essay, one will take the *Journal* reportings pretty much at face value. In doing so, however, one is neither assuming nor doubting their historicity but is simply responding to the narrated memory of earlier events, keeping the authorial interest of the written form at least somewhat in mind. This purpose is most clearly articulated in Woolman's introductory sentence: "I have often felt a motion of love to leave some hints in writing of my experience of the goodness of God, and now, in the thirty-sixth year of my age, I begin this work" (PM 23). From this declaration of intent one may infer Woolman's primary purpose was to

record his experience of “the goodness of God” in order that future readers may be inspired and moved toward like encounters. In that sense, his narration serves the function of forming—every bit as much as informing—the reader in ways spiritual. An analysis of Woolman’s treatment of both of these interests in the narration of his first twenty-three years, thus comprises the interest and scope of this essay.

So how does one approach such an endeavor, letting Woolman’s text speak for itself? In order to best get at the content, three tasks may help. First, breaking his learnings into appropriate units, largely following his own paragraph structuring, helps one consider them individually. This also facilitates considering the source(s) of each of Woolman’s impressions, suggesting something of the formation process itself. Second, identifying phases and developments in terms of content enhances one’s appreciation of Woolman’s spiritual learnings and insights. Third, from considering these two analyses together, then, observations and insights emerge regarding the spiritual formation of young John Woolman in ways instructive for our times as well.

An impressive thing about Woolman’s writing is the way he characteristically develops fully a single idea within a single paragraph. His learning shows. This makes it possible largely to follow his own paragraph structure (and Moulton’s editing of it) as it relates to isolating the spiritual learnings and impressions themselves. Each paragraph is often hemmed by markers of time or space, or both, or at least the introduction of a new theme or a further development of an earlier theme. This contributes to the identifying of 30 narrations of spiritual insight within the 32 paragraphs of Woolman’s first chapter. With such exceptions as finding two learnings in the second, twelfth, and thirteenth paragraphs, and event/reflection combinations of paragraphs 3/4, 5/6, 9/10, 16/17, and 31/32, the rest of the paragraphs in Woolman’s first chapter correspond one to one with narrations of particular spiritual learnings.

While more than one source is often mentioned within each paragraph, attention has been focused on the primary one serving as the prevalent source of formation in that particular instance. Of course, as such a procedure is always based on subjective impressions and is thus somewhat inexact, the findings ought to be taken as suggestive indications rather than conclusive ones. On the other hand, categorization and analysis does lend valuable insight as to the character and origin of each of Woolman’s early spiritual impressions. So let’s proceed.

## SOURCES OF SPIRITUAL IMPRESSIONS

In Woolman's first chapter spiritual impressions emerge from basically eight distinctive sources. At times these are combined, such as Scripture, meeting, and reflection producing a singular opening, but mostly each insight tends to have emerged from a primary source, and taking note of such is telling. These also range in frequency from once (a dream and the helpful fellowship of supportive friends) to nine times (divine address and help received). Of course, these sources of openings worked in complementary ways, such as an event or experience leading to reflection or the sense of divine help, for instance, so some of those confluences will be at least touched upon. While one could approach these sources numerically, from most frequent to least frequent or vice versa, a simpler way to approach these is to follow the sequence of the category's first appearance in the *Journal* itself and then to discuss other references along that same motif. Nonetheless, the number of each appearance is as follows:

Table 1: "*Sources of Woolman's Early Spiritual Impressions and Learnings*"

Source	Number of Times Mentioned
Readings of Scripture or Other Good Books	7
Parents' Counsel and Instruction	3
A Dream	1
Events and Life Experiences	7
Divine Address and Help	9
Corporate Meetings for Worship and Private Worship and Prayer	3
Observation and Reflection	3
The Helpful Fellowship of Supportive Friends	1

### *a) The Reading of Scripture or Religious Books.*

Woolman's first reported spiritual impression came from the reading of Scripture, and six other ones emerged from either reading the Bible, "pious authors" or "good books." In fact, this medium of inspiration

(along with learnings derived from experiences or events, which also numbers seven) is second only to the noting of receiving divine address or help which Woolman cites nine times in his first chapter. It also occupies an important place early in his personal experience. The prevalence and chronological primacy of Scripture in Woolman's spiritual formation is thus extremely significant.

As a six- or seven-year-old reading the 22nd chapter of Revelation, Woolman reflects: "And in reading it my mind was drawn to seek after that pure habitation which I then believed God had prepared for his servants. The place where I sat and the sweetness that attended my mind remains fresh in my memory" (PM 23). Clearly, he was warmed to a vision of the people of God and "a pure habitation" which began to form his own identity and aspirations. This opening was followed by a habitual pattern of reading, both of Scripture and "good books," which Woolman conducted after meeting and otherwise. It is even possible that one of these may have been the *Journal of George Fox*, as Woolman makes good use of such reminiscent terms as "openings" and the seeking out of deserts and "lonely places." His later reflections on friendship likewise suggest familiarity with St. Augustine's *Confessions*.

At several times, Scripture provided a source of guidance in ways which spoke existentially to the condition of young John Woolman. For instance, as a convicting parallel to his killing of the baby birds, the words of Proverbs 12:10 rang true: "The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel" (PM 24f.). Likewise, after having spent part of a day "in wantonness," Woolman picked up a Bible by his bed, and his eye landed on a passage which bespoke his situation: "We lie down in our shame, and our confusion covers us" [Jer. 3:25], (PM 27). The telling connection here is that Woolman experienced his own situation being "read" by the inspired text. It was as though the divine author of the Scriptures were speaking to his situation directly as he read, and such contributed considerably to Woolman's early formation.

As well as these explicit references, many indirect biblical images present themselves throughout Woolman's presentation of his early life. The white stone and new name of Revelation 2:17, for instance, mark his understanding of the blessing awarded the faithful, and "to bear the cross" becomes for Woolman a meaningful daily motif denoting the cost of discipleship (PM 29). Likewise, "the spirit of supplication" [Romans 8], (PM 30) becomes a description of divine enablement, and

being addressed by “that Word which is as a fire and hammer” (PM 26) describes the convicting power of God’s spirit. It would be a mistake to identify Woolman as a biblicist, and yet, the Scriptures undeniably played a major role in his early spiritual formation. While known primarily for his social impact and sensitivities, one must ponder whether these would have developed the way they did had young John Woolman not early on engaged—and been engaged by—the Scriptures.

