



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Change and Identity

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Change is a constant in our lives. And resistance to change is also a constant.

How can that be?

It is a simple reality. Things do not stay the same. A new day comes. We encounter new and different people. The weather is not what it was yesterday. All kinds of changes are taking place all the time, and we have to adjust to them in some way. To do so is to change.

It appears to be a simple reality that people constantly resist change. A new day can be threatening. So can meeting different people. Or having to deal with the weather. When changes occur, things aren't as they were. Adjustments have to be made. Often it is like going into the unknown. Going into the unknown is fearful business. Who wouldn't resist change?

But the known and familiar can become so uncomfortable, so unpleasant, so undesirable that change – any change – seems preferable, even if it means going into the unknown.

However, desperate people resist change when it involves their own changing.

Why?

The simple and short answer is that people tie their identity to things the way they are and the way they are accustomed to them being. Therefore, if changes occur, the person no longer knows who he/she is. This is especially true if the changes are in terms of belief, behaviour, or outlook on life.

I always see myself in terms of how I see my world. I always see myself in terms of what I believe. I always see myself in terms of what consistently happens to me. I always expect things to turn out for me as they always have. I always expect me to behave as I have typically behaved.

On the other hand, when things aren't going well, I usually hope they will go better next time. I tell myself I want them to. I often work myself over for my failure and shortcomings. I make promises to myself that I will change. If it is my pattern, I look for something or someone to blame so that I can excuse myself. I bewail my fate. I convince myself I can't do any better or any differently. One way or another, I make sure no fundamental changes take place.

I share with you a composite of an often repeated situation. If it sounds familiar, it is because the situation, with many variations, is a common one.

A counselee comes into my office. "My life is a mess," he says. "Something has to Change." So he tells me his story. It is obvious that he needs help and that he must

make some major changes for his life to be as he says he wants it to be. He is anxious, fearful, uncertain, and convinced that he is a failure. As he sees it, nothing ever goes right for him, no matter how hard he tries. And the final blow comes from his wife. "Shape up or ship out," she says.

I guess it was the fear of loosing her that finally brought him to see me.

Or maybe not. Maybe it was his resistance to the changes in him and his life that brought him to me. Maybe he most wanted to reestablish the status quo that he knew so well.

He told me a familiar story. It followed a pattern of opportunity, resolve, enthusiasm, energy, and success that lasted for a while. Then things would begin to go bad. There would be conflict and misunderstanding. People would turn against him. Through no fault of his own – or so he said – he would miss out on the opportunities that meant success.

Things would go from bad to worse. At home, his wife – even the children – would fuss at him. Things would get pretty tense and unhappy, and he would just clam up – or lose his temper and lash out at them all.

It was almost as if there were a script.

In our conversations, he expressed a lot of understanding and insight. He could see changes that he needed to make. So we re-wrote his script. He was excited about the proposed changes, and said with confidence, "I can do that."

Only he didn't change. His identity was tied to the patterns and beliefs by which he lived, although he didn't really acknowledge it. He was the person who lived out the familiar script. He always had been. He didn't know any other way. If he changed the patterns, he had to change who he saw himself to be. He had to change his interpretations. He had to change his attitudes. He had to give up the foundations and securities that he knew so well. He had to believe differently, about himself.

No wonder he didn't make any changes. Or the ones he tried to make were just cosmetic ones. And then he would complain to his wife. "Nothing I do pleases you. I try to figure out what you want, and I can't. Just tell me in plain words what you want me to do, and I'll do it."

As long as his sense of identity is tied to his beliefs, and outlook, he won't change his behaviour.

There are at least three levels of change.

There is constant change. The past is filled in history, and the future is always unknown. As each day passes, change takes place. And yet within the constant change,

there are degrees of certainty. The sun will rise in the morning and set in the evening. Tides ebb and flow. The seasons of the years always come. I assume that I will sleep tonight, rise in the morning, and go about the day's activities. There are established patterns. I am accustomed to them and I count on them. There is a sense of certainty in the changes. I believe I can count on them. My sense of who I am is usually not in question.

There are external changes. People are born, and die. We live in the same place for many years, and move. Job changes occur. The storms come, and earthquakes strike, and what was is no more. Unexpected good fortune also comes. Sometimes the external changes are small – just another day going by. Sometimes they are cataclysmic. Small or large, they require adjustment. Again, my sense of who I am is not so much involved.

There are internal changes. They have to do primarily with beliefs and outlook on life. Once I believed that "good" people always did "good" things. Once I believed that there was a certain way for Christians to act, or they weren't really Christians. Once I believed I had to obey all of God's rules or God would send me to Hell. I behaved according to those beliefs. My outlook on life was colored by those beliefs. I often felt anxious and fearful lest I was not measuring up. I was judgmental and rejecting when other people didn't live according to those beliefs. I experienced bitter disappointment and disillusionment when a man prominent in our church and community broke the law and had to serve a prison sentence. As long as I held those beliefs, I acted on them, and saw myself accordingly.

Numerous experiences brought those beliefs into question, and, gradually, through the years, they have changed. I have changed. My behavior has changed. My outlook on life has changed. My self-image has changed.

