



Writings of W. Burney Overton

As I See It to Be

On Healing and Health

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I am in very poor health

and have been for a long time.

It all started in my third year of life. My tonsils were removed, and then removed again some twenty years later. The chronicle of poor health includes a ruptured appendix and lengthy recuperation, allergic rhinitis, blood sugar problems, a severe prostate gland infection, a heart electrical system malfunction corrected by a heart pacemaker, extensive osteoarthritis, thyroid hormone deficiency, a malignant melanoma recently removed, aches and pains all over my body, and a big toe that hurts so badly that I sometimes have to limp.

As a matter of fact, I am in excellent health.

My body is my transportation through life. After some sixty-eight years of use, there is a lot wrong with it, which is to be expected. I wish that I might be free from physical infirmities, but it is inevitable that the toll of living be felt.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, in his book, *The Deacon's Masterpiece* has a poem, "The Wonderful 'One-Hoss Shay'". The person described in the poem was determined to build a one-hoss shay so perfect in every part that no part would wear out before another. He did his work well, for the shay lasted a great many years, and no part showed signs of wear more than another. No repairs were necessary. It looked as if it might last forever, until, one day, all its parts failed at once, and it was suddenly reduced to a pile of rubble.

I don't expect my body to be like that wonderful one-hoss shay. I expect it to show imperfections and wear and tear. I assume it is susceptible to various diseases, especially if I don't take care of it. My excellent health does not center in the condition of my body.

My excellent health centers in the condition of my mind and spirit. My attitudes are positive. My beliefs sustain me. I am able to accept the reality of circumstances and situations without a lot of worry. I have good resources for coping with the problems that arise. Life is exciting and offers much of value to me. I look forward to each day in anticipation of what will happen.

I enjoy my work. Mentally, emotionally and spiritually, I function at the levels I have for many years. Exploring new areas and learning new things excites and challenges me. Reviewing and revising things previously learned rewards me. There is always something worthwhile to do. The opportunities to respond to the needs of others continue. Warm and caring relationships are sustained. New ones come into being and are nurtured. I am fed, and my good health is maintained.

When I focus on my mental, emotional, and spiritual health, I give my body its best chance to repair itself, to compensate for wear and tear and the passage of years, and to stay well. It is a mistake to focus on physical healing and health, important though they are. I take care of my body. I make use of medical skill and knowledge. I receive treatment when needed. I faithfully take the medications prescribed. I observe good physical health practices. I do not become preoccupied with the issue of physical health.

When the doctor told me the mole on my back had changed color, I acted promptly to check it out. Biopsy, diagnosis of cancer, further surgery followed in quick succession. I got along remarkably well and suffered very little discomfort, although for a period of time, I really didn't want anyone to hug me or pat me on the back. The doctors involved seemed more anxious and worried than I. They also assumed that I would be very upset about the cancer diagnosis and the treatment required. I don't think they really believed me when I told them that I tended not to worry, but to do the things necessary and available to me to take care of the situation, or to adjust to it.

The concern doctors expressed was helpful to me. I felt more secure under their care. They wanted to be as sure as they could that both curative and preventive treatments were adequate. I believe that my own emotional, mental, and spiritual health contributed a great deal to success of the medical treatment.

Clearly, my emotional, mental and spiritual health (hereafter referred to as spiritual health) gives my body its best chance to stay well, or to repair itself, or to compensate for that which cannot be repaired or made well. What I decide about the relative importance of physical health vs. spiritual health also has significant bearing on what happens to my body. It also determines the quality of my life when I am confronted with physical health problems.

I could make preoccupation with the illnesses and infirmities of my body the primary concern of my life. I could severely limit my activities, "just in case..." I could make those around me focus their attention on poor me with all my physical difficulties. I could excuse myself from meeting responsibilities, or showing concern for the well-being of others. I could refrain from doing anything that might feed my mind and spirit. I could withdraw and have no interest in what was going on around me. I could make my whole life one continuous round of checking temperature, counting pulse, studying the literature of illnesses, rushing off to the doctor, spending hours each day treating myself, and worrying and complaining constantly about the terrible blows of fate that were destroying my health.

I could rail against God because He was not healing me, or go looking for every promise of healing about which I might hear – some medication, or quack cure, or current fad, or promising treatment, or miracle healing, or circle of prayer. I could be so involved in seeking ways to obtain bodily health or stop the ravages of disease that I would have no time or energy for matters of spiritual health.

I want to be physically healthy. I want more to be spiritually healthy. When I

take care of my spiritual health, I set the stage for the healing and health of my body. I do all in my power to enable the body to heal itself and to stay well. I bring positive attitudes with which to cope with what cannot be healed.

Grandmother was a case in point. We teenagers called her grandmother because she was an aged lady whom we visited each Sunday afternoon to cheer her and brighten her life. She was in her eighties and terribly drawn from the ravages of arthritis. She hurt constantly. She could not straighten her body, and her hands were drawn like claws. Her rasping fight for breath made it difficult for her to speak more than a few words at a time. Despite all her infirmities, her attitude was such that she cheered and brightened our lives more than we did hers. Even though she suffered terribly, she enjoyed spiritual health and taught us a great deal about it.