*b.) Parents’ Counsel and Instruction*

The second source of influence mentioned by Woolman is the counsel received from his parents. It was his parents whom he describes as:

... having a large family of children, used frequently on First Days after meeting to put us to read in the Holy Scriptures or some religious books, one after another, the rest sitting by without much conversation, which I have since often thought was a good practice. (PM 23f.)

From this, Woolman “believed there had been in past ages people who walked in uprightness before God in a degree exceeding any that I knew, or hear of, now living” (PM 24). Early on, his parents advised him to take seriously the life of the Spirit and the way of piety. Apparently, young Woolman took this counsel to heart and aspired to live his life in accord with such standards.

Suggestive of Woolman’s sensitivity, when his father later corrected him for making “an undutiful reply” to his mother, Woolman reports:

... the next First Day as I was with my father returning from meeting, he told me he understood I had behaved amiss to my mother and advised me to be more careful in future. ... Being thus awakened to a sense of my wickedness, I felt remorse of mind, and getting home I retired and prayed to the Lord to forgive me, and do not remember that I ever after that spoke unhandsomely to either of my parents, however foolish in other things. (PM 25)

Clearly, his personal sensitivity was formed significantly by his parents’ direction, as young Woolman quite early on developed a keen sense of high moral standard encompassing both outward and inward measures.

c.) *Dreams*

The third source of spiritual formation for Woolman was a dream he had during his ninth year. While he records other dreams during later times of his life, this was the only one he mentioned during his early years. The actual implications of the dream are left unmentioned, and one can appreciate why the dream has been omitted from MS. A (PM 24). And yet, Moulton rightly includes it, as an author's somewhat opaque contributions deserve also to be considered by later readers as well as the more memorable ones.

The importance of this dream lies not so much in the direct content it conveys, but the impression of one who sees God at work radically in the world. One could even use the words “eschatological” and “apocalyptic” to describe Woolman's emerging world view. It is apocalyptic (*apocalypsis* = revelation) in that it assumes the unveiling of God's purposes and workings transcending and invading the physical world. It is also eschatological (*eschaton* = last) in that it expects God to act with finality in the lives and affairs of humans. The believer is called to partner with God in the unfolding of God's saving/redeeming purposes in the world. Such understandings are not incidental to Woolman's ethical and social stands; they are central and foundational to them.

d.) *Events and Life Experiences*

Tied with the reading of Scripture and good books, the second most frequent source of spiritual formation mentioned by Woolman in the first chapter of his *Journal* is events and life experiences. He mentions seven such episodes, which involve reflection upon the common happenings of life. The first and last of these in Woolman's first chapter are the most dramatic, while the middle ones tend to address his struggles with social temptations and other trials.

The first of these involves an event in the life of young Woolman as a child, when he killed a robin with a stone. Feeling terrible about the incident and taking pity on the chicks, he killed them all rather than leaving them to a drawn-out demise. And yet, he records his anguish over the incident: “but for some hours [I] could think of little else but the cruelties I had committed, and was much troubled” (PM 25). From reflecting on this event and his own feelings about it, Woolman con-

cluded God had “placed a principle in the human mind which incites to exercise goodness toward every living creature; and this being singly attended to, people become tender-hearted and sympathizing” (PM 25).

The middle events and experiences from which Woolman derives spiritual insight tend to involve his struggles with social pressures and worldly temptations. At this point, one must guard against the inclination to contextualize such trials. All too easily, later audiences read of earlier struggles and minimize their sway because they seem archaic or irrelevant. Too facilely, the modern or post-modern interpreter declares with patronizing smugness, “Yes, well, those people back then struggled with X or Y (obviously they didn’t know any better, as we do today, of course) but despite their moral unsophistication we can distill certain values. . . .” Nonsense. We don’t need to know the specifics of Woolman’s social temptations to appreciate their sway. The fact is that he reports struggling greatly—more so with this set of issues than any other—and if we want to glimpse the core of young Woolman’s spiritual formation, we must take seriously his narration of backsliding struggles as indeed being such. Consider his sensitive introduction to the issue:

Having attained the age of sixteen years, I began to love wanton company, and though I was preserved from profane language or scandalous conduct, still I perceived a plant in me which produced much wild grapes. Yet my merciful Father forsook me not utterly, but at times through his grace I was brought seriously to consider my ways, and the sight of my backsliding affected me with sorrow. But for want of rightly attending to the reproofs of instruction, vanity was added to vanity, and repentance to repentance; upon the whole my mind was more and more alienated from the Truth, and I hastened toward destruction. While I meditate on the gulf toward which I travelled and reflect on my youthful disobedience, for these things I weep; mine eye runneth down with water. (PM 25)

Several things emerge as Woolman’s adolescent struggles with temptations arise. The first is that he found himself “estranged” from the Holy Scriptures rather than finding comfort in them. Second, he felt himself “going from the flock of Christ” and associating with those running down the same road “in that which is reverse to true friendship” (PM 25f.). Along “this swift race,” however, he reflects “it pleased God



to visit me with sickness, so that I doubted of recovering" (PM 26). Upon the affliction and estrangement that ensued, Woolman reflects: "in a deep sense of my great folly I was humbled before him, and at length that Word which is as a fire and a hammer broke and dissolved my rebellious heart" (PM 26).

