



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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What If I Forget?

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"Jenny's Song" was the FOR KID'S SAKE program on Atlanta television station WXIA, channel 11, Sunday evening, August 20. It was the story of Jenny, age 13, whose father died suddenly of a heart attack. They were very close, and his death was a grievous, almost unsurmountable, blow to Jenny, as well as to the rest of the family.

The story focused on Jenny's struggle to cope with her father's death. She was grief-stricken, of course, and seemed unable to pick up the normal strands of her life. She was distant and uncommunicative. Her school work suffered. Her relationship with her friends, her brother, and her mother deteriorated. She was grimly and angrily determined to live her life as if her father were still alive. She wouldn't let him be dead. She was set on accomplishing all the things that she and he were going to accomplish together. While a lot of people were concerned about her, none were able to reach her.

It seemed as if Jenny's life were going to come apart. One of the most poignant bits of dialogue in the program is an emotional scene with her mother, who was at her wits end in her efforts to help Jenny. Weeping bitterly, Jenny finally screamed, "I'm afraid I'll forget him."

Jenny's fear may well be a universal fear. It may stop us in our tracks, as it did her, as we try to cope with our own grievous losses.

Stimulated by the TV program, I decided to write this paper for three reasons.

1. Within the past year, I have, on three occasions, been with dear and close friends at the time of the tragic loss of a beloved member of the family. On two other occasions, I have been with counselees in similar circumstances. I suffered – still suffer – with them in their grief.

2. Although I have done a lot of work with grief, I have not previously tried to write about it. With all that has already been written by others, perhaps it is presumptuous of me to think that I might have something helpful to say. Even so, I have decided to try.

3. I believe there is one aspect of grief to which more attention needs to be given, namely the fear of forgetting, which may be both conscious and unconscious. As it did with Jenny, that fear can cause all kinds of problems.

Among the books already written to help people understand and cope with grief, the ones that I know best are *GOOD GRIEF* by Granger Westburg, *NECESSARY LOSSES* by Judith Virst, and *ALL OUR LOSSES, ALL OUR GRIEF* by Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson. If reading helps when one is grieving, these, in my

experience, are among the most helpful to read. There are many others.

In addition, in most communities, formal and informal support groups offer a great deal of help, as do friends and loved one who have suffered similar losses.

The steps through which people go when they grieve are well known, and expressed in a variety of ways. Because I have difficulty remembering complex and detailed steps, I think and talk and write in terms of only three. They give me a skeleton – an outline – that enables me to understand somewhat more clearly what is going on with me, and with all who grieve.

The three steps are:

1. Disbelief. Inability to accept that the loss has occurred. I know it has and I don't believe it. In this step, I both act as if the loss has not occurred, and, at the same time, take care of whatever needs to be done. I grieve. I weep. I feel empty. I can hardly think of anything else than my loss. It's true. No, it isn't. Yes, it is. I feel confused, lost, devastated. I think that I will wake up in the morning, and find it isn't true. Only it is.

2. I experience a tumult of conflicting emotions. I have to face my loss. I don't want to. I can't. I feel utterly helpless. I want to know everything. I don't want to know anything. I dwell on the "If onlys...". I want to sleep all the time. I can't. I'm afraid to. I look for someone or something to blame. I get intensely angry – at myself, at someone else, at God, at the one whom I have lost, at something or somebody. I get deeply depressed. If I can't take it out on anyone or anything else, I take it out on myself. I know I must get on with my life. I don't want to. I tell myself I can't. Will the tumult never end? Will life ever be normal again? I don't want it to be normal again. That might mean that I had forgotten, and I don't want to forget.

3. Finally – perhaps gradually – I do pick up the pieces. Life begins to return to normal. I discover again that losses, grievous losses, do occur, and that life does go on. The shock and horror blur. I do not want to forget, and realize that I do not – especially not the positive things. I find much comfort in them. And I find that I do want to get on with my life.

I don't grieve in this one, two, three way and then the grieving is over. I have all the experiences of all the steps over and over, and not necessarily in order. But time does prove to be a healer, and I am less and less preoccupied with my loss. Does that mean that I have forgotten? It doesn't have to. How can I make sure that I have not?

Jenny tried to make sure she would not forget by attempting to do all the things she and her father would have done together had he been alive. If she immersed herself in all they would have done together, she would be remembering him – or so she wanted to believe. She could tell herself that he wasn't really dead.

