



Writings of W. Burney Overton

As I See It to Be

Loving Enough To Let Go

November 15, 1983

W. Burney Overton

Pinocchio
was a little wooden puppet
who wanted to become a real live boy.

But he could not become
a real live boy
until his master,
the puppeteer,
let him go,
to work it all out
for himself.

Until that happened
he could only be
a little wooden puppet
tied by strings
to his master's hands.

His master
could care about him,
support him,
help him,
and let him go free –
free to succeed or free to fail.

Only then
would it be possible for him to become
a real live boy.

Letting go of their children seems to be extremely difficult for parents. This is understandable. After years of care and attention, decision making, and responsibility, it is time for the parents to surrender their task so that the child can be out on his own. The work of the parent is done. Being a real live person is the responsibility of boy-become-man, or girl-become-woman – not of the parents any longer. But it is hard for parents to let go.

Parents are ambitious for their children. They want them to be successful. They desire for them to become mature, effective people. An ultimate goal is for children to be “on their own”, and for their life to be rich and full and good, and parents believe it is up to them to make this happen.

Parents feel fear and concern for the well-being of their children. They don't want anything bad to happen to them. They want only the best for them. They believe it to be their responsibility to function in such a way that children are protected from the

dangers of life and led to experience the good things of life.

Parents are anxious to be good parents. They love their children, and that love is expressed in how they deal with their children. Having had years of experience, they believe themselves to be wiser than their children, and see that it is necessary to make decisions for them; to give and withhold permission; to see that they conform to the requirements; to punish them when they do not; to maintain control over them until they are old enough to decide for themselves. The difficulty comes when the parents do not know when to let go.

I remember the father of a fine sixteen year old son who said to me, “I want my son to make his own decisions, provided he makes the right ones.” The boy was being rebellious. He was often disobedient, but punishment didn’t seem to deter him. He and his father had a great deal of conflict, and, over and over, the boy said, “I’m old enough to make my own decisions.” All too often they were different from the ones his father wanted him to make. To the father, they were not the right ones, so the boy could not be permitted to make them.

The boy was self-willed and irresponsible. He didn’t have to be responsible. His father was taking responsibility for him. Decisions the boy made and acted on got him in trouble with school authorities, the law, and the people of the neighborhood. He ran with a crowd of which his parents disapproved. He was doing poorly academically. It looked as if he were well on his way to ruining his life.

Both undependable and demanding, if the boy wanted something, he thought his parents ought to see that he had it. He had figured out ways to put pressure on them so that they would eventually yield and give him what he wanted. He expected them to provide for him and to take care of him.

From his point of view, his expectations were reasonable. After all, they had provided for him and taken care of him all his life. He didn’t have to be responsible.

It was only when the parents crossed him that there was difficulty. Then the boy would “act out”. He would have a tantrum or be abusive toward them. He would make them feel guilty. “You don’t want me to look bad among my friends, do you?” he would say. “You don’t want them to make fun of me, do you?”

The boy imposed the ultimate guilt trip with the words, “You don’t care about me. You don’t love me.” He had found a way to have what he wanted without having to be responsible. His way of life paid out for him, or so he thought.

The harder the parents tried to exercise control over him, the more the boy defied them. He demanded of them and took from them. He expected them to get him out of trouble. When it served his purposes, he was penitent and remorseful, assuring them that he had learned his lesson and was going to do better. “You’ll be proud of me,” he would say. “Give me the car – or the trip – or the stereo – or whatever – and I will study – and

come in when you say – and stay out of trouble.”

It was a familiar scene, but the parents didn't know what to do. They wanted to be good parents. They truly loved their son. Over and over, they were disappointed when he did not do as he had promised, and when he got into trouble, they were impatient and angry with him. They even doubted their ability to be parents and feared what their friends would think of them.

The turn-around came when the parents confronted the question, “Do we love him enough to let him go?” In trying to answer, they had a double problem.

The boy was dependent on his parents and used them to maintain a lifestyle that was self-indulgent and uncaring. He squandered money and seemed not to attach any value to the things he had. He imposed upon his friends. He complained bitterly when someone kept him from having what he wanted. He was beginning to use alcohol and drugs. The parents felt as if they had to try to keep control and do something to prevent the tragedies that threatened. They didn't think that they could risk what might happen to him if they let him go.

The boy was constantly pressuring his parents to let him make his own decisions. He insisted that he wanted to be free. He expressed great confidence in his ability to take care of himself – meaning that if they let him be free, he could stay out of trouble. Free to him meant being out from under their authority, but still being provided for. He expected them to give him room and board and even spending money if he happened to be a little short.

The boy wanted to be both free, but dependent and irresponsible.