Over the next few years, Woolman gained and lost ground in his struggles with "giving way to youthful vanities" and "getting with wanton young people." The tension is described well:

I was not so hardy as to commit things scandalous, but to exceed in vanity and promote mirth was my chief study. Still I retained a love and esteem for pious people, and their company brought an awe upon me. (PM 26)

Another example of the tension is described in the following passage:

Now though I had been thus strengthened to bear the cross, I still found myself in great danger, having many weaknesses attending me and strong temptations to wrestle with, in the feeling whereof I frequently withdrew into private places and often with tears besought the Lord to help me, whose gracious ear was open to my cry. (PM 29)

This development of an autonomous spiritual identity became tested and strengthened by the experience of being hired to tend shop and keep books by a local shopkeeper and baker when Woolman was in his twenty-first year. He moved out of his family home and into the shop he was tending, and this event proved a testing ground for his moral commitments and resolve. When several young people he had known before "who knew not but vanities" came to visit him, Woolman says, "I cried to the Lord in secret for wisdom and strength. . . . And as I had now left my father's house outwardly, I found my Heavenly Father to be merciful to me beyond what I can express" (PM 30).

Two final events in this early chapter of Woolman's life involved actions of others, personalizing the slave trade, which troubled him and called for action and reflection. The first was a Scotch manservant, purchased from a vessel and brought to Mount Holly by Woolman's master. This man was terribly ill, and Woolman tended to his needs as he became delirious and eventually died. His second recorded encounter with the anomalies of slavery involved his employer's selling a Negro

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woman and directing Woolman to write a bill of sale for the man who bought her. Woolman recalls his unease with writing “an instrument of slavery” and reflects: “so through weakness I gave way and wrote it, but at the executing it, I was so afflicted in my mind that I said before my master and the Friend [buying the slave] that I believed slavekeeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion” (PM 33). Later, in a conversation with a purchaser, Woolman heard him also express his doubts about slavery, and one must surmise such experiences with the personal reality of the issue cannot but have affected Woolman’s later position on the matter over the rest of his life.

From this sequence of event or experience and reflection, one can detect a clear pattern of learning and discernment which becomes a friend to Woolman all of his life. As a reflective practitioner in terms of ethics and matters of morality, young John Woolman acquired the twin abilities of allowing the roots of conviction to go deep into his being and becoming willing to stand against the tide of popular opinion when Truth demanded it. These became trademarks of his life.

#### *e.) Divine Address and Help*

The most common source of spiritual formation recorded by Woolman regarding his early years may be described as the receiving of divine address and divine help. This is not to say he did not experience intimations of the Divine through the other media mentioned above and below, but at times Woolman simply notes unmediated experiences of divine enablement, which either point out the way he should go or provide the empowerment to walk in what he knows to be the way of Truth. These number at least nine in the first chapter of his *Journal*, and they are often mentioned in tandem with other means of formation.

Consider these accounts:

Yet my merciful Father forsook me not utterly, but at times through his grace I was brought seriously to consider my ways, and the sight of my backsliding affected me with sorrow. (PM 25)

. . . I felt the judgments of God in my soul like a consuming fire, and looking over my past life the prospect was moving. (PM 27)

Thus for some months I had great trouble, there remaining in me an unsubjected will which rendered my labours fruitless, till at length through the merciful continuance of heavenly visitations I was made to bow down in spirit before the Lord. (PM 27)

In the following account, both divine guidance and empowerment are recalled:

I was now led to look seriously at the means by which I was drawn from the pure Truth, and learned this: that if I would live in the life which the faithful servants of God lived in, I must not go into company as heretofore in my own will, but all the cravings of sense must be governed by a divine principle. In times of sorrow and abasement these instructions were sealed upon me, and I felt the power of Christ prevail over selfish desires, so that I was preserved in a good degree of steadiness. (PM 28)

The following accounts also speak for themselves: "As I lived under the cross and simply followed the openings of Truth, my mind from day to day was more enlightened" (PM 28) ". . . in those times the spirit of supplication was often poured upon me, under which I was frequently exercised and felt my strength renewed" (PM 30). "This truth was early fixed in my mind, and I was taught to watch the pure opening and to take heed lest while I was standing to speak, my own will should get uppermost and cause me to utter words from worldly wisdom and depart from the channel of the true gospel ministry" (PM 31). "In the management of my outward affairs I may say with thankfulness I found Truth to be my support. . ." (PM 31). And finally,

About the twenty-third year of my age, I had many fresh and heavenly openings in respect to the care and providence of the Almighty over his creatures in general, and over man as the most noble amongst those which are visible. (PM 32)

The above references illustrate graphically Woolman's growing conviction that God seeks to be engaged with humans in an inward dialogue of divine initiative and human response. And, not only is such a dialogue declared a worthy venture by Woolman, but the content of this conviction is also rooted in such a dialectical experience:

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And being clearly convinced in my judgment that to place my whole trust in God was best for me, I felt renewed engagements that in all things I might act on an inward principle of virtue and pursue worldly business no further than as Truth opened my way therein. (PM 32)

And by this standard Woolman sought to live the rest of his life.

#### *f.) Corporate Meetings for Worship and Private Worship and Prayer*

Several times Woolman mentions receiving help from corporate meetings and private times of worship. Not that these are the only times worship was mentioned (see, for instance, PM 23f.), but three times especially Woolman describes the formative power of worship:

I kept steady to meetings, spent First Days after noon chiefly in reading the Scriptures and other good books, and was early convinced in my mind that true religion consisted in an inward life, wherein the heart doth love and reverence God the Creator and learn to exercise true justice and goodness, not only toward all men but also toward the brute creatures. (PM 28)

The mention of quiet evenings alone as a source of sustenance is general (PM 30), and of course the learnings from having spoken “more than was required of me” (PM 31)—and the ensuing reflection—is a classic.

Learnings from meetings for worship are frequently combined with other means of formation such as reading, parental influence, event/experience and observation/reflection. In fact, the most extended description of meeting-related formation (PM 30) itself is based on event/experience, reflection, and divine address. At times private worship becomes a source of strength and formation (PM 30), and one gets the sense that the inward strength formed in solitude becomes the core source of later public ministry.

