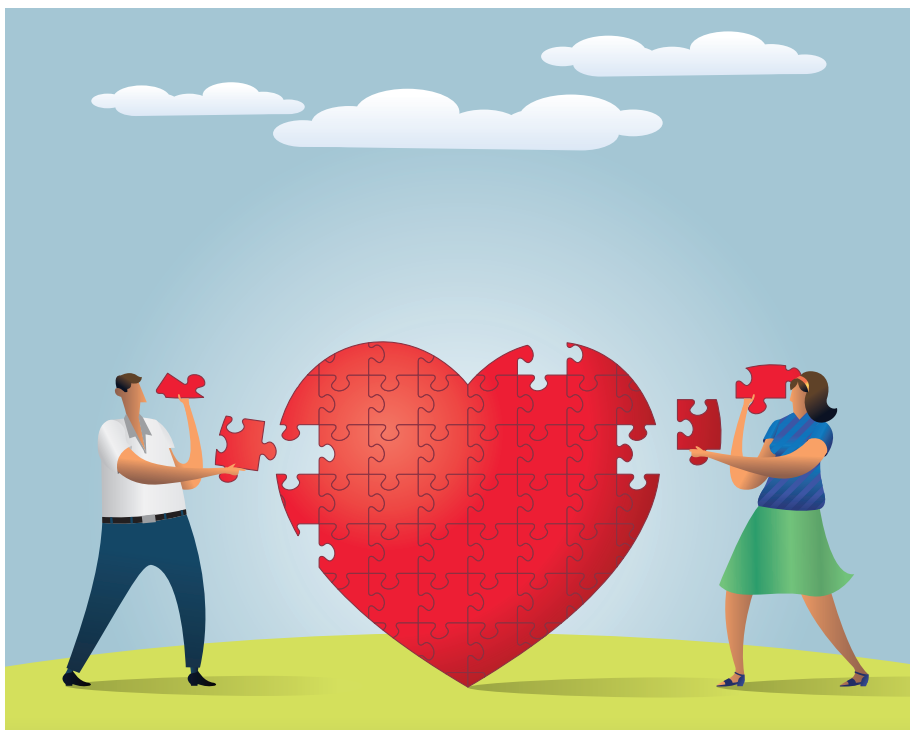




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Live It Out

Every choice we make is a piece of the puzzle.

BY COLONEL ELEANOR SHEPHERD

John Woolman was a merchant, itinerant Quaker preacher and social reformer in the 18th century. When he discovered the hazards posed by stagecoaches, the preferred method of transportation of his day, he refused to use them. The post boys who worked on them sometimes froze to death as they travelled overnight. Innocent pedestrians were run over in the dark. The overworked horses that pulled them could not long survive the rigour of their task.

While the Quakers were efficient in business, they also held firmly to the belief that God was in everything, and thus all they did must honour him. Their enlightened labour practices led to high productivity, and their adherence to the truth and unambiguous speech gave them trustworthiness in their business dealings.

It's easy to forget that God is in everything. We conclude we must either focus on the spiritual, the inner life, so that we are personally ethically consistent, or the material, believing we must try to correct the obvious ethical problems in the world. But there is a third way—the incarnational life, living out the spirit-

ual in the everyday world, following the example of Jesus, as John Woolman seemed to be doing.

This works best in community, where we can encourage and learn from one another and practise our faith. Perhaps as we face cultural pressures together, we can create timeless responses to them. We will have to find ways to incorporate the interdependence of our economic relationships. Yet we need to do this within the context of our consumer culture, the ubiquitous availability of resources that advertising and media insist are essential for our well-being.

The Quaker word for all of the accumulation this engenders is “cumber,” and that is exactly what it does to our lives. Cumber creates in us an imbalance, drawing us away from the realization of a whole and happy life. Instead, we find ourselves with anxiety about having too little, if we heed the seductive voices proclaiming new and better solutions for all of our problems. At the same time, our angst increases as we realize we are overburdened with more than we can handle, and our time and effort are pre-

occupied with the management of it. In either case, the development of our inner being in harmony with creation, community and worship is pushed aside by our “cumber.”

The solution may be found in community. Together, we seek wisdom from God and rely upon affirmation from one another about decisions concerning the blending of the material and the spiritual in the incarnational, so that a whole and happy life becomes accessible to one another.

The pattern was established in the early days of our faith. Israelites were given direction by God as to how they could manage their resources with the instructions given to them in the law. In the Gospels, the Lord Jesus distributed food to all present and they shared with one another. In the early church, the needs of widows and orphans were not neglected.

Throughout Christian history, the torch has been picked up and desert mystics, religious orders, renewal movements and reformers found ways to adapt to changing economic realities, making their response coherent with the spiritual attentiveness to the actions of God in our world. This was obvious in the 19th and 20th centuries, with the unique efforts of the church to respond to both the physical and spiritual darkness of their day, using the resources of the Industrial Revolution to provide for those enslaved by poverty and the lack of moral education, as well as spur advances in health care and literacy. Those whose faith was clothed in practical caring went out to offer soul care and social care. Among them emerged our own movement, The Salvation Army.

So where are we today? How do we blend the material and the spiritual in incarnational living, in such a way that the whole and happy life becomes accessible to all? Often, we quickly perceive hindrances to addressing complicated ethical problems. We need to ask ourselves hard questions, and seek to discern the answers, with the help of fellow pilgrims. We need to weigh our choices and ask how they might impact others. In the spirit of John Woolman, what are the stagecoaches we should stop using today?

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