



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Criticism

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"You can't criticize me," I cried in outraged anguish.

"Why not?" he responded. "Everyone has at least one fault to be criticized."

Criticizing – faultfinding – seeing things differently and saying so – appear to be a way of life. It is normal to criticize. Since people have different points of view, it is unrealistic to set the standard that one person must not be critical of another. And it is more unrealistic to require that reactions to another person must always be favorable.

Why do I criticize?

Because something, or somebody, isn't the way I want that thing or person to be, or think it should be, and I let it be known. I have a particular outlook on life. I have standards. I have expectations. I have in mind how things are supposed to be, and how people are supposed to function. These are a part of my makeup and my world view. They contribute to the security of my world as I see it. Inevitably, I assess and evaluate people and situations according to that outlook. I can't be involved unless I do.

Whenever I express a different point of view – and especially when the differing is perceived as negative – it is considered to be criticism. This is just how it is when we are involved with one another. Criticizing is common to our experience.

I remember my childhood belief about policemen. They were supposed to be enforcers and upholders of the Law. That meant, also, that they were supposed to be good and right in all aspects of their lives – and they were to be obeyed without question. They were the models. They never did anything wrong. That's how I thought it was.

One day I saw a policeman sneak a candy bar from a display in a store. I was aghast and outraged. Not only was he a person whom I knew and respected, but he was on duty at the time. He had stolen a candy bar and that was against the Law –the Law he was supposed to be upholding and enforcing.

Of course I was critical of him. And I was justified, I thought. By his action, he had disrupted my world. What I believed was called into question. He violated how I thought things were supposed to be. I was thrown into emotional turmoil. My security was shaken. He shouldn't have stolen the candy bar.

That wasn't the first time – and by no means the last – that I have been critical. It probably is accurate to say that I am a critical person. With some justification, I can be criticized for being. In any given situation, I can see things to commend and things to condemn. I do both. I evaluate and assess them. I critique them. That's how it is, and that is being critical.

Because of the standards I have for the performance of ministers and counselors, I criticize myself and others when I observe our functioning. I don't think I

have ever heard a sermon preached that, in my view, had no weakness. Churches aren't run in every particular the way I think they ought to be. The message of God's Unconditional Love is not proclaimed with the clarity, consistency and enthusiasm that I want it to be. Pastoral Care isn't provided as completely and as effectively as the need seems to me to require. The counseling I know about isn't as skillful as I think it ought to be. I am my own most severe critic, and I know that others find fault with me when I do differently than they. I tend to notice and to voice the need for improvement.

How I respond in any other facet of my life would serve equally well to make my point. It is normal to criticize, and to be criticized. It is an inevitable part of life.

Is it also normal to be upset by criticism? I don't know, but sometimes it appears to be.

There seems to be an incongruity here. I claim my right to be critical. It is normal to be. I believe that I am justified. I see little reason for persons to be hurt or upset. After all, the criticism is appropriate. And, at the same time, I deny to you your right to be critical of me. If you are, I am hurt and upset. It triggers my anxiety and uncertainty. It brings my acceptableness into question. Whether I recognize it or not, I'm taking the position that you aren't supposed to see any fault in me. And if you do, you shouldn't voice it.

Such a position isn't very logical, is it?

And of course you are critical of me, for I don't function in every particular as you expect of me, nor as you wish I would. It is a given. In some way, you express what you see, and feel, and believe. If we are in any kind of relationship, it wouldn't be reasonable for you not to.

All too often, when I learn of your criticism – even when I suspect it – I react as if you have wronged me grievously. I feel hurt. I become angry. I turn against you. I ruminate over the criticism. I slide into depression. I give priority to my reactions at the expense of other aspects of my life. I think unpleasant, hateful thoughts about both you and me. I try to retaliate and to vindicate myself. I consider ways and means to make you pay for your unjust attack on me. Or I crawl into my shell. All in all, it is a pretty miserable experience.

You criticized me, and I don't take criticism very well.

Why not?