#### *g.) Observation and Reflection*

Several times Woolman’s spirituality was formed by the process of reflection. In conjunction with reading the Scriptures and other good books

and attending meetings for worship, his reflection upon the life of the Spirit contributes significantly to his being “early convinced in my mind that true religion consisted in an inward life” (PM 28). The next time reflection is mentioned, however, it is described as a singular factor:

While I silently ponder on that change wrought in me, I find no language equal to it nor any means to convey to another a clear idea of it. I looked upon the works of God in this visible creation and an awfulness covered me; my heart was tender and often contrite, and a universal love to my fellow creatures increased in me. (PM 29)

Woolman also observed people “resorting to the public houses” and other sorts of “disorder” and formed a personal conviction against such activities (PM 32). What we see emerging in Woolman is the capacity for being a thoughtful, reflective practitioner in the everyday venues of life. From such reflection emerge insights and convictions central to his emerging ethical stands.

At this point, something must be said about Woolman’s understanding of what he calls a “divine principle” or an “inward principle.” As this motif is mentioned six times in his first chapter, one could argue this should be considered a separate source of formation, but two facts call for an alternative approach. First, the mention of principle is the result of reflection upon events and experiences, and it simply refers to what is known to be the path pleasing to God—which if taken leads to harmonious and constructive ends; but if rejected leads to “confusion” or infelicitous results. The classic example is the killing of the robin and her young (PM 24f.). Second, the mention of inward or divine principle is used in conjunction with other means of divine address, so that it really cannot be considered a separate means. Rather, “divine principle” functions for Woolman as the abiding truth of God, which is encountered inwardly while brought to awareness by life experiences (PM 25), divine enablement and address (PM 28, 30, 32), and the attending of meeting and the reading of Scriptures (PM 28). Accordingly, Woolman believed heeding such a principle would lead or help one to “exercise goodness toward every living creature” (PM 25), govern the “cravings of sense” (PM 28), have one’s heart “enlarged in this heavenly principle” (PM 30), “pursue worldly business no further than as Truth opened my way therein” (PM 32), and to “love God as an invisible, incomprehen-

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sible being . . . [and] to love him in all his manifestations in the visible world" (PM 28). So divine principle, for Woolman, functions as the inward locus of God's Truth, which if minded leads to goodness, but if disobeyed leads to destruction.

#### *b.) The Helpful Fellowship of Supportive Friends*

One time in particular Woolman mentions the value of supportive friends and fellowship, who apparently supplanted less helpful associations:

After a while my former acquaintance gave over expecting me as one of their company, and I began to be known to some whose conversation was helpful to me. And now, as I had experienced the love of God through Jesus Christ to redeem me from many pollutions and to be a succour to me through a sea of conflicts, with which no person was fully acquainted, and as my heart was often enlarged in this heavenly principle, I felt a tender compassion for the youth who remained entangled in snares like those which had entangled me. From one month to another this love and tenderness increased, and my mind was more strongly engaged for the good of my fellow creatures. (PM 30)

Again, the reference to the specific sort of help received is left general, but for our purposes, the significant interest is in the source of influence and formation. Here we see Woolman's peer group shifting to one more conducive to his values, and he clearly feels helped by these acquaintances over alternative ones. From such support and reflecting upon his own struggles, Woolman's sensitivity toward others struggling with like issues is accentuated, and one gets the sense help received will later on be translated into help offered in similar settings.

In considering the sources of formation regarding the spiritual development of young John Woolman, one can clearly infer a progression from the influences of Scripture, family, and meeting, to reflection upon events and experiences, to broader issues and engagement in social concerns. Such a progression is entirely understandable, and yet noting the particular development in Woolman's life is instructive. All too easily, his considerable social contributions become the primary focus of study, while the formative factors underlying such sensitivities is all but overlooked. The present analysis continues in examining the particular phases

in his formation, with a special interest in the themes emerging at various stages of development.

### PHASES IN YOUNG WOOLMAN'S SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Three particular phases emerge when considering Woolman's narration of his early life, and each of these appears to have two parts to it. In the first and third phases the two parts appear to be somewhat distinct, but in all of them, and especially in the second, a considerable degree of overlapping between the two parts within the phase presents itself. Not that the phases are discontinuous between themselves at all. Indeed, progress established during one phase prepares the way for later developments as well. Here one may feel inclined to analyze Woolman's experience and development within the categories of any number of developmentalist or stages-of-faith theoretical constructs, but such will be resisted in this essay. The interest here is to let Woolman's own formation determine its own classification and markers of boundary first, so as to consider fully its own character, before imposing onto it rubrics of analysis from without. Such ventures can often be helpful, but they can also function to diminish appreciation for the very special quality of individual experience. The three phases are as follows:

Table 2: *"Phases in the Spiritual Formation of Young John Woolman"*

Phase	(Approximate ages)
Parts within each phase	
a. Emergence of a Personal Vision of "Uprightness" (ages 6-16)	
i.) Seeking after "That Pure Habitation"	
ii.) Awakened to "A Sense of Wickedness"	
b. Finding a Place between Family and Society (ages 16-21)	
i.) Struggles with "Wantonness"	
ii.) Learning to "Live under the Cross"	
c. Learning to Speak to the Conditions of the World (ages 21-23)	
i.) Learning to "Watch the Pure Opening"	
ii.) Developing a "Feeling Sense of the Condition of Others"	

*a.) Emergence of a Personal Vision of "Uprightness"*

Explicit within the first three pages of his *Journal* is the emergence of a personal vision of "uprightness" within the consciousness of young John Woolman. He interprets these developments as effects of the operations of divine love, and the resulting vision of what is required of him becomes a calling to live into such an ideal personally. On one hand, the emergence of an ideal becomes the stuff of personal aspiration, challenging Woolman to a life believed to be pleasing to God. On the other hand, the ideal is experienced to be a far cry from his actual inclination and deeds, and such a disparity produces a great deal of consternation for him. These two impulses, and the tension between them, can be seen clearly in the two parts within the first phase.

i.) *Seeking after "That Pure Habitation."* Before the age of seven, young Woolman records, his sights were lifted to a pure and righteous standard to which he should aspire. Through the reading of Scripture and good books, the instruction of his parents, and the example of Friends at meeting his understanding of a life pleasing to God becomes formed, and such a vision becomes a calling to "seek after that pure habitation which I then believed God had prepared for his servants" (PM 23). Woolman was also keenly aware of discrepancies between such a pure standard and the lives of those around him. Instead of playing with peers, he would at times seek out contemplative settings; the "ill language" of boys bothered him; and he was troubled by the lack of "steadiness and firmness" among the people of the present age as contrasted to former times when people "walked in uprightness before God" (PM 23f.).