The turn-around came over the issue of a car. The boy had been pressuring his father to get him a car, using all the tactics he had learned to get his way. The final tactic was, “My old man could give me a car if he wanted to. He just doesn't care. He doesn't love me.”

That did it. The father finally came to grips with loving his son enough to let him go. He said to him, “I will not give you a car. I will not continue to support your irresponsible behavior. If you get a car, it will be because you have figured out a way to get it and to pay all the expenses of owning and operating it. I will neither give you permission to have a car nor forbid you to have one. You will make that decision and be responsible for it – I love you too much to continue as I have been doing. It is past time for me to let go.”

The father made it clear that he did not intend to abandon his son, nor to withdraw support and assistance. Of course the boy would continue to live at home – to stay in school – to have his normal needs as a teenager and minor dependent met. The changes would be in the areas of decision making and of responsibility. Instead of the father's being in charge of his son's life, the boy would confront and work through the major

decisions of his life. It would be up to him to succeed or fail in school. College, or not, and where, would be up to him within the resources available to him. If he got in trouble with the law, or with school authorities, his father would be by his side, but the boy would face the consequences and pay the penalties. He would go to school, or not. He would get a job or not. He would handle his money as he chose. He would get a car or not. He would take responsibility for his own life.

The ways his parents supported him, and what the limitations were that would govern the boy's living at home would be negotiated between them. The consequences of his choosing not to adhere to the negotiated limits would be clearly spelled out.

The boy knew how to handle this new turn of events. He shared in the discussions. He gave his point of view. He expressed his satisfaction that, at last, he was to be free to make his own decisions. He was cooperative and responsive, and even somewhat expansive about what he intended to do and how it would all turn out. It was the way to maintain his system. His parents would get over this kick, and continue to function as he was accustomed.

But the parents had really come to grips with the question of how much they loved him. They knew that their decisions were wise and correct. They knew, too, that it was essential for them to be consistent in carrying through with what they had decided.

They faced the fact that they were doing harm to their son by continuing to give and withhold permission. They understood that he would do all he knew how to do to manipulate them back into the patterns with which he was familiar. They were well aware that he would be angry with them; would try to make them feel guilt; would suggest strongly to them that they could no "do this" to their son if they really loved him; would imply that he would lose out on some things very important to his future if they didn't continue to take care of him as he wanted.

Despite the boy's apparent agreement with them in the long discussions they had, the parents were prepared for him to try to continue to function in his accustomed way, and they were determined to carry through with their own decisions – because they loved him enough to do so.

The parents knew that he might turn on them and break the relationship. They faced the fact that their son might threaten to run away from home and might even do so. They accepted that he would probably make some very poor decisions, and learn some very costly lessons. They realized that he might well not choose the course of life that they wanted and had dreamed of for him. Bad and unpleasant things could happen in his life.

There is the feeling of a great risk in loving enough to let go. Following this course doesn't guarantee a storybook ending. But letting go is the way that is most likely to bring the storybook ending.

There is little likelihood that trying to maintain the control and the authority will bring about a storybook ending. Allowing dependency to continue can only lead to a poorer quality of life and may lead to disaster.

Letting go is a difficult thing to do. There are so many uncertainties. It is hard to see that, in the long run, letting go is the most protective and surest thing to be done to give the child the fullest possibility for a worthwhile life.

When he is tied to the master's hands, the boy can be only a little wooden puppet. Cutting the strings – letting him go – provides the opportunity to become a real live boy. Of course, he needs a conscience to be his companion and to warn him. Certainly, he needs to know that he is not alone. Clearly, he needs to know that he can seek the wisdom of those more experienced and more knowledgeable than he and not to be turned away.

But most of all, the boy needs to know that he has both the freedom and the responsibility for his decisions and his behavior. Only then can he move toward the fullness of life.

Loving enough to let go is just as applicable in all our relationships, as it is with parents and their children.

* * * * *

Whether you be parent, or spouse, or friend, I love you too much to try to bind you to me – or to decide for you – or to carry responsibility for your decisions – or to attempt to keep you from experiencing the consequences of your decisions. I want you to be with me because you choose to be.

And I want you to love me enough to let me go, so I can choose to be with you, knowing that I am free not to be.

If you be parent and child, husband and wife, friend and friend, the parameters of our relationship need to be worked out. There is little freedom and responsibility – and less of love – in using or being used. Letting go does not mean becoming a doormat, or a patsy, any more than it means not caring.

It is necessary for me to love me enough to let you go, even as it is necessary for me to love you enough to let you go.

Loving that much is tough. Loving that much is essential. Loving that much is worth the risk, and the uncertainty, and the anxiety. Loving that much is the way to free one another to experience the full potential of life.

Love enough to let go.