

## **Personal Witness — Rosa Covington Packard**

The following are excerpts from a presentation on Personal Witness given by Rosa Covington Packard on Sept. 13th, 2002 in Hirschlau, Germany.

*Rosa died on Feb 22, 2016.*

Ten years ago, I joined other Quakers who were planning the work of Friends Peace Teams.

Our meeting was facilitated by two British Quakers [one of whom] spoke to us of the ministry of John Woolman, an eighteenth century Quaker who refused military taxes for war. Woolman said his ministry was like walking into a muddy ground with mist all around and he was able to see only one stepping stone forward at a time. If he took that step, as inwardly led by God, only then would the next step become clear. Like many others, my experience with tax witness, has been like that, a step at a time.

In April of 1981 I received a telephone call from a friend active in her church. She said she could no longer pay her income taxes for war. She had discussed this with her minister and decided, with his approval, to give the military portion of her taxes to the Quakers because of their work for peace. It was a week before taxes were due. I had felt nauseated when I tried to work on my tax form. During that phone call, the meaning of that nausea was clear to me. It came from the disease of cooperating with war. I told my friend that I would join her in this witness.

This gut reaction is what counselors call a crystallization of conscience.

That was one step. I took the next step the next day.

We wanted to establish an Escrow Account under the care of local Quakers. Our tax money could be held in trust for the government until the government recognized the right of religious freedom by providing for our tax money to go for peaceful purposes. I was afraid of rejection if I did this but went down to my local bank anyway about noon. As I arrived vice-president who had been kind about opening accounts for my children came out the door. He was on his way to lunch. I greeted him and told him I was a conscientious objector to paying for war and wanted to put my taxes in escrow rather than sending them to the IRS.

To my surprise, his face lit up and he said "That's terrific, I'm the man here that deals with the IRS, come on in and I'll arrange the escrow account for you." He turned right around and escorted me back into the bank.

Since an angel of the Lord had appeared to me as a banker and said "Fear Not! ", of course, I didn't feel much fear after that.

Another stepping stone:

About 12 years later. An experienced Quaker told me it was the practice of early Quakers to record in their minutes the amount of assets seized from Friends because of their faithfulness to our testimonies. These were called sufferings for conscience sake. So when the Internal Revenue Service next levied my bank account, as they do at regular intervals, I wrote the clerk of my Friends Meeting to report the amount of interest and penalties levied. I asked Friends to consider whether that amount should be recorded as sufferings for conscience sake.

Again a surprise for me! At Meeting for Business, as Friends approved a minute to record and they entered into a time of worship. In that deep silence the experience of being victimized became a

blessing. I felt in unity with a crowd of witnesses in many times and places who have acted upon a similar truth.

The earliest Quakers recognized what each generation of Quakers relearns: responsibility for discerning the truth and learning how to live by it rests with each individual. Each is responsible for discerning how she or he is called to act, but each person is also part of a fellowship of faith, responsible to and supportive of one another. There are institutions and forms which may help each find how she or he is led to live and act, including the authorities of Scripture, Quaker tradition (as expressed through Books of Discipline and Quaker history) the examples of people of good will and integrity in all traditions, and corporate discernment in official gatherings of Friends, such as Monthly and Yearly Meeting.

The enemy is not the soldier or politician. It is not the IRS or a threatening nation. It is the spirit of war itself within us and without us. We all are enmeshed in it. No one is pure.

We are all in need of transformation. We can allow ourselves, like John Woolman, to make decisions out of this danger as if we were walking on stepping stones one at a time into the unknown. And, as Jesus taught, even our persecutions can be transformed into blessings.