While the exact role of the dream is unclear, the sense of the transcendent workings of God comes through very clearly in it, and such has direct implications for an emerging sense of moral direction. Inclinations to relativize invariably wither before a lively sense of the ultimate. In all, one can detect clearly the emergence of a personal vision of what sort of life would be pleasing to God during the early years of Woolman's life, and such a vision becomes a sort of compass, pointing to true north amidst confusing times. While Woolman is stricken with a sense of incongruity between his emerging ideals and the lives of those around him, a special set of crises emerge as he is confronted by the disparity between his own actions and his emerging standards. Ironi-



cally, a personal sense of righteousness also causes him to be awakened to a personal sense of wickedness.

ii.) *Awakened to "A Sense of Wickedness."* Two primary events are recorded as awakening young Woolman to his own sense of falling short of a standard of life pleasing to God. The first is the killing of the robin and her young. Upon reflection, Woolman felt terrible about having harmed such innocent creatures and interpreted such as the rejection of the divine "principle in the human mind," resulting in the mind shutting itself up "in a contrary disposition" (PM 25). The other experience awakening Woolman to his personal "sense of wickedness" was his "undutiful reply" to his mother's reproof for his misconduct during his twelfth year of age (PM 25). When his father confronted him on the way home from meeting the next First Day about his behaving "amiss," young Woolman felt remorseful, prayed for forgiveness, and reports repentantly he did "not remember that I ever after that spoke unhandsomely to either of my parents, however foolish in other things" (PM 25).

Throughout these reports, Woolman's keen sensitivity shows through, and later interpreters may either question the authenticity of the presentation or consider him too exceptional to be relevant. Presenting the "historical Woolman" versus the narrated Woolman, however, is beyond the purview of this essay, and some embellishment or recasting of former events is always expected within any narration, even historical ones. The fact is Woolman was indeed an exceptional person, which is why his contribution is so impressive and why his life still commands sustained interest. What does indeed come through here is the tension between the emergence of a lofty ideal personally, and the personal sense of inadequacy to live up to that ideal experientially. Rather than proving a final discouragement, however, Woolman seems to have become more keenly aware of his dependence on divine enablement, and this becomes a source of further spiritual connectedness and vitality.

The first phase in Woolman's narrated spiritual development appears thus to be a personal one. The work of establishing a sense of the ideal, of a life believed pleasing to God, catches his imagination and becomes a personal aspiration. Indeed, such aspiration then becomes the stuff of personal awareness of shortcomings, leading to further spiritual struggle and maturation. While Woolman must have had other spiritual experiences before those narrated in his *Journal*, the emergence of a personal

vision of wholeness becomes the beginning juncture for narrating his story of the operations and motions of divine love upon his life.

*b.) Finding a Place between Family and Society*

From the age of sixteen into his early twenties, Woolman records many and repeated struggles to find a place between family and society. He recalls the beginning of this phase like this: "Having attained the age of sixteen years, I began to love wanton company, and though I was preserved from profane language or scandalous conduct, still I perceived a plant in me which produced much wild grapes" (PM 25). This phase continues even after Woolman's moving out of his parents' home and into the shop at which he worked. While this phase also has two main parts to it, it is unlike the first in that the two parts are described as greatly interwoven. Woolman describes struggles with wantonness throughout these five years or so, and he also narrates his learning to live under the cross into his twenty-first or twenty-second year with varying degrees of success.

i.) *Struggles with "Wantonness."* On one hand, one may consider this time in Woolman's life as the healthy development of peer relations and the needed work of individuation, moving from parental values to the establishing of one's own. Some of that does indeed happen here. In a couple of ways, however, such a task is inadequate to describe Woolman's situation. First, he has already come to own personally many values, some of which are rooted in parental instruction and some of which are not. So a fair degree of individuation and autonomy is already in place by this time in Woolman's life. A second disparity is that Woolman for some time appears to have had no genuinely supportive peer group or extra-familial locus of authority from which to receive support. He describes emerging social contacts as "wanton young people" (PM 26), "several young people, my former acquaintance, who knew not but vanities" (PM 30), and "youth who remained entangled in snares" (PM 30). And yet, it is also clear that Woolman numbers himself among them in the promoting of mirth and vanities and in the pursuit of wantonness. In that sense, the second part of the first phase continues into the first part of the second. Struggles with personal matters of morality now become wrestled with in social contexts, and such struggles continue over several years.

Again, basic ignorance of the specific issues of morality here is not problematic, as contextualizing too easily relativizes the values at stake and diminishes later readers' esteem for the gravity of the narrated struggles. The fact is Woolman reports struggling, intensely and repeatedly, and such deserves to be accorded its full weight by later readers, whatever the issues might have been.

ii.) *Learning to "Live under the Cross."* Learning to bear and live under the cross becomes Woolman's way of describing the yielding of his will to God, wherein he humbly draws on God's grace and chooses to mind the leading he knows to be true. As an inward effect of young Woolman's hastening "toward destruction," he reports his way growing more difficult: "Though I had heretofore found comfort in reading the Holy Scriptures and thinking on heavenly thing, I was now estranged therefrom" (PM 25). In the midst of this sense of estrangement, Woolman interprets the visitation of illness as a divine means of humbling and drawing him back to God. He reports:

. . . in a deep sense of my great folly I was humbled before him, . . . then my cries were put up in contrition, and in the multitude of his mercies I found inward relief, and felt a close engagement that if he was pleased to restore my health, I might walk humbly before him. (PM 26)

It is unclear to what degree the above experience defines his later conviction that the way forward spiritually and morally is to live humbly under the cross, but Woolman discusses his reflection over these events in the next paragraph: "After my recovery this exercise remained with me a considerable time" (PM 26). The dialogue between experience and reflection here continues, and Woolman's understanding of what it means to live under the cross is connected centrally to this dialectic. Later, having "lost ground" and having felt "the judgments of God in my soul like a consuming fire" (PM 26f.) he reports:

In a while I resolved totally to leave off some of my vanities, but there was a secret reserve in my heart of the more refined part of them, and I was not low enough to find true peace. Thus for some months I had great trouble, there remaining in me an unsubjected will which rendered my labours fruitless, till

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at length through the merciful continuance of heavenly visitations I was made to bow down in spirit before the Lord.

