

Daily Justice and Injustice — What Would John Woolman DO?

by Tom Kowal

As part of her Senior Project last spring, my granddaughter Bailey asked me to tell her my reasons for working on behalf of immigrants, migrants, and refugees. My reasons are probably similar to those of many other Friends.

I began by telling her that we often open our meetings for immigrant justice and migrant accompaniment by taking turns answering the question, “Why do you do this work?” My response generally goes like this:

All four of my grandparents came to this country at the turn of the last century (1890s -1910s). They were fleeing poverty, religious and political persecution, and the Russian draft of young Polish men into the Czar’s armies. All four moved into parts of New York City, and they did not have it easy there. Times were hard economically. Discrimination against Eastern Europeans and Catholics was common. But they were able to make their ways and their contributions. They built families and lives as part of America.

My self-introduction goes on to express the outrage I feel now over the situation that immigrants are facing today. They deserve the same opportunity as my grandparents had to build their lives here, as full members of our community, and they are denied that. The system is so broken, so discriminatory and racist, so oppressive and cruel, that many new immigrants do not even have the opportunity to keep their families together. So, I am called to work for justice for immigrants by the spirits of my immigrant ancestors – to work for justice and mercy and respect for the immigrant families in our community.

I then went on to describe for Bailey why we can’t count on our government to fix this broken system any time soon. There are many good people in government, but the overall political climate is so divided and hostile now, so poisoned by racism and greed, so paralyzed by partisanship and hatred, that migrant justice activists cannot see a reasonable way forward in the context of our current political and economic power structures. We have a lot of work to do before we can dismantle the current political and economic power structures and replace them with policies, systems, and structures that are congruent with American values, with human rights, and with reality.

In the meantime, we are not free to abandon the work of creating daily justice and a community that includes all of us. Even though we can’t count on the government to fix the system any time soon, as persons of faith and good will, as citizens of our country, and as decent human beings, we must band together to do our best to create the justice we want to see in the world, starting with the most marginalized and oppressed in our communities, who are often immigrants and refugees. Eleven million migrants and refugees are in the U.S. today, and hundreds of thousands more are seeking refuge here, refuge that is presently and cruelly denied to them. These children, women, and men are America’s future. Those of us who hold the privileges of citizenship and economic security have the obligation – and the opportunity – to serve new immigrants and our country and ourselves by doing justice, loving mercy, and accompanying one another into a better future.

Of course, as a Friend, my reasons for working on behalf of migrants, immigrants, and refugees go beyond explanations tailored to a high school civics class. Some of our most-quoted Early Friends challenged us all to translate our practical understandings and mystical discernings into action – by

doing, by walking our talk, by putting our money where our mouths are, by doing the Lord's work in the world.

True religion . . . is pure from above, undefiled before God, [and] leads [us] to visit the fatherless, widows, and strangers . . . – *George Fox (1660)*

True Godliness doesn't turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavors to mend it. We have nothing that we can call our own; no, not our selves: for we are all but Tenants, and at Will, too, of the great Lord of our selves, and the rest of this great farm, the World that we live upon. – *William Penn (1682)*

And of course, John Woolman's *A Plea for the Poor: A Word of Remembrance and Caution to the Rich* echoes the testimonies of both Fox and Penn concerning our responsibility to treat others fairly in this Creation.

Though the poor occupy our estates by a bargain to which they in their poor circumstance agreed, . . . if our views are to lay up riches . . . [by making demands on the poor that] are such as requires greater toil or application to business in them than is consistent with pure love, we invade their rights as inhabitants of that world of which a good and gracious God is proprietor, under whom we are tenants." – *John Woolman (1763)*

Friends know that John Woolman's practice of the equality testimony led him to regard all persons as worthy of respect and fair treatment, whatever their "condition" or position in society, and to dedicate his life to the abolition of human enslavement and exploitation.

In today's terms, this exploitation can be seen in the way we acquire all our possessions – our food and goods, the buildings we live in and work in, our public infrastructures – at prices that are set far lower than their actual values. The difference between the dollar price we pay and an item's actual value comes from our citizenship privilege, from the military umbrella over us, from unfair trade relationships, from environmental degradation, and from the underpaid labor of those who are exploited in their workplaces and oppressed in their living spaces. We live with this unjust privilege at peril to our children's security and our own integrity. So we owe it to ourselves, not only to the oppressed, to labor faithfully against these inequities.

This labor begins by educating ourselves and our communities about the iniquities of the U.S. immigration system, so that we can fully engage in solidarity with the people who are oppressed by it. We are called to hold in the Light the hundreds of migrant workers who walk in the desert today and every day, and the families of the thousands who have perished in that crossing. We are called to support families who are torn apart when a parent lacks residency papers, and to support qualified students who cannot attend college, even though they have grown up in the same communities and graduated from the same schools as our own children.

We are called to give active witness to the brokenness of the U.S. immigration system – to testify that it is inhumane and unrealistic to expect a Mexican worker to wait "on line" for ten years to obtain a work visa, or for families to wait twenty years to re-unite across a border. We must testify that the laws themselves are the root of the evil that forces families apart. The broken laws themselves are

the cause of an underground economy that not only exploits and oppresses immigrant workers, but also drives down wages and working conditions for all workers.

And so, as Friends, we are called to move beyond the politics of delay and division, beyond the rhetoric of hatred and scapegoating. We are called to work diligently for real reform of the U.S. immigration system, to energetically and effectively urge our elected representatives and public officials to immediately cease oppressing immigrant communities, and to immediately pass humane reform of U.S. immigration laws. We are called to physically and spiritually accompany families and individual members of our community who are marginalized, oppressed and brutalized because of their immigration status. We are called to speak out, to witness, and to act - as Fox, Penn, and Woolman would have us do, remembering that "Faith without works is mockery." [James 2:26]

Tom Kowal is a member of Mountain View Friends Meeting in Denver, CO (IMYM). He was raised in Ridgewood NJ Monthly Meeting [NYYM], and attended Westtown School and Haverford College [until he was drafted in his junior year, having returned his deferment card to his Draft Board in protest of the racist/classist draft and the Vietnam War.] Tom's father Ned Kowal had Tom on Nuclear Disarmament, anti-war and civil rights picket lines and demonstrations from the time he was 10. Tom is a founding and 20-year member of Coloradans for Immigrant Rights [AFSC Colorado] and the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition. His organizing and activist work includes decades of participation and leadership for El Centro Humanitario de los Trabajadores [Denver Metro's Day Laborer and Domestic Worker center], The Migrant Trail Walk on the Sonora-Arizona border, and Mountain View Friends' and other Colorado faith communities' accompaniment, lobbying and practical support work with immigrant and refugee community members.