The learning process that started then continues to this day. If I am able to maintain my spiritual health, I must give attention to my beliefs and values, and how I give expression to them. I need to decide what is most important to me, and focus on it. My beliefs and values determine what my attitude toward life is. If I believe that God is an all-powerful Being who gives His favor when I please Him, and withholds it when I do not, I live in fear of His displeasure and in hope that, somehow, I will be able to please Him.

If I believe that God, all-powerful though He is, loves and cherishes me without my having to do anything to earn His love, I feel peace and security within me. I want to respond in kind to the love I feel. I want to be all that His love assures me that I am. I want to please Him, but not because I fear His displeasure.

There was a terrible accident. The young woman's spinal cord was almost severed. She would never walk again. Almost in a moment, her vibrant health was taken from her. She was reduced to being a cripple, confined to a wheel-chair, with no hope of resuming the activities that had been so much a part of her life.

The young woman was understandably bitter. She cursed God and wanted to die. She refused to cooperate with doctors and physical therapists. She turned her back on family and friends. She made no effort to help herself. She was wasting away. Both physical and spiritual healths were almost gone. She finally agreed to counseling, but only used the time to spill her anger and frustration and bitterness in reaction to what had happened to her. Having listened to her through several sessions, the counselor finally said to her, "It seems normal to me for you to feel as you do. The fact of the matter is that the accident has occurred. You are unable to walk. There is no medical hope that you will ever walk again. There is much that you can learn to adjust and to improve the quality of your life. Whether or not that happens is up to you. What are you going to do about it?"

At first, the young woman was venomous in her reaction. The she lay in silence for a long time. Finally, she looked up at the counselor, smiled as she had not smiled in many weeks, and said, "I'm going to get on with my life." From that day, she made

almost miraculous progress with her physical therapy. Once she was able to be in her wheelchair, she spent much of her time visiting and talking with others in her ward to help and encourage them. She was an inspiration to all. In time, she left the hospital. She went back to school. She found productive work. She entered into the life of church and community. She both regained and maintained her spiritual health, and compensated beautifully for the physical limits. Her beliefs and values were in order and she was whole.

I wish that it were possible to attain spiritual health, and no longer experience ill-health in body or spirit. It doesn't work that way. I get sick. I become discouraged or depressed. I feel tension and stress. I am overcome with frustration. I react with anger. I lash out and am destructive to myself and others. I don't like the results at all.

To be healed, I must get in touch with what is making me sick. Something is wrong in my beliefs, my values, my outlook on life, my focus. Since my spiritual health is all tied up in these, I must find out what is out of adjustment so that I can make the corrections indicated.

My physical infirmity may or may not be tied to what is happening to me spiritually.

When the heart block occurred several years ago, I realized that my body was telling me some things about my spiritual health. For many months, there had been a great deal of stress in my working situation. In an effort to meet all the responsibilities I had accepted, I lived beyond the limits of my physical energy. I chose, also, to be upset with people with whom I was working but did not really confront them with my feelings and reactions. I fretted a great deal. I felt overburdened and unappreciated. Mostly, I was grimly silent as I tried to carry more and more of the load. I was a proper martyr. Then my heart refused to carry the load any longer and just quit.

I got the message – loud and clear – but my heart electrical system was damaged so severely that it was necessary to implant a pacemaker to assure a consistent and steady heart beat.

During the months of recovery, I faced how I had been dealing with my working situation. It was true that I was carrying a physical overload in the work situation, but that wasn't what made me sick. It was my attitude and my reactions. I could change the work load, but that would make little difference in my physical and spiritual health if I didn't do something about my outlook. I resolved never again to allow myself to get into such stress and tension. The work load could become heavy. Relationships could become strained. But I would never again turn all that pressure in on myself. I would find other ways to cope. And I did. I depend on the pacemaker to enable my heart to function adequately. I get enough rest and exercise. I encounter times of stress and tension in my life, but I do not allow them to accumulate and fester. I confront them, and the people involved. I make the decisions with which I am willing to live. I live at peace with myself within the limits that those decisions set.

I have come to realize that the quality of my life is determined by what I believe and how that belief is expressed. The most healing experience of my life is my growing conviction that I am in the image of my creator; that I have great intrinsic value; that I am loved unconditionally; and that I have full responsibility for deciding how I respond to who I am by the Grace of God. As long as I respond in life to those beliefs, I enjoy spiritual healing and health, and I am doing all that I can do to enable my body to be healed and healthy.

I take care of my body, but my body's health is almost incidental to my spiritual health. It is a product of being spiritually healthy but is not the reason for seeing to the well-being of my spirit. If my purpose in taking care of my spirit is to assure healing and health in my body, then I do so for the wrong reason. I take care of my spirit so that I am healthy.

My body will continue to wear out, and, one day, I will be through with it. My journey through this life will be completed. As best I can, I will continue to take care of my body until that time. As there are already things that I cannot fix, there will be other things that go wrong that I won't be able to fix.

I will continue to focus on being spiritually healthy, and so will retain quality of life. No matter what happens to my body, I can be spiritually healthy. If I stop taking care of myself spiritually, it won't matter much what happens to my body.

So, at this point in my life, I am in very poor health, and have been for a long time. And, I am in excellent health, and plan to stay that way for a long time.

I invite you to join me.