



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Magic of Believing – Part II

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There appears to be more to this business of believing than meets the eye.

I wasn't entirely happy with the last Paper on believing [cf Paper 85-6.4]. I don't know if I was dissatisfied with the development, or if I needed to give more illustrations – or both. In either case, it appears that I need to write more on the subject.

You already know, of course, that everything I write is a disclosure of how I see things to be and what I believe. I use phrases like, "It seems to me ...," and "I believe ...," and "From my point of view..." over and over as I claim ownership of what I write, but I do not claim to be expressing some objective or absolute truth, nor what someone else ought to believe. Sometimes I wish I could write with absolute authority and tell you just exactly what the truth is, what the facts are, and what you should believe, but I don't know how to do that.

However, to avoid the repetition of the word "believe" as much as possible in this paper, I ask you to keep in mind that I am writing what I believe even though I don't repeat the "ownership" phrases.

We are trinitarian beings. Maybe "holistic" is the better word. What I mean is that the three main dimensions of our being are body, mind, and spirit. In the satisfactory interrelationship and interaction of the three, we move toward wholeness – the kind of wholeness that is God's intention for his creation in his own image. To the degree that the body, or mind, or spirit is sick or troubled, the whole being is sick or troubled. And, of course, total health is in direct relationship to the health of each part.

Curiously, people give a large amount of time and energy to attaining and preserving physical health, and not so much to mental and spiritual. We appear to be able to compensate for a lack of physical health, but seem to have very little success compensating for the lack of mental and spiritual health. I have known people who were seriously infirmed physically who functioned as whole beings because they were healthy in mind and spirit, but I have not known of anyone who was infirmed mentally and spiritually who was really healthy physically.

That isn't completely accurate. I have known some people who were worshippers of their bodies. They exercised endlessly. They ate all the right kinds of foods in proper quantity. They were superb physical specimens, but seemed not to have much health of mind and spirit. They were more obsessed than healthy.

Ultimately, health of body, mind, and spirit is the product of what a person believes about him/herself, and about the world of which he/she is a part. I am aware that some people choose to believe the kinds of things about themselves and their world that lead to lack of health. In fact, it appears that some opt for ill-health – body, mind and/or spirit – to preserve a belief system, and to retain a sense of security in the familiar, unhealthy though it may be.

It is God's intention that persons be healthy in all ways. Normal functioning is designed to produce health and maintain it. The human organism is geared up to take

care of itself and to heal itself. Given half a chance, and maybe not even that much, it always moves toward wholeness.

The capacity to overcome adversity is phenomenal. People have endured the most profound physical suffering and become healthy again. Some have gone through mental torment of such intensity that survival seemed impossible – much less health – and have survived and become healthy again. Some severely-abused children become functional, creative adults. Some persons have survived the anguish of a death camp or a torture chamber and have emerged remarkably unscarred. Some, whose world has been shattered by a traumatic event or loss, have come through the grief and turmoil stronger than ever. Some, whose belief systems have been so badly disrupted that they have lost their spiritual base and cried against God, have been able to establish another spiritual base on which to build.

Maybe some of my own experiences of moving toward wholeness in response to what I believe will be helpful. As I write about them, I will also write about some of the beliefs and experiences that stood – stand – in the way of my wholeness. I want the picture to be complete.

When I was a child, I heard a great deal about the Love of God. I also heard a great deal about the importance of doing the right things so I wouldn't go to hell. I was afraid of God. I was afraid of being found out even when I didn't know what rules I might have broken. I was afraid of people in authority. After all, they could also punish me if I were not properly obedient. Obedience was essential – or at least it was necessary not to be discovered in disobedience.

But God knew everything. How could I possibly keep from being discovered? The task was even more formidable because I didn't know what all the rules were. God would know that I had broken rules I didn't even know about, and I would be responsible anyway. I was troubled, but I don't think many people around me knew it. I learned to keep my fears and uncertainties to myself. I wasn't supposed to have them, I thought, so I had to hide them.

Strange though it may seem, out of that morass of contradictory and confusing belief emerged my conviction that God's love is unconditional. Getting to that conviction was a bitter struggle accompanied by much anxiety. But somehow the power of God was at work, and that power was moving me toward wholeness and health.

