

Holy Obedience: Abandonment to God

One thing is clear, that there is a will and intention of God bearing upon me, and I must let it bear fully upon me, so that I may be free. My life has no meaning except as a conscious and total self dedication to the *fulfillment of His intentions*, which, in their details, remain a complete mystery.

Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation*¹

Here we have a prospect of one common interest from which our own is inseparable — that to turn all the treasures we possess into the channel of universal love becomes the business of our lives.

John Woolman, “A Plea for the Poor”²

The mystical experience contains an invitation to action. From the place of deep prayer arises our call to be ministers. In the Silence we are given much, and much will be asked of us. To minister requires the gifts of humility and perseverance and the recognition that though we may be invited to do what we find difficult, it is not difficult for God.

[A]s offending sober people is disagreeable to my inclination, I was straitened in my mind; but as I looked to the Lord, he inclined my heart to his testimony. . . . I had a fresh confirmation that acting contrary to present outward interest from a motive of divine love and in regard to truth and righteousness, and thereby incurring the resentments of people, opens the way to a treasure better than silver and to a friendship exceeding the friendship of men.³

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But the fear of the Lord so covered me at times that way was made easier than I expected.⁴

Kathryn Damiano, whom I met at Pendle Hill in 1994, wrote to me:

God is with us and Christ's guidance is available at all times, even for the smallest things. Christ is alive now. Christ is not dead. That is where early Friends got their life. They felt the power of God when they worshipped together and in their individual lives.⁵

In the midst of our struggles, we are sometimes tempted to give up. We lose sight of God's power flowing through us. The way of the world is sometimes attractive for it appears easy. But this is so only superficially for it is in reality deathly rather than life-giving.

However, if we are willing to trust in God, if we will allow God to help us, all is possible. We can stand against all temptations if we are tempered by the purifying, healing fire of God's love. The choice is ours. God is always knocking.

John Woolman was called, and he acted on the call.

I feel my mind resigned to leave you for a season, to exercise that gift which the Lord hath bestowed on me, which though small compared with some, yet in this I rejoice, that I feel love unfeigned toward my fellow-creatures.⁶

Our wills being made Subject to his, all temptations are Surmountable.⁷

God does not lay the notion of perfection upon us. This is a human invention that is a burden God does not ask us to carry. God accepts and loves us in our imperfect state. But we are invited to seek clarity, and we are encouraged by God's love to be faithful to the call we receive.

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Margaret O'Neal, a fellow resident student at Pendle Hill in the spring of 1994, wrote to me:

My soul has been heavy all day — because this morning I *didn't* listen to a nudging from God. Sometimes I have a hard time being sure of God's voice. Especially when it is something I don't want to hear! How difficult it is to walk this path we're walking. . . . And blessed . . .

It is by listening to God in these small nudgings that I bind myself to God.

I've realised that when I speak of "listening" to God, I equate listening with obeying. It doesn't seem like listening to God if I respond with: "Well, thanks for your input, but I've decided to do otherwise." The only reasonable response to the voice of God is to obey. What a miracle it is to *hear* God's voice; how could I possibly choose to defy it?

But I did this morning. I just wasn't *sure* of what I heard. . . . May my soul be enlightened so that I may recognise the presence of God.⁸

Thomas Merton states:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing of that. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of

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death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.⁹

John Woolman wrote:

I may say with thankfulness that the kindness of Providence is still near to his people, to give counsel in times of distress and difficulty. The need we have of His help some of late have been more sensible than heretofore.¹⁰

John Woolman's commitment to be obedient to God arises from his experiential knowledge of God's Love for him and all creation. His desire to abandon himself to God is a natural movement of the Spirit in a person who has been willing to receive God's love.

My heart hath been often melted into contrition since I left thee, under a Sence of divine goodness being extended for my help and preparing in me a Subjection to his will.¹¹

Accepting Christ's presence, Christ's tenderness, Christ's desires for us, leads us on the path of freedom. We become detached from worldly values and journey toward true liberty.

John Woolman saw himself as walking in the company of his friend Israel Pemberton and in the company of Christ. They allowed themselves to be led from their entanglements into a state of nakedness and freedom, their souls looking for and desiring a more perfect deliverance.

I have had in view the purity of the Heavenly Family. The most Gracious and most tender Visitations of Christ to our Souls drawing them from the mixture and entanglements, that they may Attain true Liberty, and have seem'd in company with thee, looking for and desiring a more perfect Deliverance.¹²

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The power of Good is greater than the power of evil. In all our difficulties, Christ is present and is a power for good. Do we believe that?

