



Writings of W. Burney Overton

As I See It to Be

The Illusion of Immortality

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It was a trigger phrase for me--"Our all-pervasive illusion of immortality."

I was reading the book *Reaching Out* by Henri J. M. Nouwen, and there, on page 82, was that phrase. I stopped reading and allowed the flood of triggered thoughts to wash over me. For a long time they were jumbled and tumbling one over the other without much apparent connection. Then some order began to come out of the chaos.

The illusion of immortality – is immortality an illusion? Is not everlasting life God's promise to those who truly believe? "Jesus came that we might have life and have it more abundantly." Isn't the purpose of salvation to assure us that our immortal life is in heaven and not hell? Am I merely a mortal? Is it all over when this life is over? If it is, what is the point of it all?

Maybe a priority question is, "What is the illusion?" Is it that I can gain immortality? Maybe I am already immortal because God created me that way. Maybe the illusion is that I am mortal. It seems like a wild idea, but I have to explore the possibility.

I am mortal. I have no doubt of that. I was born, I am alive, and I will die. Will I? My body will die, but will I? I believe that I am created in the image of God. I have a body. I have a temporal, mortal life to live. I have the potential that God has given me to give meaning to living it. In time, this life will be over.

I cannot escape the reality of this mortal life. A tiny baby dies. A child can't fight off the destroying disease. A teenager is killed in an automobile accident. Pestilence and famine wipe out thousands and hundreds of thousands. So does crime, and war, and storms. At all ages, and from many causes, people die. Death seems the one certainty of life, and little occurs in this life to suggest immortality. Death, it appears, is our human destiny.

Yet people cling to the hope of immortality. They give the hope such priority that much of life is devoted to trying to gain or assure life after death.

People expressed much concerned about being saved, and about living so that they receive heavenly reward – life after death. "I fear I am not immortal, and I want to be..." they say. "I plead with God to save me and ask, 'What must I do to be saved?'"

My doctor friend once said, "I believe in life after death. I believe because there must be more to life than this life. If there isn't, I don't see any purpose in this life." He needed to believe in his own future immortality for him to see any meaning in his mortality. He had given no thought to the possibility that he was already immortal. Nor had I when he made his statement to me. He seemed to believe that he must live this mortal life in such a way that he would be immortal when he died. I didn't know what to believe then.

Now, I believe that the hope of immortality is an illusion because I am already immortal. I have dealt with the question and the “maybe”. I am immortal because God created me that way. I am in the image of God. I am of the essence of God. I have the potential to become as God is. This mortal life is the time for me to move toward the realization of that potential. Now is the time to bear witness to what it means to be a creation in the image of God.

My experience working in the garden helps me to understand the concept. I hold a seed in my hand before I plant it. I picture what it will become. I marvel that the tiny seed already has in it all that it can ever become. It will go into the ground. Warmth and moisture will work their magic, and it will sprout into a tiny plant. More warmth, more moisture, and plant food will bring growth. In due season it will blossom and bear fruit. And in the fruit will be the tiny seed containing all it can ever become.

The seed did not sprout, and grow, and bear fruit to become something after it died. It became what it had the potential to be while it lived. It became what it was created to be in this life.

I don't know what is after this life. I haven't discovered a way to find out. I doubt that it is relevant for me to know, or to try to find out. It isn't if I believe I am created in the image of God and God is incarnate in me. I can leave the matter of my immortality in God's hands.

What life is all about is this life – here and now – temporal – mortal – lived in response to God. The overriding challenge is not to find a way to assure my immortality. It is to find ways to be as God is in my mortality. I am privileged, and challenged, to live a mortal life – to express, as a mortal, what it means to be created in the image of God. I have the opportunity to grow toward my potential. To use the imagery of the seed, my aim in life is to bear fruit – the very best I can.

When I begin to worry about whether or not I am immortal – or try to live my mortal life in a way to make sure I preserve my immortality – or hope to gain my immortality as the reward for how I live my mortal life – I miss the whole point of my mortal life.

Given that I am created in the image of my Creator with a life span to live, my primary goal is to become and be who I am created to be. Neither life after this life, nor immortality are my concerns.

It strikes me that the main struggle of human life has always been to try to obtain something we already have. The first temptation in the Bible is to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and thereby to obtain food, an esthetic quality of life, and the wisdom to provide all that was necessary to stay alive forever, as if they did not already have these things. In the Garden, they ate of the Tree of Life. They were in a relationship with their Creator and with each other that fulfilled every need and assured them of life. But they argued within themselves, “We must do something to

make sure we can be satisfied now, and live forever. We must be our own God. We don't trust, or believe, what we already have from our Creator.”

Jesus pointedly said to those around Him who were trying to save their own lives, “Whoever would save his life will lose it...” (Mark 8:35). The irony was that they already had their life and didn't need to do anything to save it. They needed to live it to the fullest.

Despite their exposure to Jesus and His teachings, the disciples remained fearful of losing their lives, until after the Resurrection. It appears that they didn't realize who they were and what they had. They seemed to believe that their mortal lives must be preserved and protected. They experienced a great deal of conflict and anxiety. In this life, were they God incarnate, or did they have to separate from God to be God? Were they mortals trying to gain immortality, or were they already immortal (in the image of God) giving expression to who they were by God's creating grace in this mortal life. No matter where I turn in life, people seem to be confronted with this basic conflict and anxiety. It is very real, and it is an illusion.

It was a joyous day for me when I realized that I was free from my illusion of my immortality. That day my fears ended. I was anxious no more. God had made me who I am, with full potential to be. I realized that I have just two main tasks in life. One is to grow toward that potential, and the other is to use my life up – to expend it.

Some years ago, I was leading a group in a personal growth workshop. It was toward the end of the last day. The focus of the group was on who we are by the Grace of God, and what we do with our lives when we know we are loved as God loves us. I had the group sit in a circle on the floor and gave each member an empty cup. I said, “This is your cup of love. Do whatever you want with it.”

Some of them clutched the cup to themselves in an effort to keep and protect it. Some of them began to share their cup with each other. One person sat holding his cup in both hands, staring into it. In a few moments, he began to scoop with one hand, and then the other, as if something were spilling out of the cup and he was trying to put it back. No matter what he did, he couldn't stop the cup from overflowing. He set it on the floor in front of him and used both hands to try to put the overflow back in the cup—to no avail.

Finally, almost in panic, he got up and went to each person in the group and poured from his cup into theirs. By the time he finished, the fearful look on his face was gone. A calmness and peacefulness settled over him as he returned to his place in the circle. Again he sat, holding his cup and staring into it. No one said anything. All eyes were on him and they waited—waited for his next word or move.

At last he spoke, “It keeps on running over. The more I pour out, the more there is to pour out. I don't need to keep it, or try to hold onto it. The cup is never empty.” There was awe and reverence in his voice, and a look of wonder on his face.

Out of His great love for me, God has given me life—abundant life. I don't need to try to save my life, nor to gain it. I have it already. I do need to use it up and pour it out.

The belief that I need to gain my life—or to save it—or to live so as to become immortal, is an illusion. I already have my life – God's gift to me. I use it up, and like the cup of love, it is continually replenished.