Because I have been trained to the notion that no unkind word is to be spoken of me. Because, when you are critical of me, I believe that you don't like me. Because even the slightest hint of criticism triggers my uncertainty about myself and my abilities – an uncertainty I can't let anyone know about. Because I am so anxious to have approval and affirmation that I am devastated when I hear the opposite. Because I don't believe in

myself enough to accord you the freedom to react negatively to me as well as positively. Because I lack self-esteem. Because I really feel terribly insecure.

And most of all, because I "take your criticism personally". You are talking about me. You are pointing the finger at me and my weaknesses and errors. You are exposing me and contributing to my fear that my inadequacies will show to everybody. And worst of all, you are confirming my doubts about myself. You break through my shell and touch my most secret fears.

Of course, I don't take criticism well – not as long as I personalize it and deny to you your right to react to me however you do.

Personalizing may be my typical way of reacting to any criticism. We don't have to have a relationship. I don't even have to know who you are. If, from any source, I receive information that I can construe as critical of me, that may be all it takes for me to go into all the negative reactions typical of me when I feel criticized.

Choosing to feel hurt and angry is destructive in just about any way I can think of. It is destructive to my sense of well being – to the relationship between us – to its potential – and to you. If you know about my hurt, you must either try to placate me, or assert your criticism more forcefully. You must defend yourself and your opinions, or simply ignore the whole thing and hope it will go away, thereby risking a broken relationship.

Any attempt at resolution is, at best, unsatisfactory, and, at worst, an addition to the trauma. There is no real resolution – not after I react with such upset to your criticism. I'm not open to understanding you, nor benefitting from your criticism. I am preoccupied by my own feelings.

But I don't have to react in such a negative way.

What is the alternative? How else can I handle criticism?

I can, instead, get and keep a clear perspective on what is really going on. This, of course, has to do with how I choose to see the criticism and the criticizer; what I choose the meaning to be; and what I choose for my attitude and reaction to be. I am free to make those choices even as I am free to choose to be hurt and angry.

Instead of "taking it personally", I can realize and accept that your criticism is more a disclosure of you than a message about me. I can allow myself to see that you have entrusted something of yourself to me. You have told me something about how you see things, what you believe, what is important to you, what your standards and expectations are, and how you react to me. You have disclosed at least a bit of how you cope, what your attitudes are, what your outlook on life is. You have let me see something of your upset, or uneasiness, or unhappiness. You have, in fact, reacted with authenticity to me and to the situation as you experience it.

Whether you realize it or not, you have given me a gift of yourself. I can accept and treasure it, or refuse and trample it.

I can know that you are upset and unhappy with me. Somehow, from your point of view, I have wronged you, misunderstood you, acted by different standards and values than yours, disappointed you, done something unexpected, failed to do something expected. And you have risked letting me know your reactions.

Maybe you didn't let me know. Maybe you told someone else because you didn't want to risk a direct encounter with me. Or maybe you just shared an opinion with someone else. In any case, you have disclosed something of you to me.

I can see the criticism as an invitation to a deeper, richer relationship, or make it the cause of a broken one. I can take the opportunity to grow in understanding, or add to the barriers of misunderstanding. I can appreciate you all the more, or reject you for your negative reaction to me. I can be attentive to what may really be going on with you, or refuse to consider that there may be any validity in your criticism. I can grow myself and enable the relationship to grow, or I can weaken or destroy it.

My attitude and my reactions make the difference.

For instance, you may say to me, "Burney, you think you are a good counselor, but you don't ever tell anybody what to do. If you're so good, why don't you give us the answers?" And I can react in all the negative ways that I have said, including, "The trouble with you is that you don't know what a good counselor is. If you did, you wouldn't say that to me."

Or I can realize that you have given me a gift of yourself, and I can encourage you to tell me more of what is going on with you. I can take you into account. I can know that you have told me something of importance to you. I can be with you in the relationship and make it even richer.

I can also turn the criticism to good advantage for me. I can make it a constructive and beneficial experience, and not a destructive one.

