



Writings of W. Burney Overton

Burney's Papers

1988 Series, Volume 7

Good? Bad? Who Knows?

January 16, 1989

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Anthony de Mello, is a recently deceased Jesuit Priest. He was an outstanding spiritual guide, and he wrote a number of books. My contact with him is through his books, which have influenced me in my own spiritual journey. One of them is *SADHANA, A WAY TO GOD*. At the very end of the book, he tells a story – a frequently used favorite of his. I paraphrase it here.

An old Chinese story tells of an old farmer who had an old horse. One day the horse broke out of his yard and ran into the hills. The neighbors sympathized with the old man over his bad luck. He responded to them, "Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?"

A week later, the horse showed up with a herd of wild horses following him. The neighbors congratulated the old man on his good luck, and he replied, "Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?"

When attempting to tame one of the wild horses, the old farmer's son fell and broke his leg. The neighbors thought this was very bad luck. The old man merely said, "Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?"

Shortly thereafter, the army came through the village conscripting all the able-bodied men. Since the farmer's son had a broken leg, they did not take him. And again, the old man was heard to say, "Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?"

I quote from *SADHANA*, p. 140, "Everything that seems on the surface to be an evil may be a good in disguise. And everything that seems good on the surface may really be evil. So we are wise when we leave it to God to decide what is good luck and what bad, and thank him that all things turn out for good with those who love him."

It is comforting to know – believe that all things turn out for good with those who love God. I do not want that belief to lull me, or cause me to live life with resignation. I believe that, in the last analysis, I cannot know whether anything that happens in my life can ever be seen as solely good or bad. I don't even know if it will turn out for good. I want to recognize both good and bad to the best of my ability, and try to maximize the good and minimize the bad. I also want to leave it to God to make the final judgments about how all things turn out in life.

In various forms, this favorite story of de Mello has been around a long time. Now I want to retell it in terms of things that have happened in my own life.

I started my life in the middle of the First World War. I had a brother two years older. It was a difficult time for everyone. All normal opportunities were set aside for the war effort, and the possibility of being drafted into the military faced every able-bodied young man. Because Dad had two young children, he was deferred from military service.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

The need for personnel in the armed forces became more acute. Despite that he was a family man, Dad was called up. About a month before he was to report for duty, the armistice was signed. The war was over. Dad did not have to go into the armed services.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

Things went well for my family for several years. Dad survived a severe case of typhoid fever, but suffered a great deal from malaria fever. The climate of central Alabama was against him. There seemed no choice but to uproot from the family home and move to some place with a more suitable climate. So we moved to the mountains of east Tennessee. Life was not easy, but, in that climate, Dad regained his health.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

We did have a house, but income was low. And then came the Great Depression, and income was even lower. I remember ragged clothes, and not many of them. I remember shoes resoled with automobile tire treads. I remember how exciting it was to have a nickel to spend for candy, or to be given an ice cream cone on a hot summers day. By then, I had two sisters. Despite the hard times, family life was good. Poverty was our common enemy, and we were bonded together by love.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

I learned the value of money and of time. I learned to treasure possessions and to take care of them. I learned to adjust and to make do with what I had. I learned not to be bitter, and to thank God for such blessings as I had.

I was a good student and active in school and church. Despite hard times, I hoped to be able to go to college. Then even finishing high school was in doubt. In the early Fall of my senior year, I was abruptly stricken with appendicitis. The appendix ruptured. Emergency surgery was performed. There were no "wonder drugs" to fight the poison spilled into my abdomen. I was out of school for three months. I did not know if I could make up the work I had missed and be able to graduate with my class.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

My teachers were very kind and helpful. They made exceptions for me and encouraged me in every way that they could. I made up the work that I had missed and graduated from high school on time and with honors. I was a prime candidate for college. But the Depression was at its worst, and there were no resources to pay for college. The time to go off to college came and went, and I stayed at home. There wasn't much work to be had, but I managed to find things to do that brought in some money, although not enough to save any toward college expenses.

I was bitterly disappointed. The first year out of high school was the most miserable of my life, but not solely because I was unable to go to college. The misery was mostly over fighting with God over what I was to do with my life.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

I did fight with God. My experience of church, in which I was very involved, and my observation of the difficulties my minister encountered as he tried to serve and minister faithfully to us, convinced me that the last profession on earth that I wanted was that of minister. I promised God to be a faithful servant of Christ in any other profession, but I did not want to be a minister.

I really wanted to be a doctor. I pointed out to God that Christian doctors were badly needed. If I couldn't be a doctor, I would settle for something else. But not for ministry. I was in spiritual and emotional tumult and torment.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

It was only when I accepted the call to ministry that I got any peace of mind or spirit. I had no idea how I would ever be able to find the resources to pay for college and seminary, and so to receive training to be a minister.

Shortly after I made my decision to be a minister, I received a letter from the President of Tusculum College in Greeneville, Tennessee asking me to come to Tusculum that summer and work in construction and maintenance on the campus. I would get room and board and be paid 25 cents an hour for my work. What I earned would go toward my collage expenses at Tusculum. At that time, 25 cents an hour was rather generous pay, but what I could earn in a summer would nowhere near pay the cost of college.

Nevertheless, I accepted his offer, not knowing where any other money would come from.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

The time came for school to start. I had the income from the summer's work, and a work scholarship during the school year. I was still \$300.00 short of the money I needed for that first year. No money was in sight for the other years.

