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Birkel's "A Near Sympathy: The Timeless Quaker Vision of John Woolman" - Book Review

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BIRKEL, Michael L., *A Near Sympathy: the timeless Quaker vision of John Woolman* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2003), pp. 123. ISBN: 0-944350-63-1, Paper, \$15.00.

A Near Sympathy: the timeless Quaker wisdom of John Woolman, by Michael Birkel, is a devotional book of high order. The author has distilled from his scholarly work and his years of teaching, an introduction to Woolman that seems likely to find wide appeal across the whole spectrum of Quaker groups. His approach is biblically literate, socially engaged, and politically astute. The shape and practice of spiritual life within the ecological world view and under the cloud of post 9/11 politics is on his mind, and the wisdom of Woolman is set forth as a helpful guide.

I was particularly struck by the author's introductory statement on 'reading as an act of friendship'. He writes; 'A text can befriend us when we see it as psychologically and spiritually true to our own deepest personal experiences. John Woolman's teachings on simplicity have the ring of truth for me, and they have changed my life. His reflections on suffering have strengthened me to endure the death of loved ones, and they have enabled me to find meaning amid life's pain. To call someone who died over two hundred years ago a friend is an act of imagination on our part, but the imagining makes something real happen'.

The author stresses ‘the power of imagination as a spiritual discipline’, and cites Woolman as a particularly good example of this practice. Birkel writes; ‘Imagination opens the way to perceiving how those who bear the burden of injustice feel. It is an invitation to identify with them and be in solidarity with them. This practice of imagination reaches what John Woolman calls the “pure witness” within people.’ He develops this theme in the first chapter in a particularly effective way (‘Integrity and Love’), and carries it through the book’s subsequent chapters, ‘Worship’, ‘Scripture’, ‘Suffering and Redemption’, ‘Nurturing Empathy’, and ‘Engaging the World’. *A Near Sympathy* carries forward the concerns of Woolman and recasts them for our time. From scholarship to devotion, this short and inviting book provides a good introduction to Woolman and extends Quaker studies on human solidarity and the integrity of Creation.

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