The faith realization of the extent and certainty of God's Love changed my whole outlook on life. I was no longer afraid of God. I was no longer afraid of being found out by God. Since I believed that God knew all things, it followed that He knew all about me. Being afraid I would be found out didn't make any sense if God already knew all about me. Since nothing was able to separate me from God's love, it was O. K. for God to know all about me.

I remember the relief I felt. A tremendous burden was lifted. I could – literally – do as I pleased. The love of God was certain. The relationship to God was eternally secure – even if I chose to act as if it were not. Even then it was insofar as God was concerned.

Doing as I pleased under these circumstances did not mean acting irresponsibly, nor as if no one mattered. If anything, I felt a greater sense of responsibility for what I said and did. The reason for saying and doing had shifted. It was no longer to cope with anxiety and fear, but to express the reality of being loved so completely. It was to be who I was because of God's Grace. I wanted my way of living to confirm what it meant to me to be in loving relationship with God.

Further, since I believed that God loved every person, all persons were valuable to me. I wanted to respond to them in terms of that value. I had a new set of guidelines for deciding about my responses to people and my behavior toward them. Harsh judgement and condemnation didn't fit. Retaliation had no place. Trying to love as I believed God loved did fit. Seeking to return good for evil did have a place.

The hardest part of incorporating this new set of values was to let go of the expectation of reward, or favorable attention because of how I was seeking to be. The reward and punishment concept had been thoroughly established in my life. In fact, I was accustomed to being affirmed and approved for what I did, and there weren't too many negative reactions.

It was – still is – a constant temptation to govern my decisions and actions so as to get favorable reactions. But I don't really want to be controlled by that old belief system – not any more. I like favorable reactions, and it troubles me when I get unfavorable ones. I just don't want to hold a belief system that makes getting favorable reactions, and avoiding unfavorable ones, the reason for any decision or action.

In the relationship with God, the reason for any decision or action is to respond to being loved. It is to confirm reality that already is. It is to express in living what I understand to be the way of love as God loves.

Even as I write, my old belief system says, "You're being egotistical. Those who read will see you as bragging and claiming credit for a style of life you can't possibly sustain. They'll see – or wonder about – your faults and weaknesses." I feel constrained to make less of a claim about my life. That's how persistent old belief systems can be.

What I am really trying to express is that I believe God is love. His love is a gift. I can't earn it, nor cause it to be withdrawn. It is not a reward, and God does not punish me when I am less than loving in my decisions and actions.

I don't like how things turn out when I am less than loving in my decisions and actions. I am not pleased with me when I yield to pressures to seek approval, and to

avoid disapproval. I get upset with me when I feel anxious and afraid and modify my behavior to try to avoid feared consequences.

At those times, I seem to be denying what I believe about being loved, but I am not. The point of stability in my life is my assurance in faith that I am loved – that God never separates nor withdraws from me.

I am convinced that this belief favorably affects my outlook on life, my attitudes, and my feelings. In the difficult times – and there are many in my history involving body, mind, spirit, and relationships – I am much more positive and hopeful and confident than I could otherwise be. What I believe brings this about, and gives me the highest potential possible for being the whole person I was created to be. The same potential is there for every person.

What have I said? Believing is a powerful force in our lives – to the point of seeming magical. While there are other forces involved, believing seems to be the determinant one. Indeed, it appears that the other forces have varying degrees of power according to what one believes.

Even our health, or lack of it – body, mind, and spirit – seems to be the product of what we believe. God intends that we be healthy in all ways, and has created us with the resources to be. We tap and utilize those resources to the degree that we believe they are available. Hence, our capacity to overcome adversity is phenomenal – to the point of seeming magical. The degree of my wholeness is directly tied to the degree that I believe God is love – I am loved – I can love as God loves.

I add another observation. The systems of my body have suffered the wear and tear of the years of my life to the degree that I could be an invalid, of little value to myself or anyone else, but such is not the case. Why? Because of the power of what I believe. By the Grace of God – the gift of God – I have spiritual health. That is the key. All the rest follows.

Jesus said, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1: 8)

Do I believe this?

Yes, with my life. I have spiritual life and health because the Holy Spirit has come upon me. I want to be a witness. I want my life to witness.

What is it that I witness?

I witness to the reality of the love of God. I witness to the power of God manifested through that love. I witness to the reality of that love with my own life.

There is magic in that believing. It touches the very power of God. And it is just as much yours as it is mine –

- if you believe.