When we are well, do we remember the God who was with us in our sickness and helped us to recover? Do we believe that God was/is with us in our sickness? Do we turn to God at first or only as a last resort? What sort of relationship do we have with God? What is our image of God?

Let us rejoice in God's goodness to us and undertake to follow in God's way. May God help us to resist the temptation to step off the foundations God has laid for us.

But we must acknowledge the difficulty of this calling, for in truth it is difficult. We, by the nature of society, are forever interacting with those who are not following God's way, good people trapped within institutions and structures which are death-giving, including religious bodies. We should always remember that we have much to learn from the holy people who have never set foot in church and do not use the word God.

We are invited to desire the strength to stand in the Light of Truth.

But in humble gratitude hold fast his instructions, thereby to shun those by paths which leads from the firm foundation. I am Sensible of that variety of Company, to which one in thy business must be Exposed. I have painfully felt the force of conversation proceeding from men deeply rooted in an Earthly mind, and can sympathize with others in Such Conflicts, in that much weakness still attends me.¹³

In the Strength of all Temptation and in difficulties which Appear very great, there hath seem'd before me a

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prospect, a POWER, able and ready to subdue all things to Himself.¹⁴

When we are called to minister, God is asking us to be helpful, in some way, to others. But we are asked to do this humbly for the power comes from God working through us. John Woolman recognised that God knew what was best for those he visited; i.e. God was there before John Woolman turned up and would be present after he had gone. And, he recognised that he, John Woolman, would not necessarily see the fruits of his labour.

Ministering is reminiscent of planting seeds and not knowing what will come. Will we be surprised by small white daffodils amidst the irises?

Do we ever really know what is happening in the depths of another human being?

Indeed, it is desirable only to get occasional hints of the fruits. This leads to prayers of thanksgiving, gives enough encouragement to continue, elicits a state of detachment from the outcome, and leads to a state of inner freedom, a place from which true ministry can take place.

We are also called to minister because *we* need our ministry to get closer to God.

Our Visits in general have hitherto been in weakness, and to me it hath been a time of Abasement. I hope, notwithstanding, our appointing meetings have not been to the dishonour of Truth. My Exercises have, I think, been at least usefull to me, & I am thankful to the Almighty in that I have seen and felt that He knows best what is for our good, and the good of fr'ds where we come.¹⁵

As he ministers, John Woolman detects the invitation to abandon himself even more to God. His desire is to surrender

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totally to God. How important it is to recognise and state our desires, for God will not force us. Stating our desires points us in a direction, and we grow even closer to God. It confirms our dependence on God and leads us to clarity and real freedom.

John Woolman is in a state of continually reflecting on his experience and is always learning of God. As he travels in the ministry, he is on a journey *with* God. He knew his travelling in the ministry was the right thing to do when he left home, and he is still very clear.

But Such is the weight of the work I am engaged in, and
Such the baptisms with which I have been baptized; that
I see A Necessity for all nature to Stand Silent. . . .

. . . All I have are his gifts, and I am endeavouring
(though in weakness) to Surrender all to him.¹⁶

Every Year brings Additional Experience and I think I
never more clearly Saw the reasonableness and fitness
of Casting all my cares on God than I have Since I left
thee.¹⁷

With his desire to be obedient to God's call and his need to be supported by God, his task each day is to give himself over to God. God is faithful to John Woolman, and John Woolman is faithful to God.

I am humbly Thankfull to the Lord that my mind is so
supported in a Trust in Him that I go cheerfully on my
Journey and at present Apprehend that I have nothing
in any way to fear but a Spirit of Disobedience, which I
Trust through Divine Help I may be delivered from.¹⁸

My Daily Labour is to find a full Resignedness to Him
and m(a)y say with thankfulness he Remains to be my
Gracious Father.¹⁹

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In describing Holy Obedience in *A Testament of Devotion*, Thomas Kelly writes:

Only now and then comes a man or a woman who, like John Woolman or Francis of Assisi, is willing to be utterly obedient, to go the other half, to follow God's faintest whisper. But when such a commitment comes in a human life, God breaks through, miracles are wrought, world-renewing divine forces are released, history changes.²⁰

People like John Woolman are presented to us as arrows pointing to the universal invitation. If, in the midst of admiring him, we leave it at that, we are missing the point. His witness is there to challenge us to follow God across our human-made boundaries.

John Woolman encouraged others to be obedient to God, and he lived a life that inspired others to live in a way closer to God's values. His recognition of the holiness of God and his knowledge of the blessed state that could exist if we gave ourselves over to the Divine Teacher meant he became distressed when others, particularly children, were educated into materialistic ways — by the education system and through the example of others.