However, if my sense of who I am – my identity – had been tied to those beliefs, I would not have changed. Not without "kicking and screaming" about it, and maybe not even then.

Let me be more accurate. My sense of my identity was tied to those – and many other – beliefs. It wasn't enough just to change the beliefs. I had to separate my sense of who I am from the beliefs before I could ever make any lasting changes.

If I discover that something is not as I have believed it to be, it would seem logical to raise the question, "Then how is it? What is the truth? If not this, what is the correct belief?"

The more likely question is, "If it isn't as I believe it to be, who am I?" If I look to my belief system to define me, having to change what I believe means having to change who I see myself to be. No matter what my self-image is, I tend to resist changing it if I also have to change what I believe.

Not infrequently, a person comes into my office quite troubled, and I sense that

she/he is fearful and upset about what God is going to do in response to her/his sinful behavior. I ask, "Do you believe that God is going to punish you for sinful behavior?"

She/he responds amid tears and distress, "Yes, I do. God hates sinners, and I am a sinner. I know God is going to do something terrible to me."

Then I have to reply, "As long as that is what you believe and who you see yourself to be, I know of no way for you to get relief from your fears and upset."

Yet another presenting problem is, "I have low self-esteem. I am no good. I am a failure. I'm not worth caring about." The problem is stated in an enormous variety of ways that all add up to the same thing. "Because of what I have – or haven't – done; because of the ways people respond to me; because of my outlook on life; because of what I believe about myself; I am no good – unworthy."

If my sense of myself is tied to my behavior and outlook and belief, I won't change anything for fear of losing myself. If I have a poor self-image, and it is the only image of me I have, I'm not going to risk what it would mean to change it. Therefore, consciously or unconsciously, I'm going to try to keep everything just as I am familiar with it being so that I can retain the identity I have.

The ultimate answer is for me to be able to get my identity from something other than behavior and outlook on life.

Justifiably you may say, "That sounds well and good, but, if I don't get my identity from what I do and how I see things to be, then from what do I get it?"

Your question is the crucial question. Who I see myself to be and why is absolutely basic.

There are two views.

One – the common one, it seems – says, "When I perform correctly and well; when I achieve at the levels I should; when I am acclaimed and affirmed; when I am a success in the eyes of others; then I can believe that I am truly somebody, a worthy and worthwhile person.

In that view, self-esteem – a positive identity – is the product of the achieving and the becoming. Otherwise, I am no good, unworthy, not worthwhile.

Inevitably, then, if I have not measured up to what I believe I am supposed to, I cannot think well of myself. After I learn not to think well of myself, I tend to interpret and evaluate everything that I do in the light of that self-image. I even tend to make sure that everything that I do confirms the self-image.

Hence, I can't change what I do and how I do it because, then, I will have to see myself differently. If I see myself differently, I have to revise virtually everything in my life – my outlook, my beliefs, my interpretations, my attitudes – everything – to conform to the different view of myself, and to support it.

By the same token, if I actually change an outlook, belief, interpretation, attitude – anything – I have to see myself differently. That is fearful, so I tend to tend to elect to keep everything just as it is. If I loose my identity, I loose myself. That is truly frightening.

The second view is that my self-image is not the product of performance. I don't believe what I believe, nor do what I do to gain a good self-image. What I believe and do are the products of who I see myself to be. I separate identity from change, and then I am free to change, to welcome change, to embrace change.

If self-image is not the product of performance, where does it come from?

My answer is deceptively simple, and accurate.

My worth, value, worthwhileness – my self with all its potential – is a given. I started out that way. I am created in the image of God, and God declared that I am good. My positive self-image comes from believing this.

The most obvious example is a new-born baby. A new-born baby hasn't done anything to be valuable except to be a baby. In fact, she/he may already have caused considerable discomfort, trouble, and expense. Yet the parents see the child as extremely valuable. They are willing to go through whatever is necessary to have that child. No performance on the child's part is required or expected.

So it is with each of us in God's sight. And in our own sight if we will allow it. What a tragedy that, in our society, so many people learn to see themselves as not worthwhile until they have met the standards and have earned worthwhilenss.

That's how the counselee who wanted some change saw himself. In a very real sense, he maintained the circumstances of his life to keep his self-image. As long as he saw himself as he did, he wouldn't allow any changes. When he was able to free himself from that self-image based on performance, he had created a new environment in which he could make any change he wanted to make.

Things being the way they are and as I am accustomed to them being neither define nor identity me. God has already defined and identified me. I am child of God. I have gifts, talents, limits, and opportunities. I bring who I am by the grace of God to the task of being who I am. I use my gifts, talents, limits and opportunities to express who I am and who God is. I like to achieve. I like recognition and acclaim. I like to try new and different things. I find it beneficial to review my beliefs, outlook, and behavior in the light of experience land response. All of them change, and are subject to change. I

change. I grow. My understanding and awareness increase. I am able to be more constructively responsive to the people with whom I share life.

Because my identity is a gift of God to me, I don't have to find it, nor earn it. I have the privilege of being it.

No, I arrived, and I'm not finished. I am beloved child of God, and I seek to express, and to grow in the expression of, who I am.

Who could ask for anything more?