I went to the president of the bank in my home town and told him my situation. He said to me, "I will loan you the money on a three-months note, renewable indefinitely, if you can get your father and two other men to sign the note." We struck the deal. I got the necessary signatures. Every three months, until a year after I graduated from seminary, those men signed my note and it was renewed. I did not have to borrow any other money to finish college and seminary.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

Lee came to college as a freshman my second year. He grew up in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. and was an only child. His mother had died about a year before. We quickly became very close friends. In the spring, he became seriously ill and died.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

Lee's father took an interest in me and asked me to live with him when I was not in school. He made up the difference between what I could earn and my college and seminary expenses. While I was with him, my awareness of the world in which I lived expanded tremendously. In many ways, what I learned was as valuable as all my academic training in equipping me for ministry.

At the beginning of my senior year in seminary, Lee's father died.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

The first church I served was in Blasdell, N.Y. during the Second World War. I was about the only able-bodied young man in the community. All the rest were off to war. It was a difficult time. What did I have to offer to parents and families at home, worrying about their sons in war? Regularly the messages came of those wounded, and those who would not ever return. Because I was married and had a child, the military did not want me to serve as a chaplain.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

The pastorates in Franklinville, N. Y. and Rochester, N. Y. were marked by many experiences which, at the time, I saw as either good or bad. Subsequent events often shaded or changed that view. The net effect for me was that, year by year, I saw myself becoming better equipped and more able to fulfill my ministerial duties and opportunities.

And then I accepted a call to the New Prospect Presbyterian Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. From all the information available at that time, it looked like a wonderful opportunity to be about the Lord's work. The location had been rural and had become a developing suburban community.

As it turned out, the transition from rural to suburban was not successfully made. Nor were the social and racial problems satisfactorily resolved. It was a pastorate fraught with difficulties, and it was, in many ways, a failure.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

For all the difficulties – and maybe because of them – I learned a great deal about dealing with people and their problems, both individually and in groups. I became an

effective counselor, teacher, and group leader. Having developed those skills, I was qualified to join the staff of the Pastoral Counseling Institute in Athens, Georgia, where I was to provide a counseling service and to work with groups. Dr. William E. Crane, for many years my friend and mentor, was the founder and director.

The years in Athens were wonderful years. I met and shared with many fine people and became more proficient in my work as each year went by. It was there that I developed the principles and processes of Relational Communication that continue to be the basis of all my work. The Institute was routinely in financial difficulty, so, in addition to the counseling and group work, I undertook to resolve those difficulties. There were some staff tensions that made the task more difficult.

Finally, in November, 1972, my body rebelled against the stresses of my life, and I suffered a heart block that, abruptly and for a time, stopped my work.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

I learned a lot about dealing with stress and resolved never to allow myself to get into such a stressful condition again.

During my illness, and afterward, some distressing and upsetting things occurred at PCI, by then known as the Center for Creative Living and Spiritual Growth. As I saw it, it was necessary for me to resign from the staff. The Center did not survive but about six months after I left.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

Ben Johnson, who was the director of the Lay Renewal Institute in Atlanta, Georgia offered me the opportunity to come to the Institute and there to continue my work in counseling and group facilitating. Miriam and I moved to Atlanta, although we had thought Athens would be our last move.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

For five years, Ben and I were closely associated. They were very good years. Then there were some reversals at the Lay Renewal Institute. Moves were made to correct the difficulties, including a change of location in Atlanta. Since the new location was not suitable for a counseling service, it seemed wise to try to find another base from which to continue my program.

Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta offered me that opportunity.

As it turned out, the Church was interested in a different kind of program in counseling and group work than I had developed, so, after five years there, I decided to seek another base from which to continue my program.

I found it at Shallowford Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. Tom Are, senior pastor, and I had been friends for a number of years. I "retired" to Shallowford Church, and, for almost seven years, have been enjoying the best kind of retirement one could desire – that of being able to continue to do what I most enjoy and desire to be doing.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

Time does not permit me to tell of all the experiences of my life and ministry where those questions apply.

I look at my life, and see how that it might have been better had I made other decisions, or had other things happened. I face the reality that I have no way to know if any decision, or any event, would have been better or worse. I make the decisions I make. Things happen the way they happen. I do with them what I do with them.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

I can't know and, in reality, I don't need to know.

Adverse events occur. Bad breaks come. Illness strikes. Death takes a loved one. Tragedies – or seeming tragedies – beset us.

Good breaks come. Healing occurs. Death is thwarted. Tragedies are overcome. Rewards are received. Success accompanies effort.

Good? Bad? Who knows?

What I do with what occurs really makes the difference. What I learn from the experience is one measure. I look for the good in anything that happens. I try to guard against the bad that may be involved. I look for ways to capitalize on what I can perceive as good. I look for ways to adjust and to turn what I perceive as bad toward the good.

I believe the highest good comes from the manifestation of the unconditional love God has for each of us, and that we can have for each other. I believe that good can come from all the experiences of life. I believe, also, that bad can come from all the experiences of life. I believe that if, with the very best understanding I can have, I choose to live loving unconditionally, I am doing what I can to create and live in an environment where good can prevail. Can I do more? Is not that God's will for each of us?

Good? Bad? Who knows?

I leave it to, God to make the final judgments about how all things turn out in life. I believe that, ultimately, it will be for good. This, too, is God's will.