



Writings of W. Burney Overton

As I See It to Be

Blame and Responsibility

(The Parable of the Talents—Based on Matthew 25:14-30)

August 20, 1984

W. Burney Overton

“It isn't fair.” That's what I told myself at first.

I am Aarum, and recently, I got fired from the job I've held for twenty years.

“There was no reason,” I told myself—and a lot of other people.

I did all the right things just as the Boss wanted them done. I was steady, dependable, always on time. I never took any risks. I asked the Boss for instructions before I made any changes. I did exactly what he said—until he went off on his own and I couldn't check with him.

I kept the faith, though. I remembered how he was, and what he had said when he was around, and I took no risks.

For that I got fired. I was angry, and bitter, and afraid. The Boss turned out to be exactly who I thought he was. He treated me the way I knew he would. He didn't care about me. He was using me—taking advantage of my abilities—for his own profit.

The other two—Barum and Carum—were just lucky. They took all kinds of risks while the Boss was away. They tried different ways of doing things. They branched out in their Divisions. They could have lost their shirts, but they got the breaks.

When the Boss came back, they were in pretty good shape despite the liberties they had taken. They got promoted, and I got fired.

Not only, that, but Barum, who already was in charge of the largest part of the Boss's business, was put in charge of my Division when I was fired, and I was left with nothing—no job—no assets of the company—no resources. I was out in the cold. My life is over. I had a right to be angry, and bitter, and afraid.

It all started several years ago when the Boss decided to make some changes in the Company. I don't quite know why. He was sole owner. He had nothing at the beginning, but, through the years, he worked hard and created a huge company with many divisions. He had a smooth running organization with many able people in key positions throughout.

And the Boss ran the operation with an iron hand. He was hard hitting and direct, and, I thought, unscrupulous. He took advantage of people and situations for his own benefit. Without a sign of regret, he would sacrifice anybody or anything if it meant that he would gain power or possessions. He was one to be feared. The way to get along with him, and for the job to be safe, was to do exactly as he said—ask no questions—make no waves—take no risks.

Anyway, the Boss had called us in—me and Barum and Carum—one day. “The three of you have been with the company a long time. I am impressed with each of you and have chosen you for some special positions in the Company while I'm gone. Yes, I will be gone for an indefinite period – maybe years – and I want to leave the Company in good hands. Therefore, according to what I have already seen as your ability, I'm turning a certain Division of the company over to each of you for you to manage as you see fit. Manage it as if it were your own. Do with it what you believe you can. I believe you have outstanding management ability, and, this way, you will

have the opportunity to expand and strengthen the Company. I believe in you. I believe I have left each of these Divisions in good hands.”

And so the boss went away.

I remember that I came away from that meeting feeling a little disgruntled, but I don't think I showed it.

“According to your ability,” he had said. I had just as much ability as either Barum or Carum, and we had all been with the Company about the same length of time. Yet the Boss had put Barum over a Division that was at least ten times larger than mine. And Carum's was five times larger. Even though I was just as able, I was handicapped from the start, and I didn't like it.

“Use it as your own,” the Boss had said. That irritated me some, too. I knew the Boss. If I didn't manage the Division just exactly as he would have, I would be in real trouble when he came back. He was a hard man, and I was pretty uneasy about the whole thing by the time we left the meeting.

Barum and Carum didn't share my uneasiness. They were excited and full of plans of what they would do. They told me some of them and wanted me to join with them. They pointed out how much more the three of us could do if we were a team. They seemed to see the Boss differently than I did. They talked about his being a fair man who really cared about those in his employ. They believed that he really meant what he said about handling the Divisions assigned to us as if they were our own. They took him at face value when he said, "Use your abilities. See what you can do with what I have turned over to you." They had some ambitious plans, and they seemed to think they could implement them.

They'll find out, I thought. The Boss isn't who they think he is. When he comes back, he will demand an accounting. That's reasonable, but they'll find out what kind of Boss he really is if they don't have at least what they started with to turn back to him. He doesn't care about honest effort, nor fairness. He just wants everything he can get. Even if they manage to hold on to—or increase—their holdings, he'll take it all from them when he comes back. They'll have nothing to show for all their effort.

“I'm not going to take any chances. I've worked with the Boss enough to know what he wants and what he will do. I'll keep my Division intact just as it is already set up. When he comes back, he'll have what is his just like it was when he left,” I said to myself. “Yes, that's the best decision. I won't take any risks. Why should I? No matter what he said, it isn't mine, and it never will be.”

So I set about to run the Division just like the boss had run it. After a while, Barum and Carum quit talking about a team. They even quit coming around to my office, so I didn't hear directly how they were getting along.

