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The Solace Of History: Reflections On Quakers And The Environment

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The Solace of History: Reflections on Quakers and the Environment

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Quaker Thought and Life Today

February 17, 2012

By [Ellen M. Ross](#)

Sometimes I feel painfully out-of-step with the world around me. Perhaps I'd have fit in better in some other era, in a more simple time. And yet, as a student of Quaker history, I know there has been no "simple time." Some days my yearning to make a better world and my fear that I cannot make any meaningful difference pervade my every step.

In these dark moments, history comforts me. In the eighteenth century, people with sensibilities similar to mine took meaningful action in their own lives. My solace comes in stories of these Quakers—people who worked to change themselves, their families, their communities; who accepted the misunderstanding of the world around them and persevered in working for what they believed.

I am grateful when the witness of history wraps a warm cloak of companionship around me and sets my feet once again on a forward path to seek the company of the inheritors of this lineage of willingness to live what one believes. Our militaristic and conflict-saturated society

often neglects to tell these stories of resistance, peace, commitment, and transformation. But these stories abound and their telling gives hope to many of us who believe that there can be another way to live.

* * *

The 1730s-era home and gardens of the Quaker John Bartram (1699-1777) and his family, still preserved in southwest Philadelphia today, signal the beginning of colonial botany in the Americas. Bartram was an avid collector and documenter of the flora and fauna of Philadelphia and other North American terrain. But while John Bartram is remembered for his botanical contributions, the religious ideas shaping his scientific study are often overlooked.

In his letters Bartram frequently observes that the study of plants, minerals, and animals leads humanity to praise and adore God, the Creator. In a 1758 “Letter to his Children” Bartram warns that book-bound education does not evoke true faith, and he counsels his children instead to study and contemplate the created world. Contemplation of the stars and their “incomprehensible... magnitude and distance” leads to love of the Creator; dissection of animals and observations of the “numberless numbers of vessels and tubes for [the] conveyance of fluids” manifest eternal wisdom; and study of the growth, motion, and “dazzling beauty” of plant buds, flowers, and seeds calls persons to adore the Creator. Scientific study as an act of worship and praise deepens the relationship of humans with the Sacred.

In the eighteenth century many Quakers and non-Quakers alike taught that the study of nature could be a significant part of religious life. In the Revolutionary War period, John Bartram’s son William (1739-1823) journeyed through wildernesses of the Carolinas, Georgia, and what were then East and West Florida. William did not name himself a Quaker in the same public way as did his father, who, although disowned by his local meeting for theological reasons in 1758, continued to attend meeting until the end of his life. Nevertheless, Quaker ideas, and specifically the worldview of his father, run throughout William’s writings. The soaring, rhapsodic *Travels* of this artist, writer, and naturalist, published in 1791, inspired poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge and is thought by many to be the most significant American nature writing before Thoreau. For William, as for his father, exploring nature evoked his adoration and praise of the Creator. His image-rich travel narrative seeks to stir his readers to praise, adoration, and gratitude. Further, praise of God leads to compassion and moral concern for the welfare of other beings, both human and non-human.

William tells stories of his own spiritual growth and increasing sensitivity to the welfare of animals as well as humans. He notes times when these qualities are absent in himself or his companions. William was traveling with his father through a swamp when John Bartram alerted his son to a rattlesnake in a high spiral coil just ahead on William’s path. William recalls his own fright at the six-foot long creature and says he was stirred to resentment: “at that time,” he remembers, “I was entirely insensible to gratitude or mercy.” He killed the

snake; it was served at dinner that night, and he recalls: "I tasted of it but could not swallow it. I...was sorry after killing the serpent, when coolly recollecting every circumstance. He certainly had it in his power to kill me almost instantly, and I make no doubt but that he was conscious of it. I promised myself that I would never again be accessory to the death of a rattle snake, which promise I have invariably kept to."

In another story, he tells of an evening when he and his companion, a hunter, came upon two bears, and the companion shot one of them. The other bear then "approached the dead body, smelled, and pawed it, and appearing in agony, fell to weeping and looking upwards, then towards us, and cried out like a child." The bear's cries struck Bartram deeply. "I was moved with compassion," he writes, "and charging myself as if accessory to what now appeared to be a cruel murder, endeavored to prevail upon the hunter to save its life, but to no effect! for by habit he had become insensible to compassion towards the brute creation: being now within a few yards of the harmless devoted victim, he fired, and laid it dead upon the body of the dam."

Throughout the Travels, Bartram demonstrates that living interaction with the plant and animal community can open one to compassion, unless, for example, by habit one has become deaf to the communication between the animal and human communities. He notes that among his acquaintances he is "known to be an advocate or vindicator of the benevolent and peaceable disposition of animal creation."

Keen religious observers of the natural world like John and William Bartram were among the first post-contact North Americans to understand the detrimental impact white settlers were having on the environment. Along with English Quakers, such as Peter and Michael Collinson and John Fothergill, they express deep alarm about the potential loss and even extinction of bear, beaver, buffalo, rattlesnake, and reptiles, as well as plant life endangered by increased human presence and predation.

