

“The John Woolman Story”

from Healing The Heart of Democracy by Parker Palmer

If the “power of the broken heart” makes sense to you in the context of personal life but seems irrelevant to politics, consider this story of an ordinary citizen and an issue of great moral and political consequence that continues to haunt our democracy.

John Woolman (1720-1772) was a Quaker who lived in colonial New Jersey among other merchants and farmers in the Society of Friends whose affluence depended on enslaving human beings who, like them, had names and families, histories and hopes. Woolman, a tailor who did not own slaves, was torn by the blatant contradiction between the Quaker belief in human equality and the fact that many Quaker gentry were slaveholders. He refused to make that tension disappear by ignoring it, using theological sleight of hand, or riding its energy toward violence. Instead, he insisted that his community hold that tension with honesty and resolve it with integrity by freeing their slaves.

Quakers make decisions by consensus instead of majority rule, and Woolman’s local meeting (or congregation) was unable to reach unity on his proposal. Nonetheless, persuaded of Woolman’s absolute integrity in the matter, they agreed to support him as he pursued his concern. For the next twenty years, Woolman made frequent trips up and down the East Coast, visiting Friends in their homes and their shops, at their farms, and in their meetings. He spoke with his fellow Quakers about the heartbreaking contradiction between their faith and their practice. And he was always true to his beliefs. He wore undyed white clothing because dye was produced by slave labor; at meal, he would fast rather than eat food prepared or served by slaves, even if he stayed to talk; and if he learned that he had inadvertently benefited from a slave’s work, he would pay that person his or her due without calling attention to the exchange.

Woolman and his family paid a great price for his consistent witness to truth’s imperatives and his deeply felt heartbreak. Nonetheless, he held that tension, held it for twenty long years, until Quakers became the first religious community in America to free their slaves, some eighty years before the Civil War. In 1783, Quakers petitioned the Congress to correct the “complicated evils” and “unrighteous commerce” created by the enslavement of human beings. And from 1827 onward, Quakers played a key role in developing the Underground Railroad, “an informal network of secret routes and safe houses used by nineteenth-century black slaves...to escape to free states and Canada with the aid of abolitionists who were sympathetic to their cause.”

These historic outcomes were possible because not just Woolman but the entire Quaker community held their internal contradiction consciously and constantly until they saw the light. The community, like Woolman himself, refused to resolve the matter falsely or prematurely. The Quakers did not take a quick vote to let the slave-owning majority have its way, nor did they banish the vexatious Woolman from their midst. They tested their convictions in dialogue and labored to achieve unity, trusting tension to do the work, until they finally arrived at a decision of historic importance.

Sadly, members of the United States Congress were unwilling to hold the tension even long enough to consider the Quaker's petition of 1783. After hearing the petition read on October 8, they immediately tabled it and never took it up again. Perhaps there was too much retention in the fact that the petition invoked the Declaration of Independence, stating that the institution of slavery exists "in opposition to the solemn declaration often repeated in favor of universal liberty."

John Woolman's story allows us to distinguish once more between two kinds of heartbreak. The first is the conventional image of a heart exploded into a thousand shards. Some of us try to pick up the pieces and put our lives back together; some fall into long-term despair; some take grim satisfaction in the injury the heart's explosion inflicts on our enemies. This kind of broken heart is an unresolved wound that keeps on wounding us and others. When the heart is brittle and shatters, it can scatter seeds of violence and multiply our suffering among others.

And yet as Woolman's story reveals, there is an alternative image for a broken heart. When the heart is supple, it can be "broken open" into a greater capacity to hold our own and the world's pain: it happens every day. When we hold our suffering in a way that opens us to greater compassion, heartbreak becomes a source of healing, deepening our empathy for others who suffer and extending our ability to reach out to them. This kind of tension-holding can plant the seeds of justice and peace, as Woolman and other exemplars of nonviolence have shown time and again.

The Woolman story also underscores a point that is critical to the central thesis of this book: holding tension creatively does not mean indecision or inaction. At every level of human life - from living our own lives well to governing a nation justly - decisions must be made. But they must not be made in the haste that comes from fearing the clash of diverse opinions. If the Quaker way of getting eighty years ahead of the Civil War on America's greatest moral dilemma means anything at all, it means that the broken-open, tension-holding heart is not only a powerful source of compassion and healing. It is also a source of the wisdom required to make challenging decisions well.