There were lots of rumors, though—rumors about the things they were doing and the changes they were making. Sometimes they sounded good, and sometimes they didn't. Some sounded awfully risky to me, and I knew the Boss was going to be extremely displeased with them for taking such chances.

Occasionally, when I heard of some success of Barum and Carum, I wondered if I had made the right decision. Then I was glad I hadn't added to my anxiety and fear by risking trying to make changes in the Division.

I lived with anxiety and fear. Was I doing exactly what the Boss would do? Was I going to be able to stay out of trouble with him? When was the day of accounting going to be? As years went by, I felt more and more stress. I worked extra hours. I got irritable with employees, and, worst of all, with my wife and children.

We never had any family fun anymore. The job was like an ogre over us. And always I thought, "If I can just keep the Division intact as the Boss had it until the day of accounting, I'll be OK." I spent many a sleepless night worrying.

Then the day of accounting came—as I knew it would. I felt a huge weight lifted from my back. I had succeeded in keeping the Division intact just as it was when it was turned over to me. I dreaded seeing the Boss, but the ordeal wouldn't take long. The months and years of dread and anxiety and fear would be over, and I could go back to the job I held before the Boss went away. I could breathe easy again. I could handle that responsibility without so much stress.

I wondered if the Boss somehow sensed my agony. I thought he would see Barum and Carum and me together as he had done in the beginning. But he didn't. He saw each of us separately, and he saw them first.

Things must have turned out pretty good for them. They each were all smiles and seemed pretty happy when they came out of the Boss's office. Maybe they even got a good bonus.

Barum came directly to my office. "I told you the boss was a fair man and cared about his employees," he said.

I waited for him to continue, and then couldn't stand the silence. "What happened? What did he say?"

Then he told me, and what he said didn't make sense to me. There were no rewards, unless "Well done" is some kind of reward. There was no bonus, and must having even more responsibility is a bonus.

"Well done," the boss had said. Because Barum had handled his responsibility so well, even more had been turned over to him, and he seemed very pleased.

I felt even more confusion when Carum came into my office from his interview with the Boss. He was pretty happy, too, and told the same story as Barum about what had happened.

"Barum and Carum were just lucky," I thought. After all, they each had doubled

the assets of the Division left in their charge. The Boss could afford to be generous with them—except that I didn't understand why their achievements were recognized by turning over to them even more responsibility in the Company. No, my way was better. There was no reason for me to take risks with someone else's business. Let him take the risk—and the loss, if one occurred. I didn't owe him anything. But I was very ill-at-ease while I waited to be called.

Finally, it was my turn. I was almost paralyzed with fright—and, at the same time, felt a sense of relief as I came into the presence of the Boss. I hoped my feelings did not show.

My presentation was well rehearsed.

I started by reminding him of the kind of Boss he was. I don't know why I felt as if I had to justify myself, for I knew him to be a hard and unscrupulous man. Then, with a slight flourish, I handed him the accounts of the Division and pointed out that I was returning it to him in exactly the condition it was in when it was turned over to me -- all safe and secure and running in precisely the well-oiled way that was his hallmark as a manager. I felt some pride in having preserved the Division so well.

The Boss took the papers, leafed through them briefly, and sat in silence for some moments. I began to get uneasy all over again.

“You believe me to be that kind of man?” I couldn't quite identify the look on the Boss's face, nor the tone of his voice—hurt—sadness—unhappiness—but not approval as I expected, nor the anger that would go with disapproval.

The Boss continued, “Since you thought I was that kind of man, you ought to at least have kept the Division up to date in its operation. If nothing else, I would be able to compete on an equal basis with similar Divisions in other companies instead of being handicapped by an outmoded system. You have forfeited your job. You have surrendered your place in the Company. Barum will have your Division along with the others he now heads.”

I was stunned. The Boss had fired me. Just like that, I was turned out with nothing to show for 20 years of hard work. Or, at least that is how I saw it then—no reward—no appreciation—no acknowledgment of how I had protected what was his—no “Well done” for me. His words were harsh and unfeeling—just what I would expect from a person such as he.

The following days were a nightmare for me. I ran the gamut of feelings--dismay, confusion, bitterness, anger, fear, vindictiveness. “I made a most prudent decision,” I told myself, “and look what I got in return. The Boss had it in for me all the time. He gave me the least responsibility to start with ‘because of my lack of ability,’ and when I do a faithful, conservative job for him and keep his own intact, he angrily dismisses me and leaves me without any resources to take care of myself and my family.”

