



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Anatomy of Intimacy

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“...and they become one flesh.  
And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.”  
Genesis 2: 24 -25

The passage from Genesis suggests that intimacy has to do with husband and wife, things sexual, and a merging that results in the loss of separate identity. I believe intimacy is not confined to the relationship between husband and wife. Nor is it solely sexual. Nor does it entail a loss of separate identity. Much more is involved. Indeed, sexual involvement may not be intimate at all, and relinquishing one's identity to another is to lose the very essence of intimacy.

So what is the anatomy of intimacy?

Words like open, vulnerable, unafraid, unashamed, self-accepting, accepting, trusting, entrusting describe how it is when persons are intimate. Or you might say that ultimate intimacy is achieved when we feel safe, at ease, and comfortable with each other. There is no tension between us, or, at least, we know how to cope with tension before it becomes a problem. There are no barriers. We have no protection and need no protection from each other. We are naked, not ashamed, and not afraid. Intimacy isn't something we do. It is the nature and quality of a relationship. What we do discloses the level and degree of our intimacy. What we don't do also discloses it.

Can two people actually be unprotected and unafraid with each other? Is such a relationship actually possible? It may not be. But to have such a relationship certainly can be a goal toward which to be moving all the time.

In the realities of human involvements, just what does such a relationship look like? What, precisely, is the anatomy of intimacy?

Intimacy is sexual, and it may not be sexual at all. It involves much more than the sexual. When the sexual is involved, what does it look like?

The Bible describes the sexual encounter – meaning intercourse – as "to know ". "Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived ..." (Gen. 4:1). Hence, we tend to interpret that sexual intercourse is the truest and deepest manifestation of intimacy. After all, if sexual intercourse is to really know each other, in that act we put ourselves in the most vulnerable position in which we can be – with no protection – no barriers – no fears. So the theory goes. That should be intimacy, shouldn't it?

Obviously, the answer is, "Not necessarily." People have intercourse without knowing each other at all. The sexual encounter can be painful, demanding, using, and thoroughly unsatisfactory – with all kinds of barriers and defenses. It can be casual and quick with little or no meaning except gratification. Men have been known to rape women after they have violated them in other ways. Women have sexually exploited

men. There is no intimacy in such encounters, nor in any sexual encounter the purpose of which is to take from the other person. It is not automatic that two people who are sexually involved feel safe, trusting, open, unashamed, unafraid, or comfortable with each other.

When, then, and under what circumstances is sexual encounter intimate?

When we are sexually involved, and the desire and commitment of each of us is to care for the other – to please each other – to satisfy and fulfill each other. We are intimate.

They were lovers. They pleased each other. They responded to each other's needs and desires. They enjoyed being together and doing together – it didn't make a lot of difference what. They could go their separate ways, knowing they were actually together. They appreciated and affirmed what each did. Sometimes they differed, and even became impatient and upset with each other. But always they cared. Always they talked things out. Always they listened to each other. Always they took each other into account. They were always loving. Therefore, when they expressed their love sexually, they were truly intimate, needing no protection and having no fear. They truly knew each other.

So the anatomy of sexual intimacy is not in the intensity of passion, nor in the excellence of technique. It is in the degree of valuing, giving to, caring for, and entrusting. It is in the ease, comfort, and safety two people feel with each other.

What, then, is the anatomy of intimacy when it is other than sexual?

Or more accurately, when is any encounter intimate? What makes it safe, with no need for protection, shame, nor fear? What enables any person to move toward intimacy? What, precisely, is the anatomy of intimacy?

To the degree that I know what I believe, accept my own worth, and have as my priority to give rather than to receive, I move toward intimacy.

That statement doesn't answer the question very well, does it?