How? How do I cope constructively with criticism?

I do not try to avoid or deny it, nor try to stop it. I do try to be understanding and accepting, and decide whether or not – and how – to act on it. I raise questions about it to help me keep my perspective, such as:

1. What is the criticizer telling me – entrusting to me – that is possibly about me?
2. Upon examination, do I see the criticism as, in some sense, valid about me?

3. If it is, why am I upset by it? (There is always a reason). What do I want to do about it? Do I want to make any changes?
4. If it is not valid, why am I upset by it? (There is always a reason). What do I want to do about it?
5. Do I require of people in relation to me that they not be critical of me as the price of our relating?
6. Do I make sure I do not criticize the other person?

Both questions 5 and 6 are answered with a firm "No." It is utterly unrealistic to pretend to answer either one with "Yes." We human beings just do not function that way.

You ask me, "But suppose the criticism is unjust or unfair, with no foundation in fact?"

If I take the criticism personally, I will be upset and in conflict about it. I will feel all the more outraged, and, very likely, will, in turn, be sharply critical of my criticizer – with inevitable conflict.

If I take the criticism as something the criticizer has entrusted to me of him/herself, I will be attentive to that person and his/her disclosure. I will put my perception in a more accurate perspective. I will understand that person more completely. I will be in a position to deal constructively with him/her and his/her concerns. I will end up with more positive feelings toward myself and him/her – not angry and depressed. And I may well be able to say and do things to strengthen the relationship rather than destroy it.

The following may serve to illustrate the whole concept.

My wife and I were having lunch after church on Sunday.

"What did you think of my sermon?" I asked.

She was silent for a few moments, and then said, "Mostly I liked it, but..."

"Here comes the criticism." I thought, "She always has a 'but....'", and I could feel my guard going up.

"The part about God's unconditional love applying to the father who had beaten and tortured his child to death wasn't very clear, and I don't know if I agree with what you said."

I reacted immediately and defensively, "What do you mean it wasn't clear? I worked extra hard on that part to make sure it was."

She didn't say anything. Just got up and began to clear the table. More eloquent than words, her face, body, and movements told me she was unhappy with me – with good reason, which, of course, I couldn't admit.

I told myself that I was unhappy with her, but, in reality, I was unhappy with me. I had asked her opinion, and, when she gave it, had reacted with defensiveness and anger as if she had attacked me and put me down about my sermon. Lunch was over and we were at odds with each other. I wanted to blame her, but I knew it was my fault.

Let's replay that conversation.

"What did you think of my sermon?" I asked.

She was silent for a few moments, and then said, "Mostly I liked it, but ..."

I was aware that I felt a little wary because I had some doubts about the sermon myself. But I didn't want that to get in the way of my listening to her. "She takes me seriously," I thought, "I can count on her to give me her candid reactions, even if they may seem to be negative."

"The part about God's unconditional love applying to the father who had beaten and tortured his child to death wasn't very clear, and I don't know if I agree with what you said."

The truth was that I had felt pretty insecure about that illustration myself, but I wanted to give more attention to what she had said before I began to look at my feelings about the sermon.

So I said, "I felt a little muddy about that part of the sermon, too, but tell me more about your reactions."

The discussion that followed was satisfying to us both. She told me about the difficulty she sometimes had applying the concepts of unconditional love. I understood her better, and saw some ways that I could be clearer in illustrating the meaning as I saw it to be. Instead of tensions between us, there was closeness and caring. And I certainly didn't feel under attack.

"It's a beautiful theory, you say to me, "but it just won't work. When somebody criticizes me, it really gets to me."

"Is that how you want it to be?"

"Well, no, but..."

"If you don't want it that way, how do you want it to be?"

“I don't know, but I can't see me reacting in the way you describe.”

"That is a problem, isn't it?" I pause. "Are you ever critical?"

“I've been known to be.”

"Do you want, or expect, people to react as you do when you are criticized?"

"Of course not. I want them to react as you suggest.”

The discussion ended at that point.