I knew I was right about the Boss. When I told my friends—and I talked plenty—they all agreed that I was right. “He is that kind of man,” they said, “always has been -- and he has victimized you.” After all I did for him, he fired me. He took everything I had from me. I didn't deserve such treatment.

I kept telling myself how justified I was to blame the Boss, and to feel bitter and angry. But no matter how upset I felt, I couldn't dismiss the memory of the look on his face when I reported to him—nor the tone of his voice. I had decided his words were harsh and unfeeling, but the facial expression and his voice were not.

As the days went by, I was less and less able to put the memory out of mind. I saw on the Boss's face a look of profound sadness, and—yes—of deep disappointment—of compassion—pity-- and, most incomprehensible to me, love. His tone of voice, I gradually realized, carried the same messages.

I fought against the memory, but it only got stronger. Was I wrong about the Boss? Was I wrong about me? Had I, indeed, brought my misfortune upon myself?

This memory of the boss fit what Barum and Carum had told me over and over. They said he was trying to give us a chance to discover our full potential in the Company and in life. He cared about each of us—valued us as members of the Company—trusted us. He knew that we had to be without restraints—free to decide for ourselves our levels of responsibility commensurate with our ability. He cared enough about each of us to take that kind of risk with us. He had turned the divisions over to us to give us a chance to grow to our fullest potential in the Company.

Barum and Carum had realized what the Boss was about and had joyfully responded to the challenge, as they were continuing to respond to the challenge of the larger responsibilities each had in the Company. What had happened to me was the result of my own decisions and actions. I had refused to take the responsibility that went with being valued and trusted.

The Boss's words when I reported to him were words of grief and disappointment and compassion—not anger. He was right. If I believed he was the kind of man I said, I ought at least you have kept the Division modernized so that it could be competitive. I wasn't willing even to take the degree of responsibility. No wonder he was sad and hurting. He was sad for me and hurting for me. He cared that much. I hadn't failed him. I had failed myself.

To be more accurate, I had failed the Boss by the process of failing myself. By my decisions and actions, I had discounted both his high regard for me and my own worth. He hadn't fired me. He hadn't taken my resources from me. I had forfeited my job and my resources in the Company. He had accepted me where I had said—and demonstrated—that I was. He had cared enough not to set aside the inevitable results of my decisions and actions. He had not intervened to make the outcome different for me or for him. His love and wisdom was such that he would not pretend with me, nor would he

bail me out.

I was out of a job all right, and without resources. But the Boss hadn't kicked me out. I had done that. I couldn't avoid my responsibility by being bitter and angry with him, and putting the blame on him. I had done it to myself.

Was it over? Could I do nothing to correct the situation? Was there no way to get back into the good favor of the Boss?

“Wait a minute,” I said to myself. “I'm not out of the Boss's favor. He hasn't been testing me. He cared about me, and caring, gave me an opportunity to achieve my full potential according to my ability. He had not taken the opportunity from me. I had lost it. I hadn't taken any risks. I hadn't even kept the Division up-to-date. I had failed more completely than I possibly could have by taking some risks.”

Getting back into the good favor of the Boss isn't what I needed to be trying to do. That isn't the issue. I needed to be making new decisions about myself and my life. I needed to revise my view of the Boss and of myself in his eyes and mine. I needed to believe that the Boss really cares about me and sees me as valuable—and then make decisions and take actions on that basis. That's what Barum and Carum did, and they were right.

If I do, maybe the Boss will reconsider --

There I go again, sliding back into the pattern of thinking that, if I do it right, I'll be rewarded. I don't want to do it that way any more. There is no greater reward than to be loved, valued and trusted. It is hard to unlearn the pattern of a life time.

The Boss won't reward me, no matter what I do. Nor will he take opportunities away from me. He won't reject me, either. I have ability, and there are opportunities to make use of that ability. It is up to me to decide about the level of responsibility at which I function. When I do, the Boss will say, “Well done” and open other opportunities to me—opportunities of additional responsibility commensurate with my responsible use of my abilities.

The Boss looks very different to me now. And I look very different to myself. The anger and bitterness and blaming are all gone. He didn't fire me. I did it to myself. Even though right now I don't have a job, I feel better than I have in years. I feel at peace with myself. I have a stronger sense of self-confidence than I've ever had. I know now that I am valuable and worthwhile. I no longer have to take the "safe" way, nor try to prove my worth.

I'll get another job. In time, I will be back with the Company and working for the Boss. But in whatever job I have—in all my life, in fact—I will demonstrate my ability and my responsibility. I will give accounting to myself and say, "Well done."

The Boss will like that -- and so will I.