I remember one evening I had spent some time in reading a pious author, and walking out alone I humbly prayed to the Lord for his help, that I might be delivered from all those vanities which so ensnared me. Thus being brought low, he helped me; and as I learned to bear the cross I felt refreshment to come from his presence. (PM 27)

This appears, in the first chapter of Woolman's *Journal*, to be the closest thing we find to a conversion experience. Notice the sense of need, the coming to God humbly in faith and the sense of transformation emerging from the experience of divine grace and presence. Note also, however, that this was by no means a first religious experience. It follows at least a decade of human/divine dialogue, but the change here appears to be connected to Woolman's offering his "unsubjected will" to God and learning to "bow down in spirit before the Lord." This results in a sense of restored fellowship with God, and it represents the learning of an important spiritual lesson. One can choose to approach God humbly and authentically, with lowliness of heart, thereby finding help, and this is what it means to "bear the cross" (PM 27). On the other hand, such an encounter, real though it may be, is never the last leg of the journey. Woolman records losing ground again but also reports humbly craving help from God, to the effect that: "And I may say with reverence he was near to me in my troubles, and in those times of humiliation opened my ear to discipline" (PM 28). Learning to bear the cross, therefore, first implies humbly turning to God and conforming one's will to the divine principle, whence one encounters the inward "power of Christ to prevail over selfish desires" (PM 28).

A second association with "living under" and "being humbled and disciplined under the cross" (PM 28, 31) has to do with following "the openings of Truth" (PM 28). The first reference appears to relate to living in ways upright, which seems to have produced an inward change in Woolman beyond what he can describe. His heart was filled with a sense of awe toward God and a sense of universal love for fellow creatures (PM 29). The next mention of the cross is set in the context of discerning the leadings of the Spirit within the meeting for worship. Having felt led to speak, though, Woolman reports, ". . . but not keeping close to the

divine opening, I said more than was required of me; . . . I was afflicted in mind some weeks without any light or comfort, even to that degree that I could take satisfaction in nothing" (PM 31).

Nonetheless, he eventually felt God's comfort and forgiveness and then recalled:

And after this, feeling the spring of divine love opened and a concern to speak, I said a few words in a meeting, in which I found peace. This I believe was about six weeks from the first time, and as I was thus humbled and disciplined under the cross, my understanding became more strengthened to distinguish the language of the pure Spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart and taught [me] to wait in silence sometimes many weeks together, until I felt that rise which prepares the creature to stand like a trumpet through which the Lord speaks to his flock. (PM 31)

Distinctive to the second narrated phase of Woolman's spiritual formation is the interplay between the two parts. His pursuit of "wantonness" leads to a desire to learn what it means to "live under the cross," and eventually young Woolman makes progress. Just as the first phase leads into the second, so the latter part of the second phase leads directly into the third. Rather than reflecting the personal inculcation of values or the finding of one's place beyond the family circle, the third phase brings Woolman's keen sensitivities directly to bear on the acute needs of the world. More specifically, learning to live under the cross brings with it the vocation to discern the leadings of the Spirit as they bear upon the personal and social conditions of the world, and this takes us into the next phase of young Woolman's spiritual formation.

*c.) Learning to Speak to the Conditions of the World*

While maturation is clear as Woolman moves from personal to peer to societal issues, it must be kept in mind that the ability to function within later phases leans heavily upon the skills and learnings of prior phases. This set of connections obviates at least one reason the spiritual maturation process is approached within stage-development frameworks by many analysts, as later developments are often made possible only as earlier ones are established. Indeed, the value of considering Woolman's convictions from the narrated perspective of devotional autobiography

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is that one can identify the struggles behind and evolutions of eventual stands. This provides the history behind the story, which allows the narration to have a far richer impact than a one- or a two-dimensional presentation of convictions or concerns. Again, such an analysis makes it clear that Woolman's later radical ministries emerged out of earlier radical discoveries, and the connections between these must not be overlooked. A clear case in point is the bridge between phases two and three. For Woolman, sensitivities to the Spirit's leading with regard to personal morality was undoubtedly foundational to sensitivities regarding social concerns and later being able to address the conditions of the world.

i.) *Learning to "Watch the Pure Opening."* Woolman himself marks the transition from his concerns to mind the truth for his own sake and the desire to do so for the well-being of others. He describes the growth of his compassion for youth who had "remained entangled in snares like those which had entangled me" (PM 30). One gets the sense Woolman will invest a good deal of his life in the formation of other young lives, and indeed his school teaching and other work with young people attest to that calling. Another clear image is the description of inspired vocal ministry as feeling "that rise which prepares the creature to stand like a trumpet through which the Lord speaks to his flock" (PM 31). Notice the locus of import has shifted here to addressing meaningfully the conditions of the world. Thus, minding the Spirit's leading becomes valued primarily for the sake of ministry, which Woolman describes lucidly:

From an inward purifying, and steadfast abiding under it [the cross], springs a lively operative desire for the good of others. . . . The outward modes of worship are various, but wherever men [and women] are true ministers of Jesus Christ it is from the operation of his spirit upon their hearts, first purifying them and thus giving them a feeling sense of the conditions of others. This truth was early fixed in my mind, and I was taught to watch the pure opening and to take heed lest while I was standing to speak, my own will should get uppermost and cause me to utter words from worldly wisdom and depart from the channel of the true gospel ministry. (PM 31)

The description of ministry here is classic. Ministry is not a set of programs or a platform of human initiatives to effect a task; rather, like

authentic worship, it is from the operation of the Spirit upon people's hearts. This operation purifies the individual, and such heightened sensitivity becomes the fountain of one's "feeling sense of the condition of others." True ministry thus becomes the addressing of human needs in ways spiritually sensitized and empowered. Central to this work is the ability to attend, discern, and mind the promptings of the Spirit, lest worldly wisdom detract from the "channel of the true gospel ministry."

