



Writings of W. Burney Overton

As I See It to Be

On Specialness – And Being Special

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People are special to me, and special in many different ways. However it has come about in my life, I care about people. I care about what happens in their lives. When a person discloses to me that there is troubledness, or loneliness, or confusion, or suffering, or any difficulty in his or her life, I have intense feelings for that person. When a person allows me to know about the joy and happiness of his or her life, I feel close and caring. Each one is special to me.

I think about all the people with whom I have shared in some significant way. There are a great many of them. We have been together in the work of a particular congregation. We have spent time together in workshops and in other kinds of training events. We have worked together in counseling session. We have met. We have entrusted something of ourselves to each other. My life has been enriched immeasurably. Each special relationship has enhanced all the others.

Yet each relationship stands alone, even though it is a part of them all. Each is both complete and incomplete. There is never time enough nor opportunity to explore and develop all the potential. Sometimes, one or both of us feels no particular need to explore further. Sometimes the need is there, but there is no way for it to happen.

My Webster's Dictionary defines "special" as, "distinguished by some unusual quality", and "peculiar, unique". My own use of the word has to do both with experiencing the uniqueness of another, and with seeing the value of the other. I feel privileged that I have had an opportunity to share. I value the fact of sharing. Being in the relationship, at whatever level, is a blessing to me. I rejoice and give thanks that so many have come into my life.

It appears to me that people become special to me because of at least four kinds of experiences. One is when persons reach out to me, believing that I have something of value to offer them. A second is when I feel valued by another and reach out to that person for something for me. A third is the specialness of commitment to one person. And a fourth is when I realize again that the person – each person – is created in the image of God and is loved unconditionally.

Persons do reach out to me. I am not always aware of what they see, or what they believe I have to offer. Sometimes it appears to me that they are hurting so badly, or are so much in need, that they just hope I may have something to offer them. Sometimes I do have. I have been able to give of myself, and of my experience and believing, and the person has, indeed, been helped. By the very fact of having been able to help a little, I feel closer to the person. The person becomes special to me. It is no wonder. When I have invested something of myself in another, that person is a part of me, and I of that person. The levels of trusting and entrusting deepen, and the relationship becomes stronger.

The most specific illustration I know is that of the reaction to an animal or a baby. Each may be seen as helpless, in need, and dependent upon the person. Under those circumstances, the one helping is likely to feel that the one receiving the help is a most

special one – just because the helper has felt needed. Or maybe it is that giving and receiving results in a bond of warmth and caring.

We have shared something significant. Significant to the other out of that person's need. Significant to me because I have been able to offer something in response to that need. I like to believe that what I have to offer is an enabler for the other to grow toward the wholeness that is God's will for each of His people.

I think of people in this first category as my "larger family – the people with whom I have shared for a time in congregations, counseling sessions, and/or training groups over a period of many years. Some of them – many of them – I no longer see, nor hear from in any way. Nonetheless, we have walked the path of life together for a while, and, because of that sharing, each one is special to me.

Certain ones of that "larger family" have seemed to value me beyond what I could see that I had offered to them, or had given to them. They seemed to want to know more of me. They seemed to be more than passingly interested in me and what was going on in my life. They seemed to reach out to me to be more involved in what happens with me. Through repeated contacts, our friendship has grown to ever deeper levels. I value that friendship, and I count those persons as special.

I have to confront reality at this point. When a person reaches out to me to be helpful, my reaction is dependent upon how it is done. I don't like for anyone to intrude. I don't like for a person to decide for me what I need or want. I don't like for someone to insist on helping me when I have not asked for help. Mostly, I prefer to work out solutions to my problems myself. I appreciate the interest and the caring, but I don't want to feel as if I have to accept help because someone cares about me.

Upon occasion, I have chosen to try to talk with a friend about a problem of some concern to me. He wanted to be helpful, but before I could really tell him what was going on, he already had answers for me. And then he seemed surprised and hurt when I did not immediately act on what he had said. His suggestions were well intended, and may well have been exactly what I needed to do. The difficulty for me was that he, without ever intending to be, was intrusive and demanding about what I should do. I knew he meant well. I knew he cared. His advice, so freely given, just wasn't what I needed from him at that time.

What I really want is for the caring person to be with me and to listen to me without trying to correct me, or show me the error of my ways – not until I ask for it. I do like to hear opinions and points of view, but I don't want to feel pressure.

When I feel pressure, I wonder just how special I am to the other person. I question if the person really cares about me, or if the intrusion (or what I interpret as intrusion) is in response to the person's own need. I want to experience the specialness of relationship without demand or pressure.