I want intimacy. My body, mind and spirit cry out for intimacy. But I have a problem. I am afraid. I believe I can't risk being vulnerable. I need to feel protected. If I tell you my secrets – especially those that I think are dark and bad, I fear you won't accept me nor approve of me. By my own standards, as well as what I think yours are, I've done and said things that I consider to be wrong and of which I am ashamed. If I let you know what they are, you may reject me. I'd rather stay away from you than to risk rejection or disapproval. I have a poor enough self-image. I don't need to be put down any more. I need to feel safe. So I don't take a chance by exposing myself to you.

Nonetheless, I want to be and need to be in some kind of sharing relationship, so, with fear and trembling, I sort of entrust myself to you and you respond in some way. We become friends – maybe close friends. Or we agree on some kind of partnership. Or we decide to live together. Or we marry. Whatever the arrangement, we have ties with each other. We have a commitment. We look to each other for support, sharing, and caring. At some level, we depend upon each other. And we carefully maintain the barriers we believe are necessary to protect ourselves, and to feel safe.

Are we intimate? Maybe we are and maybe we aren't. We may be exclusive – dependent – intensely involved – and not intimate at all. I may reach the point that I require you to meet my needs, claiming that you owe it to me because of our commitment to each other. If you don't respond as I want, I may get very upset – say harsh and unloving things – withdraw – make threats and demands – generally create havoc – and then be shocked when you say you are going to leave. Under those circumstances, we aren't intimate at all. We distance from each other. We demand expressions of intimacy and then reject them and say they aren't real. We blame each other. We become increasingly defensive. We conflict. We feel hurt. We know we long for intimacy, and are sure we can have it "if only you would do your part".

For instance, this is a typical situation. They have been married – or lived together – for X number of years. They said it was because they loved each other, and it had been so good at first. Things haven't gone well between them. More and more, they have distanced from each other. Now they are at the point of separation, but neither wants that to happen. They have invested too much to lose it. Each feels helpless to change the situation. Each is convinced that the other is the problem. For each, the solution is clear. The other should change. As long as those are the circumstances, the intimacy for which each longs is impossible.

What changes in outlook and understanding are needed for them to move toward intimacy?

Obviously, if I am in that situation, I need to recognize and accept my own responsibility for building intimacy between us. I search for ways to do it. I touch you, pour out my deepest secrets to you, disclose the good and the bad of my being – and ask you to do the same, begging your forgiveness. Only it doesn't work – not if I do these things to have intimacy between us. If I do them because I believe I can safely entrust them, and myself, to you, a level of intimacy already exists, and we can build on it.

If such a level of intimacy doesn't exist, how do I get to it? How can I trust? How can I reach the point where I am willing to entrust myself to another person?

Not alone by finding that the other person is trustworthy.

I am not likely to entrust myself to you if my experience of you tells me that you aren't trustworthy. If my experience tells me you are, that, by itself, won't enable me to be vulnerable to you. The degree of my maturity – my security within myself – my

knowing and accepting myself – my growth is the real measure of my ability to be in an intimate relationship with you. Ideally, I need to have such a sense of my own worth and value that I don't depend on you for approval, acceptance, comfort, or safety.

If ours is an intimate relationship, what do I give to it or receive from it?

Of course, I give myself in keeping with the degree of our intimacy. And I relinquish the priority of getting something back. Certainly, I want something back. I want to receive as well as to give. It is necessary if we are to stay in relationship. But receiving is not the priority. Giving is.

I have needs and desires. How do I go about getting what I want? The answer is deceptively simple. I let you know up front what I need – want – desire – but without any demand. I accept your decision not to accede, if that is what you decide. I let you know that I appreciate any of your decisions and actions in response to what I have told you. However you respond, I routinely recommit myself to the priority task of being in touch with your disclosures of what you need – want – desire, and of taking you into account as I decide upon my responses.

Intimacy is achieved, not in receiving from the other, but in giving to the other – including giving acceptance to the other where he/she is. It is true that neither of us will stay in the relationship very long if we do not both receive from it. And the relationship will not last if either of us makes receiving the priority – not with any degree of satisfaction.