My mind is often on the immutability of the Divine being, & the purity of his judgments, and a prospect of outward distress in this part of the world hath been open before me, and I have had to behold the blessedness of a state in which the mind is fully subjected to the divine Teacher, and the confusion and perplexity of such who profess the Truth, and are not faithful to the leadings of it: nor have I ever felt pitty move more evidently on my mind, than I have felt it toward children, who, by their education, are lead on in unnecessary expenses, and exampled in seeking gain in the wisdom of this world to support themselves

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therein.²¹

In this thy late affliction I've found a deep fellow-feeling with thee, and had a secret hope throughout that it might please the Father of Mercies to raise thee up & sanctifie thy troubles to thee, that thou being more fully acquainted with that way which the world esteems foolish may feel the Cloathing of Divine Fortitude, and be strengthened to Resist that spirit which leads from the Simplicity of the Everlasting Truth.²²

To Him I recomend thee, my Dear Companion, greatly Desiring thy mind may be Resigned to Him for I Veryly believe if we keep in this Frame all will End well.²³

On 9 July 1769, John Woolman wrote a letter to a now unknown recipient. The thrust of this letter is to comment on the pressure of worldly values on religious considerations, e.g. time and money. He is writing a supportive letter to this friend whom he feels, like himself, is being asked to be an example of the True Way.

My dear friend — In our meeting of Ministers and Elders, I have several times felt the movings of divine love amongst us, and to me there appeared a preparation for profitable labours in the meeting: but the time appointed for publick meetings drawing near, a strictness for time hath been felt. And in Yearly Meeting, for the preservation of good order in the Society, when much business hath lain before us, and weighty matters relating to the Testimony of Truth hath been under consideration, I have sometimes felt that a care in some to get forward soon hath prevented so weighty and deliberate a proceeding as by Some hath been desired.

Sincere hearted friends who are concerned to wait for the Counsel of Truth, are often made helps to each other, and when such from distant parts of our

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extensive Yearly meeting, have set their houses in order and thus gathered in one place, I believe it is the will of our Heavenly Father, that we, with a single eye to the leadings of his Holy Spirit, should quietly wait on him without hurrying in the business before us.

As my mind hath been on these things some difficulties have arisen in my way; first there are through prevailing custom, many expences attending our entertainment in town, which, if the readings of Truth were faithfully followed, might be lessened.

Many under an outward shew of a delicate life, are entangled in the worldly Spirit, labouring to support those expensive customs which they at times feel to be a burden.

These expences arising from a conformity to the spirit of this world, have often lain as a heavy burden on my mind, and Especially at the time of our solemn meetings; and a life truly conformable to the simplicity that is in Christ, where we may faithfully serve our God without distraction, and have no interruption from that which is against the Truth, to me hath been very desirable; and my dear friend, as the Lord in Infinite mercies hath called thee and I (Sic) to labour at times in his vineyard, and hath, I believe, sometimes appointed to us different offices in his work, our opening our experience one to another in the pure feeling of Charity may be profitable.

The great Shepherd of the Sheep I believe is preparing some to example the people in a plain Simple way of living. And I feel a tender care that thee and I may abide in that, where our light may shine clear, and nothing pertaining to us have any tendency to Strengthen those customs which are distinguishable from the Truth as it is in Jesus.

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God loves us even more than our parents love us, more than any human being can. God desires that we become whole and be in union with God. What is our desire? Are we willing to pay the price? Are we ready for the discipline and obedience that are necessary?

God is waiting for us to invite Her into our hearts to heal our inner conflicts, to heal our inner distress, to heal our negative view of ourselves, to expand our limited view of God, to expand our limited view of our potential. Our pain contains an invitation from God to address our inner state. But we must be willing to pass through the pain of the struggle. We must be willing to believe that God shows us our difficulties when we are ready to deal with them.

If kind parents love their children and delight in their happiness, then He who is perfect goodness in sending abroad mortal Contagions, doth Assuredly direct their use. Are the righteous removed by it? their change is happy: Are the wicked taken away in their wickedness? the Almighty is clear. Do we pass through it with anguish and great bitterness, & yet recover? he intends that we should be purged from dross, and our ear opened to discipline.²⁵

If we will allow God to set us free, we will enter into a state of reliance upon and obedience to God — a place where we will trust that we will be given all that we need, a place of spiritual, psychological, and emotional well-being. As St. Ignatius of Loyola wrote in his classic *Suscipe* prayer:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,

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and my entire will.
All I have and call my own.

You have given all to me.
To you, Lord, I return it.

Everything is yours; do with it what you will.
Give me only your love and your grace,
that is enough for me.²⁶