



Writings of W. Burney Overton

As I See It to Be

Responsibility Without Blaming

October 8, 1981

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If something goes wrong, it is necessary to fix blame. This is a rather widespread belief and attitude. The argument runs, “Somebody is responsible. Find out who that somebody is and put the blame on that person.” Somehow we have not learned the difference between accountability and condemnation.

The word “responsible” is defined as “able to respond and answer for one’s conduct and obligations – accountable, answerable.” I take it, therefore, that responsibility means I am responsible – that is, accountable. I accept that what I do is my deciding and my doing. A whole variety of influences may be involved, both from the past and in the present. Nonetheless, I decide and I do. I don’t try to excuse myself, nor do I seek not to be held accountable. In fact, I hold myself accountable, and I seek to understand what is going on with me that I decide as I do and function as I do. I expect others to look to me for answers about what I do, and say, and think, and feel. In fact, as a part of being responsible, I expect to look into myself for answers about these things.

I am responsible. I don’t really have the option not to be. That does not mean that I am responsible for everything that happens, nor that I cause everything to happen the way it does. I intend to carry my responsibility. I expect to be faithful and trustworthy to the limits of my ability and my growth along those lines. I will carry my share of the load, and thank God that I have the ability and resources and time and opportunity to do so. When, for whatever reason, I either do not utilize the ability, resources, time and opportunity, or just do not have enough of some one of more or all of these, I will strive to recognize and accept that reality.

This, to me, is what responsibility means. I see it as my way of giving expression to my tasks and opportunities in life. I see it as one of the means by which I make my living of my life meaningful, and make contributions to those around me. Since I am reasonable, people can count on me to be who I say I am, to do what I say I will do, to be dependable in the roles and tasks that I accept as mine. They can count on me to study, and grow, and do what I can find to do to improve and to equip myself so that I can decide more wisely, and function more effectively.

I am dependable. I get done what I promise. Sometimes, factors outside my control affect me so that I am unable to accomplish as much as I hoped to accomplish, or even promised that I would. I fail, or partially fail. I do not get the results I hoped to get. Things go bad in spite of all that I try to do.

Under those circumstances, what about responsibility and blaming?

Blaming is an after-the-fact activity. It is something that I do after whatever it is that has happened. To blame means to censor, to find fault with, to reproach. It is a judgment – condemnation word. It is the punitive evaluation after it has happened – whatever it may be.

It is also an attitude toward self in the face of unfavorable or unhappy events, regardless of who did what, or on whom the responsibility really rested.

The blamer (things aren't going well, or as I want them to) says: "It must be my fault. If I had done my part.....if I had made another decision.....if I had spoken a different word.....if I had behaved differently....." I censure and find fault with and reproach and judge and condemn myself. In short, I blame myself in the face of events and outcomes different from what I want or what I think should be. If I have learned to look at life this way, I do it whether or not I am the one who is responsible.

I can take this as an attitude toward myself, and thereby devalue myself and my efforts; reject myself; dislike, hate, discredit myself; and be very punitive so that I have destroyed virtually all of my ego strength. I can feel miserable. I can declare myself no good. I can argue that since I had some responsibility, and since things did not turn out as I wanted or hoped they would, it is obvious that I am to blame. Thus, I can put blame and responsibility together. The net result of blaming is destructiveness and the immobilizing, or at least diminishing the effectiveness of the person.

It does no good to blame oneself or others. What this all adds up to is, I decide whether or not to separate my concept and sense of responsibility from my concept of blaming. As I see it, holding myself, or another, responsible, and expecting for persons to bear the consequence of their responsible or irresponsible functioning is an entirely different matter than blaming. If I am driving along a street, and I momentarily lose control of my car and destroy my neighbor's mailbox, the damage was the consequence of my behavior – no matter what the explanation for it might be. Therefore, I assume that it is up to me to correct the situation (within my power to do so) and further assume that my neighbor expects me to do so. I hold myself accountable, and he holds me accountable, and I pay the price. I do not want him to blame me, nor do I want to blame myself. Being condemningly judgmental, or censuring, or finding fault, or reproaching do nothing to correct the situation, or restore the damaged mailbox. They may lead to recrimination – to harshness – to hard feelings – and to broken relationships. They may even lead to a sense of brokenness within me as the product of my blaming myself. Time, emotions, and energy go into the blaming process without altering or really affecting the issue of responsibility.

When I do not blame myself, or try to escape from being blamed, I am much freer to deal with the situations in which I find myself more responsibly and more constructively. There is an approach that I can use. It involves several steps:

1. Data gathering and deciding. Having gathered the data, I assess the situation, and I decide that it is or is not my responsibility. Or, I decide what, within the situation, is my responsibility. If I am dealing with an after-the-fact situation, I gather the data, and I make the same kinds of decisions about whether or not I was responsible, and/or to what degree.

2. And, you know, if my decision is that I am not responsible, I have no need to condemn, or reproach, myself, no matter how intensively I wish the outcome were different from what it is. I am free to look at the situation, and make some assessments about what needed to have been done, and by whom, and again, consider whether or not

there is, or was, something for me to do. Censuring, fault-finding, and reproach just do not enter in.

3. If I have decided that I am, to some degree, responsible, I go about dealing with responsibility along these lines:

a. I equip myself as well as I can for the responsibility that I recognize is mine.

b. Having functioned according to that ability, I assess the outcome and note the strengths and weaknesses in what I said or did and how I said or did it.

c. I decide to retain the strengths, and learn from the weaknesses (or errors) so that I am better equipped for another time, whether it be the same area of responsibility or yet another one.

d. I never censure, nor find fault, nor reproach. It does no good to put myself down. It is not helpful to put energy into feeling guilty. It is not very constructive to negate myself. I do what I can – or know how to do – to meet my responsibility, and I try to accept the outcome. I hold myself accountable without condemnation.

4. I suggest the same general approach with reference to any event of the behavior of any person. I decide that I do not want to censure, nor find fault, nor reproach. I do want to assess the situation and the behavior of the persons in it. I do not want to sit in judgment upon them and condemn them. I want and expect them to be answerable and accountable, even though sometimes in my judgment they are not. Insofar as I can tell, it does no good to be rejecting, and censuring, and reproachful, and separating.

I am hurt, I am victimized, I am dismayed, I am upset by the irresponsible things I do, and that others do. I have a great deal of difficulty with people who, in my judgment, do not function responsibly – especially when it costs me something materially or in peace of mind or in what I want to do. In that situation, I can be angry, and vindictive, and rejecting. I may choose to be, and in the process, break or strain the relationship.

However, I want to be very clear in my own thinking and understanding that responsibility and blaming are two different things. Expecting me and others to be responsible contributes to the building of trust relationships and provides some resources for weathering some stormy times. Blaming only contributes to breaking relationship and to intense negative feelings. I choose to be responsible, and not to blame.