



Writings of W. Burney Overton

As I See It to Be

Freedom and Limits In A Relationship

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W. Burney Overton

When I am not free to be out of a relationship,  
I am not free to be in it.

Or, expressed in positive terms –  
I am free to be in a relationship  
Only when I am free to be out of it.

All life is lived in relationships.  
They come into being for all kinds of reasons.  
Chief among these is to meet needs –  
My needs are met in the relationship  
and I have the opportunity –  
or obligation –  
or freedom –  
to meet yours.

The ideal relationship, it appears to me,  
is one in which,  
at whatever level,  
each is in it  
because each has chosen to be in it  
without demands or restraints from the other.

This neither means that  
there are no limits or boundaries.  
Nor does it mean  
that there are no commitments and no thought  
for the needs and feelings of the other.

It does mean  
that each person in the relationship  
is in it by free choice,  
and that each person  
has chosen to limit freedom,  
in order to have what the relationship offers.

All too often  
I hear people say,  
“You can’t leave me.”  
“You owe it to me.”  
“After all that I have done for you.”  
“I demand.....”  
“You have no right.....”  
indicating that they believe  
one person in a relationship

has the right  
to demand  
that the other stay in it –  
and stay in it according to the terms laid down.

Inevitably  
either one or both of them  
reach the point of feeling ensnared –  
trapped by the demands and the requirements.  
Feelings surface –  
anger—anxiety—insecurity—fear—dismay—  
a host of feelings  
intensified by the sense of imprisonment  
and the rebellion against those feelings.

Even if the relationship survives,  
it does so with much tension  
and with many unmet needs  
and with defensiveness  
and with many efforts to bind the relationship  
so that the other cannot escape.

If I am not free to move out of a relationship,  
I am not free to remain in it.  
I am not free to make the decisions  
and the choices  
that are my commitments  
to the solidarity and the continuance of the relationship.  
I am not free to exercise  
my own sense of responsibility,  
nor to give expression to my own values  
and my own caring about you  
and your well-being.

The freedom to move out of a relationship  
neither means a license to ignore  
your thoughts, feelings, needs, and desires.  
Nor does it mean that no contract is formed—  
no understanding reached—  
no basis of security provided.

What it does mean  
is that,  
when I am indeed free to move out of a relationship,  
I am in it—and stay in it—  
responsibly—

taking into account both  
what I bring to the relationship  
that serves both you and me  
and what you bring that serves us both.

I am free to make my decisions  
in response to my own value system.  
I choose and accept the limits and the boundaries.  
They are my choices.  
They are neither imposed upon me,  
nor demanded of me.  
I am neither rebellious  
nor trapped  
by the requirements or demands you make.  
I am in the relationship because I choose to be,  
and I live with the outcome of that choosing  
without faulting or blaming you.

Even if the basis of the relationship  
is the freedom of each to be in it  
or to be out of it,  
my own sense of commitment and obligation—  
my own value system—  
my own sense of what is appropriate—  
my own sense of responsibility for the other—  
results in loss of the freedom to be out,  
even if being in  
means a loss of some of what I really want  
in the relationship—  
or in a relationship of depth and meaning to me.

When I enter into a relationship,  
I make decisions,  
I make commitments,  
I accept the terms,  
And I live out the result.

So, when I enter into a relationship,  
I accept limits upon my freedom to be out of it.

But, if I feel that the limits are imposed by you,  
I feel trapped.  
I do not like the feeling,  
or what it does to me.  
I feel resentment and anger.  
I have to work very hard not to impose

those negative feelings upon you.  
I tend to put up barriers  
and to give less to the relationship  
than I might have given.  
I want to be free from the binding.  
I want to require of you  
that the things I want and need  
be supplied –  
and that isn't fair.  
It is demand and requirement from me.

I do not want to impose limits on our relationship that way.  
I believe it is destructive to both of us  
and to the relationship itself.

I do want to be able to tell you  
in detail,  
how I would like for our relationship to be—  
so that we may have openness and understanding between us.  
I also want you to give me the same kind of information,  
and, with each of us knowing about the other,  
we decide and we agree  
on how we want to build our relationship—  
to what levels of sharing—  
of intensity—  
and of intimacy—  
and so we build it together,  
experiencing much joy and satisfaction in the process—  
and living within the limits that we have decided.

In a sense,  
one relationship can be independent of another.  
In another sense,  
each relationship impinges upon and limits  
all relationships.

If I can keep my perspective—  
stay in touch with what is going on with me—  
be clear about my needs and desires—  
and how they are to be met—  
I can work the relationships out.  
I can make decisions  
that take you  
and your needs and desires  
into account.  
I can function according to my own sense of responsibility

and my own value system.

I can look myself in the eye.  
I can accept the situation as I see it to be.  
I can get on with what I need to do  
to be able to cope effectively.

As I see it—  
When I am free to be out of a relationship,  
then I am free to remain in it.

That is true.

It is also true that,  
when I have decided to be in a relationship,  
I limit my freedom to be out of it.  
My sense of responsibility for you  
will not allow me to set aside  
what I perceive to be your needs and desires.

Nor can I ignore the possibility  
of hurting or damaging you.  
So I am not free to move out of the relationship.

Sometimes  
this is a heavy burden to me.  
In time past,  
I made decisions and commitments.  
I feel unable to set them aside,  
or to turn away from them.  
I do not want to.  
I can accept and deal with  
my pain—my limits—my unmet needs—  
more easily than I can make decisions to  
impose hurt and suffering upon another.

It is a dilemma.

It prescribes limits upon me  
in other relationships  
that have their very special values for me.  
I do not feel free  
to experience the fullness of those relationships.  
And that tends to impose limits upon you  
and to deprive the relationship of its fullest fruits.

My own sensitiveness—  
my concern for you—  
tells me it isn't fair—  
and I do not know how to make it fair.  
Being true to one set of commitments  
means to put limits upon another set.

Sometimes I feel depressed.  
Sometimes I feel deprived.  
Sometimes I feel hungry.  
Sometimes I feel deep pain.

I can handle my own feelings.  
What bothers me the most  
is that I can't really do anything about  
your feelings—  
except to know—to try to understand—  
to care—even though I feel so helpless at times.

I truly believe that  
if persons in a relationship impose limits upon each other,  
there is no freedom to be in the relationship.  
The ideal  
is for each to be able to say to the other,  
“I share this relationship with you  
because I want to and choose to do so—  
and you are free  
to be out of it, if you choose,  
or to be in it with me.”

On that freedom of choice,  
we build our commitment  
and our contract—  
and know that what we have and share  
is because each of us wants it—  
seeks it—  
and experiences fulfillment in it.

It is an ideal that I believe is possible—  
and God intends it to be.