In a 1772 letter in which he thanks John Bartram for his account of the migration of bears, rabbits, and partridges, the English Quaker and naturalist Michael Collinson expresses concern about the potential extinction of bear and beaver and speculates that at one time beavers were found in Wales but had been completely destroyed. In July 1773 he echoes Bartram's sentiments and concerns about possible extinction of species and writes specifically of his indignation at the many thousands of beaver furs imported from America annually and advertised for sale in English papers. Acknowledging Bartram's concern for rattlesnakes, Collinson says it has been some years since he himself had "except in one or two instances only...deprived the minutest individual of life. I consider it as a heavenly spark, derived from the great Author and Fountain of life, which is to be held sacred, and which I have not right to injure or destroy."

The English botanist and physician John Fothergill, who financially supported the botanical explorations of both John and William Bartram, noted the probable decline in the number of American tortoises and asked William to paint them before they became extinct: "As the

inhabitants increase, the species of this and some other animals, as well as vegetables, will, perhaps, be extinguished, or exist only in some still more distant parts.”

I am comforted knowing that more than two hundred years ago early Americans were studying the plants and animals in this country and communicating to one another their concerns about the well-being of the natural world. Sadly, human exploitation has worsened since the days of the Bartrams, the Fothergills, and the Collinsons, but their witness reminds us that there has never been a time when we could sit idly. It has always been important for those who are aware to speak out.

A second trajectory of early North American environmental concern emerges among eighteenth-century Quakers who were led to attend to the environment by the deepening of their compassionate response to the world around them, independent of the study of nature itself. The environmental advocacy of these early Friends grew within a network of social justice commitments to anti-slavery, temperance, Indian rights, women’s rights, local sustainability, and non-reliance upon overseas production of goods. Quaker social reformers like Anthony Benezet, John Woolman, and Joshua Evans, all non-scientists, came to the conclusion that they should advocate for the welfare of animals as well as for the welfare of humans. Their central affirmation is that humans should interact with the natural world as God’s creation.

The reformer and anti-slavery prophet John Woolman decried the plight of poultry and livestock on ships crossing the ocean. On his passage to England in 1772, Woolman notes that some poultry were plagued by sickness and others swept away by the waves at sea. He believes that where the “love of God is verily perfected...a care is felt in us that we do not lessen that sweetness of life in the animal creation,” and Woolman recommends that fewer fowl carried off to be eaten at sea would accord with “pure wisdom.” Woolman rarely ate meat.

Woolman’s contemporary, the traveling minister and prophet Joshua Evans, writing about 1774, describes his developing commitment no longer to kill or eat animals: “I considered that life was sweet in all living creatures, and the taking [of] it away became a very tender point with me.” Evans observes that other people who try to live close to the truth similarly have decided to refuse to take away animal life or to use animals as food, although at first some of his friends stood aloof from him, and some people even treated him with disdain.

Anthony Benezet (the Philadelphia reformer, publisher, and founder of schools for African-Americans, Native Americans, and poor children) was also protective of animal life, and a vegetarian. In a 1758 letter in reply to his friend John Smith who had given him a gift of live geese, Benezet writes that if the geese have to be killed, he cannot be the one to do it: “I shall scarce ever imbrue my hands in the blood of any creature, having left off eating meat... and made a kind of league of amity and peace with the animal creation, looking upon them as the most grateful, as well as the most reasonable part of God’s creatures.”

Sympathetic attention to animal life often emerges in Quaker journals and letters in the context of the authors' critiques of rampant materialism, which they perceived as increasingly prevalent in eighteenth-century society. Human greed not only forces laborers and others into inhumane labor practices, but it also causes animals to suffer. Whales, Woolman writes, after visiting Nantucket at a time of increased whaling in 1760, are "much hunted," and, since they are sometimes wounded and not killed, they are learning to avoid humans. He also observed that the eyes and emotions of oxen and horses often manifest that they are overworked and oppressed. Woolman refused to ride in stagecoaches, or even to send or receive letters by stagecoach, because "it was common for horses to be killed with hard driving"; Joshua Evans expressed a similar sentiment.

For these authors, spiritual growth accompanies the concern to "love one's neighbor as oneself," and it is manifested in a growing recognition of and appreciation for the "sweetness" of all creation and a concern to attend to the needs of suffering creation.

These stories testify that there have always been observers and worshippers who experience conversions to ecological concern. Every one of these voices was at some point a minority voice within a dismissive, dominant culture, even within Christian, and more particularly, Quaker circles. And yet all persevered in living according to their beliefs. I find hope in living within a lineage of people, some of whom were extraordinarily influential and others of whom tilled only small gardens and are largely unknown to us now, people who were willing to live what they believed and who attended to the natural world around them.

As in the movements for gaining women's rights and for abolishing slavery, it may take generations to achieve the vision of those who early expressed environmental concerns. The ecological voices in Christianity today have seeds in these early voices, just as movements for change in which we participate today may come to widespread fruition hundreds of years from now. The voices of John and William Bartram, of Anthony Benezet, John Woolman, and Joshua Evans urge us to live what we believe, to attend to what is significant to us, to be open to growth in our compassionate witness, and to work for change, nurtured by the rich history of those who have gone before us.

Ellen M. Ross