Another part of the reality is that, upon occasion, I have allowed myself to believe that the other person really wanted to be supportive and helpful. I have taken the risk of entrusting my troubledness and need to him/her, only to have that person turn away from me as if I did not matter. “Confide in me,” the person will say, “You are special to me. I want to be of help to you as you have been to me.” And when I believe, and entrust, the person is not there for me.

Some years ago, I attended a conference of people helpers. It was at the time when the encounter group movement was at its peak, and the conference was run as an encounter group. The facilitator was skilled, and the members of the group reached the point where they seemed to care for and trust each other. I had not spoken much in the sessions until, one day, the others began to press me to share more of what was going on with me. I decided to trust them, and began to tell them some of my fears and needs. I told them about often feeling lonely, and wishing that someone cared enough about me to want to spend time with me for my sake. They were responsive to me, and assured me that they wanted to be with me so that I wouldn’t feel that loneliness while the conference was going on.

I came away from that session feeling pretty good. I thought a lot about what had been said, and allowed myself to believe that those people would be there for me when I needed them. The next afternoon was free time. I, of course, anticipated that I would be included in the activities of the afternoon – only I didn’t hear anything from anyone. At noon, I heard of some things being planned and decided to join with some of the group in a particular activity. So I showed up and went along. That was one of the loneliest afternoons of my life. It didn’t seem to make any difference to anyone whether or not I was along. Not only was there no attempt to work out my problems for me, there seemed no interest in me whatsoever.

Such an experience is devastating to me. It hurts so badly that I pull a protective shell around me and fear to let anyone within it. And yet I want closeness – specialness – intimacy.

I wonder why persons aren’t there for me when I allow myself to be vulnerable enough to entrust to them. Thus far, the only conclusions I have reached are that my perceived needs are so great that the other person feels overwhelmed by them, or that I am not as special as I thought. Either way, I tend not to let my needs be known, and the other one continues to be special to me.

And there is the specialness of commitment to one person with whom to share the most intimate and most significant aspects of life. I am fortunate to have such a relationship – at this writing – for almost forty-five years.

The final kind of specialness about which I want to write centers in the reality that each one of us is created in the image of God and loved unconditionally. I believe this, and, therefore, I see every person as special. Each one is unique and valuable. This is a

specialness that is a given, and not the product of any experience. Hence, I come to every relationship already viewing the other person as special.

I may have no other information than that the person is a child of God and loved. From that beginning, all that happens between us is interpreted accordingly. I look for the indications of worth. I note the evidences of trouble or difficulty and want to be helpful if I possibly can be.

Sometimes I do not have the resources to be helpful. Sometimes the person does not want anything from me. Sometimes there is too much of suspicion, and fear, and anger to be overcome. No real relationship can develop. Nonetheless, the person is special, and I will continue to love him/her.

I hadn't really intended to say anything about that last kind of specialness when I started writing this paper, yet it seems to fit.

Created in the image of God, we have within us a deep desire for relationship – for knowing – caring – sharing – trusting – and entrusting. Despite the bad experiences of life that cause us to put up our guard, the effort continues to try to find that relationship that is so free of distrust and fear that we can be “without any protection” with each other. It is as if being totally open to one another, and totally vulnerable, were a present possibility. I believe that it is – at least as a goal toward which to be moving all the time.

I do not want to wait until someone is open and vulnerable with me before I will risk being that way. I admit that I am afraid, but if I want to take the initiative, I cannot let my fear control me. How can I protect myself, and still be open and vulnerable?

I cannot protect myself by waiting for someone to be open and vulnerable with me. No, that isn't true. I can protect myself that way. I just can't go on and be open and vulnerable. I make myself dependent upon what another person does to determine what I do. That can result in a very limited experience of life.

But I don't have to limit myself by entrusting my protection to another person. If I believe that I am by the Grace of God, I have sufficient protection. Then the degree to which I am open and vulnerable is determined by what I experience as the willingness or capacity of another person to receive that openness and vulnerability from me. I can play games with this. I can deceive myself. I can tell myself that you can't handle my openness, when what I mean is that I am afraid to risk it. I am responsible for deciding how it really is with me.

What has this to do with specialness?

Just this. I can lay claim on you. I can make demands of you. I can say you are so significant to me that I cannot bear to be out of relationship. I can tell you how special you are to me as I try to hold you in the relationship for my sake. Or, I can reach out to you to be responsive to you and your need, and, thereby, make you special.

It is my choice.