Friends, Slavery, and the Earth

(from a Quaker Earthcare Witness pamphlet, Friends, Slavery, and the Earth, by Lisa Lofland Gould)

GIFT OF GOD, BROTHERHOOD, JUSTICE, INTEGRITY, LIBERTY, JESUS... fine words beloved by Friends...words also the names of ships in the slave trade. How disconnected from the sufferings of their human cargoes were the owners of those ships, how much denial did they hold in their hearts, to be able to give such names?

But as we look for splinters in the eyes of slave traders of the past, are we perhaps overlooking beams in our own eyes? Is it possible that today we are equally disconnected from an understanding of the suffering we bring to the whole of God's creation? Behind what euphemisms do we hide the modern equivalent of the slave trade, our oppression of the Earth?

Modern Friends are proud of the Quaker record on slavery. We point to George Fox's and William Penn's early words on treating Native Americans and slaves with kindness, to the witness of John Woolman, to Friends' participation in the Underground Railroad, to the southern Friends who migrated from slave-holding to free states, and to the many Friends whose words and actions had influence well beyond the Quaker community.

Fox, Penn, and Woolman wrote movingly of the human relationship with the rest of Creation. All were concerned about the spiritual degradation brought on by wrong relationships. In his Journal, John Woolman wrote of the spiritual effect of slavery on slaves, slave owners, and future generations. He asked Friends to stop using human beings as personal property, at the cost of both money and power.

Friends also were asked to take on work previously done by slaves, or pay fair wages for hired labor. They were asked to recognize black people as full human beings at a time when much of society considered them soulless creatures. They were asked to examine every aspect of their lives to root out practices and purchases which utilized slave labor.

EARLY FRIENDS searched their hearts and came to the corporate leading that they could no longer participate in any aspect of slavery. In a society in which much of the economy was based on slave labor, this must have been a very difficult decision to live by. As time passed and the initial difficulties were surmounted, however, surely those Friends who changed the way they lived in response to this corporate leading found their lives more joyful. They had "come 'round right" in relationships, and were freed from the terrible burden of guilt and empowered to positive action and lives of wholeness.

After Friends abandoned the practice of slavery, they were asked to work in the political arena to help abolish slavery as an institution, and then to help former slaves become part of the larger society. At every juncture, Friends were required to examine their relationship with black people, to see if it was in keeping with Fox's admonition to "speak to that of God in everyone," and with Christ's great commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

God calls Friends today to similar action: we are asked to look into our hearts and examine our relationship with the rest of Creation, and to recognize that our neighbor includes the entire Earth community. We, too, are being asked to give up habits and things which have made our lives seem easier, just as slaves appeared to make life easier for their owners.

We are being called to examine our relationship with modern technology, to make conscious choices about which technologies enhance our lives and which are superfluous or destructive. We are being asked to develop a new relationship with the land, one based on mutual respect and care rather than exploitation. We are being asked to acknowledge our inter-dependence with all Creation. And we are being asked to do these things at a time in history when much of humanity still cannot accept other people as their "neighbors," much less accept the sacred nature of the rest of Creation.
TODAY WE ARE REMINDED constantly of the results of wrong relationships, as we hear the grim news of crime, pollution, drug abuse, racism, promiscuous sexuality, poverty, war, and despair. One hundred thirty years after its abolition in America, we still reap the bitter fruits of slavery. How long will we reap the fruit of our treatment of the Earth? It is time that Friends seek to understand the spiritual consequences of our broken relationship with the rest of Creation, and how this broken relationship is affecting our human communities and the wider biological communities to which we belong. It is time we seek to mend this relationship and return to wholeness.

How many Friends have looked into their hearts and asked themselves, "If I had been living at the time of John Woolman, how would I have reacted to his message?" Friends have rested long on the laurels of Quaker participation in emancipation. In looking backwards so proudly, have we forgotten to look ahead at the new revelations we are offered? Two hundred years from now, will Friends be as proud of Quaker initiative in caring for the Earth?

Now is the time for Friends to explore these new revelations. We must move forward with joyful hearts to help heal our human communities, and to reconnect humanity to the rest of Creation.

Illustrative activity

DIVIDE INTO FIVE GROUPS: Peace, Simplicity, Equality, Truth-telling and Integrity. Find out what your Faith and Practice says about these testimonies. Ask each group to list environmental issues that relate to that testimony and decide whether Earthcare should be included in their testimony. They could be asked to design a poster for their testimony with earthcare included in it, or make another type of presentation of their conclusions. Then compare--even argue the cases. Then the leader asks if a case can be made for a separate Earthcare testimony.

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