Over and over we are told that people must be completely open and honest with each other if they are to be intimate. I think the popular statement is, "Let it all hang out." One day a couple came to my office. They came, of course, because they were having some difficulties in their relationship. Early in the interview, they assured me they were basically happy with their relationship, and, they said, "We have no secrets from each other." This turned out not to be the case. There were secrets. They didn't know each other totally and completely. They had barriers and defenses. But they thought they couldn't be intimate if they didn't bare every detail of their history, their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings – including all the negative ones. In fact, a lot of their problems centered in their trying to live up to that belief, and ending up confused and hurt, and not knowing what to do about it.

For whatever reasons, I keep my secrets and maintain my parameters – both consciously and unconsciously. And so do you. I don't have to know every detail of you for us to experience intimacy. I do need to trust myself and you, and to entrust myself to you. I need to believe that I am safe with you, "warts and all" as they say.

For some, the measure of intimacy is in the emotions. Maybe this is on target. When there is warmth between us, it feels like intimacy. When we get along really well and are very close, it feels like intimacy. When we respond positively to each other's needs, it feels like intimacy. When things happen between us that are mutually

satisfying, we are sure it is intimacy. We like what is happening between us. We want to hold on to it because it feels so good. If we have deluded ourselves into these kinds of feelings by "letting it all hang out", we are in for deep disappointment. The feeling of intimacy will soon give way to anxiety, suspicion, and uncertainty accompanied by withdrawal and defensiveness.

However, openness and honesty are essential between two people if they are to experience any real intimacy. They are in a relationship. That relationship has certain parameters based on who each is and what the circumstances are. The first openness is to be clear with themselves and each other about those parameters so that they are mutually understood and accepted.

Then it is necessary to be open and honest about what is going on between the two. They need to tell each other about thoughts, beliefs, feelings, perceptions, interpretations, reactions, and all that is involved in their relating to each other. They need to be clear and consistent with each other so that they can know and trust each other within the parameters they have established. Under those circumstances, they can believe each other, have confidence in each other, depend upon each other, entrust themselves to each other, feel at ease and safe and comfortable with each other. In other words, they can experience true intimacy.

Learning to achieve – experience – true intimacy moves one toward wholeness. Body, mind, and spirit are fed and grow. One moves toward his/her own separate identity. As separate, independent entities, we join and share. We move toward oneness. Becoming one doesn't mean loss of separate identity, but enhancement of the distinctiveness of each.

The alternative to an intimate relationship is a using one. The hallmarks of a using relationship are requirements, demands, manipulations, defensiveness, suspicions, anger, accusations, hurt feelings, recriminations, and much more in like vain. For reasons that I do not understand, people seek, build, and stay in such relationships.

Maybe I do understand. Maybe, by staying in a using relationship, they preserve their negative self-image and their victim role. Since feelings of security – or safety – are so essential, and since those feelings are possible only in a known and familiar situation, they cling to the negative self-image and the victim role with grim determination – that being what they know. But they have to forgo any real intimacy.

The anatomy of intimacy. To be intimate is to feel easy, comfortable, and safe with each other. It is to know, accept, and stay within the parameters of that particular relationship. It is to be open and honest with each other about all the dimensions of that relationship, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and reactions. It is to truly care for self and each other, and to be committed to giving to each other as the first priority.

There are different levels of relationship – from marriage and family to casual encounter. At every level, intimacy as caring and sharing – as trusting and entrusting – is

possible, indeed desirable. However, the manifestation of intimacy will be – and always needs to be – in keeping with the level of the relationship.

God created human beings in the image of God to be in intimate relationship with God and with each other. At the highest level of human involvement, to feel so at ease, comfortable and safe with each other that they are as one, though separate. They trust themselves and each other so completely that they need no protection from each other, and are not afraid nor ashamed.

This is the anatomy of intimacy at the highest levels of human involvement. At all levels, incorporating the anatomy of intimacy can be our goal. To the degree that we succeed, we experience intimacy.