This endeavor of watching for the "pure opening" carries beyond the meeting for worship and extends to the workplace. Thus, Woolman reflects on this venture and its effect: "In the management of my outward affairs I may say with thankfulness I found Truth to be my support, and I was respected in my master's family, who came to live in Mount Holly within two year[s] after my going there" (PM 31). Woolman reportedly received in his twenty-third year "many fresh and heavenly openings in respect to the care and providence of the Almighty over his creatures in general, and over man as the most noble amongst those which are visible" (PM 32). This sentence clearly suggests he was becoming more and more sensitized to the conditions of animals and humans around him, and one infers the development of social consciousness which becomes the foundation of later concerns and actions. Being confirmed in his decision to place his whole trust in God, Woolman applies the same rigorous standard guiding vocal ministry to the workplace: ". . . I felt renewed engagements that in all things I might act on an inward principle of virtue and pursue worldly business no further than as Truth opened my way therein" (PM 32). So in the religious life and beyond it, young Woolman set his attention to watching for, and heeding, the pure opening.

ii.) *Developing a "Feeling Sense of the Condition of Others."* Not only does this phrase render a fitting description of gospel ministry, but it describes Woolman's own actions during the last part of this chapter. In particular, Woolman becomes concerned about two situations wherein the well-being of others is threatened, and he addresses each with intentionality. It is fair to say that in neither of these actions can Woolman's actions be deemed highly successful, or even significant. But two considerations remain: his first concern was to be faithful to a sense of principle and divine leading. In that sense, "success" deserves to be interpreted in terms of sensitivity to ills needed to be addressed and one's willing-

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ness to act meaningfully toward such ends. A second consideration is that from the early development of social concerns, later plans of action flow. Over the long-term perspective, world-changing movements were beginning to coalesce.

The first concern had to do with corruptions and vanities associated with drinking at public houses. Feeling led to go and speak to the master of a particular pub, Woolman paused because he was not aware of other more mature Friends raising this concern first, and yet the "duty" was laid upon him to do so. Liking himself to Ezekiel, the watchman on the tower, he carried forth his prophetic charge. He spoke to the man, who actually received his concern warmly, and Woolman was very pleased to have done so because, shortly thereafter, the man died. This confirmed the timeliness of faithful responsiveness to the pure opening, and Woolman felt grateful for God's guidance and support in the matter (PM 32).

The second concern relates to being asked to write a bill of sale for a Negro woman who was being sold by his master to a Friend, an elderly man in the community. While Woolman considered it weakness to have written it, he reports: "I was so afflicted in my mind that I said before my master and the Friend that I believed slavekeeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion" (PM 33). Woolman felt good about having at least said something, but he still felt bad about having written "an instrument of slavery." At the next opportunity to write a bill of purchase for a slave owner Woolman objected. "I told him I was not easy to write it, for though many kept slaves in our Society, as in others, I still believed the practice was not right, and desired to be excused from writing [it]" (PM 33). Apparently he was excused, and he even found some resonance within the heart of the man making a "gift" to his wife. Addressing the conditions of others leads to specific, direct action for Woolman, and this begins the public chapter of his long life of spiritual and social service and reform.

Throughout the three phases of Woolman's early spiritual formation one sees the progression between the emergence of a personal sense of uprightness—the stuff of aspiration, to struggles with living up to those standards—personally and in the world, to a place where he could say "I found Truth to be my support." The habitual vision of greatness central to the life of every great person here becomes a paradoxical reality. The only way forward is the way of the cross, and sensitivities gained in



personal struggles become the sharpened implements of social reform. While the phases overlap to some degree and appear to have a couple of parts within each, they also build upon each other in ways significant. To tease out the implications, a bit of final analysis is in order.

## ANALYSIS AND OBSERVATIONS

Upon considering the sources and phases of young Woolman's spiritual formation, several observations deserve to be drawn out. Many of these may appear to be obvious, and indeed rational analysis may at times detract from the emotion and aesthetic experience of simply letting the text speak for itself, but my belief is that such a venture serves the reader well. The following analysis and observations attempt to draw together some of the findings of the above work in ways which not only distill learnings from Woolman's spiritual formation, but they also do so in ways which have meaningful implications for spiritual formation work today.

The first thing one notes is the importance of outward sources of formation upon the early spiritual life of John Woolman. The reading of Scripture and good books, the loving instruction of parents, guidance received from Friends at meeting, and the social support received from helpful friends all played extremely significant roles in his spiritual formation. This input forms the stuff of spiritual aspiration, and it becomes a central source of later encouragement along the way. Hence, "take up and read" was not only the invitation received by St. Augustine over thirteen centuries earlier, but its echoes also ring clearly in the experience and formation of the young John Woolman.

What if Woolman had not read the Bible and been warmed to the lofty idealism of Revelation? What if his parents had not insisted on the attending of meeting or had not expected high standards regarding respect for others, honesty, and integrity? What would have come of Woolman's first formative phase? Would he have ever become as sensitive to his own need or the condition of the world around him? These may be impossible questions to answer, but they are highly significant as educators and formers of young lives today consider their callings. Steady, consistent, loving input appears to be foundational to spiritual formation if the life of Woolman serves as any sort of an example.