Some people try to accomplish the same thing by trying to suspend life. If they don't let anything normal or typical take place, they can hold their memories, and deny their loss in their inmost being. Others grimly pursue the usual patterns of their life and refuse even to talk about their loss.

This need to deny is the aspect of grief that causes the most trouble. It is the most pervasive part of the whole experience of grieving. Even though I know my loss has really occurred, and even though I deny that I deny, I may still deny.

Why would I deny what I know is true? To try to make it not so.

It is important to realize that denial under these circumstances is the understandable and normal. I don't want to accept my loss. I don't want to believe it nor acknowledge it. If I deny it, maybe I can make it not so. Or maybe I can postpone accepting that it is true. To go about my life in my usual and normal ways is to acknowledge that it is true. It can also be an effort to deny that it is true. The facts, in my mind, tell me that my loss has really occurred, but my feelings won't go along with what I know to be true.

How does denial cause trouble? If it relieves my pain, why isn't it O. K.?

If denial really relieves pain, I'm sure it is O. K. However, if it doesn't – and, in the long run, it doesn't – then it causes trouble for me and those important to me. How?

When I deny my loss and the feelings that go with it, I tend to take it out on my other life situations and relationships. The terrible feelings inside me cause me to be extremely judgmental, to get angry with others with little or no provocation, to distance from them, to deny them as well as to deny my loss. With little thought and with vehemence, I may declare, "That won't work.", or, "You have made a very bad decision.", or "What's the matter with you?", or, "Leave me alone." I am difficult to be around. I am morose and uncommunicative – or biting and critical. I'm not very good company, and I blame everything and everybody for how I am acting.

When I deny my loss, I find myself living with my loss all the time. My thoughts, my feelings, my dreams – my waking time and my sleeping – my busy times and my resting – all are focused on my loss. My denying only results in more remembering –

more pain. And the pain is so great that I don't let anyone comfort me, nor can I be of comfort to anyone else. All my relationships suffer.

But I don't want to forget. The purpose of denying is to keep from forgetting. How can I keep from forgetting? If I don't deny, have I denied the reality of the one I have lost? Does acceptance mean that I have dismissed or discounted my loved one? Does it mean he/she will soon be forgotten?

Acceptance does not mean that I have dismissed or discounted my loved one – nor that he/she will soon be forgotten. On the contrary. Much as I do not want to admit nor acknowledge it, my loss has occurred. It is reality. So how do I keep my memories if I do not deny my loss?

I memorialize my loved one by the way in which I live my life.

What is the cost to me of releasing you and allowing you to be dead? Indeed, what is the cost to me of releasing myself from my denial-grief?

The chief cost to me of releasing us – if it actually is cost – is that I have to acknowledge that the relationship no longer exists as it was. I have to adjust. I have to change. But the relationship continues to exist – only in a new form.

However it came about, in this life our paths merged for a while. While we were on the same path, we shared in many ways. You were precious to me. I liked having you on the path with me. I liked it so much that I wanted it to stay that way for the rest of my life. It didn't. Abruptly, it didn't. And we no longer walked the same path. Sooner or later – one way or another – this happens to us all. It is the way of life, and when I am the one who is left, I grieve. Maybe I deny. I resist giving up how it was. I fear I will forget.

If I do deny and resist and refuse to release, the real cost is that I deprive both of us of what we had, and of what we can have, now that our paths have diverged.

Do I deny, or do I release? How can I let you be dead, and still keep you alive? How can I keep the memory?

Certainly not by stopping my own life, nor by acting as if you never existed.

So I decide to memorialize you – to remember you – by living the most productive life of which I am capable. With that decision, we both live. You, in my

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memory and through your contributions to my life. I, in what I do with my life. I make your life mean more by living mine to the fullest.

Though I did not choose, and do not want, the loss, and though I have suffered and will continue to suffer because of it, I will not choose death for me.

At first, Jenny chose denial, and then she chose life. She realized she couldn't keep Dad alive by doing what they would have done. She finally understood that those things weren't what she was best at, or really wanted to do. Her father and his influence would always be in her life. He had taught her many things. And she finally saw that she could remember him best by being herself, and by doing what she did best.

I understand, too. I choose life. Your life, and your death, are not in vain. You live in me, and in the lives of all those you touched while you walked this earth with us.

I will never forget you.