A second observation takes seriously the growing internalization of values and the ability to trust God inwardly within the maturing spiri-

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tual experience of young John Woolman. His dream, events, and experiences, receiving divine impressions and help, and reflection upon these experiences all produced a growing ability to trust one's inward estimation of the Truth. At times, Woolman called this a divine or inward principle, and at times he described it as "the pure opening," or the leading of the Spirit. Eventually, this battle becomes defined as the willingness to trust God versus clinging to one's "unsubjected will," and growth in small increments leads to larger ones. Implications for spiritual formation today include the importance of facilitating autonomy in the spiritual experiences of young people. As valuable as external sources of formation are, the central goal is to prepare emerging leaders to be able to attend, discern, and heed the promptings of the divine presence. Trust becomes the way forward, and moving one's life from an unsubjected will to a creative "yes" to God becomes the goal.

Note the tremendous importance of the peer group in the process of young Woolman's spiritual formation. From his middle teens to his early twenties, the greatest source of diversion and "confusion" (a term for spiritual lostness) is the influence of "wanton" young people. The conflict involved the healthy individuation by means of socialization outside the family, combined with the fact that peer values went against many of those of Woolman's family, as well as his own, and this produced major and repeated crises. While young Woolman was undoubtedly strengthened by his repeated seeking of God rather than the world and its wantonness, one is reminded that he finally found his way as he developed friendships supportive of his values and moral commitments. Implications for today are twofold. First, young people must be given support to stand up for values and convictions, especially other than those embraced by prevalent peer groups. Second, the organizing of social contexts where peers can be of mutual support, spiritually and morally, is extremely valuable in the successful formation of personal positive identity. Apparently, young Woolman found his own set of supportive relationships, independent of assistance, but one wonders what might be done by others to facilitate such developments for emerging leaders today.

One is impressed at the processive way Woolman's spiritual commitments developed. The fact that all people develop in their own distinctive ways should be an instructive point to remember. Notice that Woolman's becoming established in his faith really took over half a de-

cade, from the first commitments of his will to God to the sense of finding victory in the Spirit. This does not fit some instantaneous doctrines of transformation wherein one “gets it right” the first time and has no more struggles thereafter. Apparently, Woolman’s experience went up and down many times, and it finally leveled off into a more matured set of commitments and experiences. This is to say that his “conversion experience” appears to have been more like a “conversion process,” and this ought to allow us some liberty when people don’t appear to fit one’s understanding of how it “ought to” take place. At this point, however, a caution in the other direction is also fitting. Neither should one expect a five-year process to be normative just because things happened something like that for John Woolman. Transformational work may indeed take shorter or longer, depending on the individual and her or his situation. From Woolman’s example, present readers find liberty to value fully the particular ways spiritual experience and formation emerge—or don’t emerge—within the life of each person. This sets us free to face authentically into the places we seem to be, and to respond appropriately to the Truth as understood and needed.

One is greatly impressed at the spiritual sensitivity of young John Woolman, both in relation to his personal state of being and to the condition of others in a hurting world. One cannot escape his acute moral sensitivity, and the tendency to consider such exaggerated or to disregard it as extreme should be resisted at all costs. One is mindful that his social sensitivities were also experienced thusly, especially by those who would rather not have had the boat rocked too much. But the prophet always sings a solo, at least for a while, and in retrospect we wonder why more people had not made the stands Woolman did before or even during his time. Put otherwise, why were not more people sensitive to the terrible abuses of humanity endemic to the slave trade and other social ills? Were their hearts hardened? Were they desensitized by those who thought rocking the boat socially to be extremist? Or, were they never given the opportunity to develop personal moral sensitivities because no one gave them the chance? Whatever the case, one is struck that personal moral sensitivity provides the early framework for later social concern, and it is never too early to develop such sensitivities and foundations for later contributions.

One is also taken by Woolman’s acute desire to mind, above all else, the pure openings of Truth, both in the meeting for worship and in the

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workplace. This commitment to be a seeker and minder of the Truth becomes the trademark of Woolman's maturing spiritual life. He felt terribly distraught over having spoken "more than was required" of him, and out of the repentant weeks following that episode, he came to exercise faithfulness once more, leading to the experience of being used as a trumpet of the Lord, sounding the clarion call of the Word of the Lord within the world. Likewise, in the business world, rather than seeing such as off limits to the workings of the Spirit, Woolman aspired to live in ways truthful and to behave in all ways beyond reproach. Implications for spiritual formation today involve the paramount importance of living with integrity and seeking to be truthful in small things as well as large ones. The seeking of Truth, then, becomes not only the end goal of spiritual formation, but also its beginning.

A final observation involves the priority of faithfulness to divine principle over outward measures of success. Impressive about many of young Woolman's socially moral stands is that many of them appear to have had very little impact on the outcome of events, if any. From this one may be inclined to consider them failures, but as in war, the only really important battle is the last one. All too easily, prophetic work is measured by early receptions rather than lasting contributions, and the example of young Woolman's faithfulness helps later audiences take heart. He indeed felt pleased at least to have spoken to people about his concerns, even though no appreciable changes appeared to have resulted from such conversations. On the other hand, world history was changed by the long-term example of Woolman and by his compelling narration of his experiences. Implications for later generations are rife. The central issue is faithfulness to the Truth and the embracing of what is known to be divine principle. Having done so, apparent successes and failures become glimpsed through a different prism—refracting our fractured sight, until the whole is fully seen.

Considering the spiritual formation of young John Woolman grants insight into the foundational set of experiences which produced one of the most effective agents of change in American history. It also reminds us of an often-overlooked fact in this age of pluralism and the conscious or unconscious diminishment of the religious self: that Woolman's great social impacts had their roots deeply embedded in spiritual soil, without which such contributions might not have been made, certainly not in

the same way. The central implication may be put better in the form of a query: "In desiring to change the world for the good, today and tomorrow, how well are we doing at forming the spiritual lives and sensitivities of emerging generations of young people?" From reading anew the first chapter of John Woolman's *Journal*, many fresh insights emerge. As we consider this record of "the operations of divine love," we too may feel "a motion of love" to leave some hints of the goodness of God in the world, ourselves. When this happens, we become mindful that these "hints" extend beyond the written page to the life of the reader, and information extends to formation—our own.

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