



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Truth About Suffering

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It is presumptuous of me to suggest that I know – or can write – the truth about suffering. But it makes a good title, doesn't it?

Whether or not I know the truth about suffering, I can share some beliefs and understandings. They may be of interest to you and they may speak to you where you are.

In so far as I can tell, people generally believe – with a sort of “gut level” belief that may not rise to consciousness – that suffering and hardship are punishment for wrong doing. Good people ought not to experience suffering and hardship. They certainly ought not to be punished. Take Job and his friends, for instance. Even though Job knew that he was righteous and had no sins to confess, all of them believed that the only viable explanation for suffering was that it was punishment for sin. If, therefore, a person – Job, in this case – had things happen that caused him to suffer, he had to have done some kind of wrong. It works like this. God punishes people for wrongdoing. Suffering certainly feels like punishment. Hence, there had to be some kind of sinning to explain Job's suffering.

Over against that quite widespread belief about the reason why people suffer, I want to offer some other points of view. Think about them. They may “make sense” to you. And then, again, I recognize that they may not. They do to me.

Suffering is not a punishment for mis-deeds, nor for destructive and harmful things that happen.

Freedom from suffering is not a reward for good living, righteousness, nor obedience to God's will and laws.

God does not impose suffering on people. Nor does God manipulate and control what happens to people, and, thereby, cause them to suffer – nor escape from suffering.

Suffering of some kind – with varying degrees of intensity – comes to every person. There are no exceptions. People suffer physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual pain. Some people suffer more than others. It seems that, for some reason, more “bad” (suffering causing) things happen to them than to others.

Though we may not like it, suffering is a vital and significant part of life – of health – of wholeness – or the lack of it. So is the risk of suffering. Just as death has to happen to have and to sustain life, so suffering has to occur to have and to stain health and wholeness.

Think what life would be like if there were no suffering, nor any risk of suffering.

One first thought, it may seem that life would be wonderful if there were no suffering. In fact, heaven is described as a place where, among other things, there is no suffering and no tears.

But, on second thought ---

No suffering? Suffering is a signal and warning of something gone wrong, or going wrong. In a world of opposites and relatives, how would you know whether or not you were suffering? What would the criteria be?

My throat hurts. The pain signals and warns me. I know there is a problem, and that I need to do something about it.

I lose someone very dear to me, and my heart throbs with the pain of it. My suffering is a measure of the intensity of the loss I feel.

I feel a deep anguish of spirit. Though I do not know its cause, I know something is wrong. My suffering signals me and warns me to take the steps that will determine what is the source of my anguish and what needs to be done to bring healing.

Suffering is a measure of the degree of sensitivity and caring on the part of people for people. Because people care – love – people are helped to escape suffering – to be more able to endure suffering – to be relieved of suffering. Caring people comfort and support those who suffer. Sharing each others’ suffering draws people closer, and deepens their relationship.

Suffering is a possible penalty for taking risks – the possibility that it won’t turn out as anticipated or expected – with resulting damage and pain.

Suffering is a product of bad decisions and destructive actions. There are always consequences. They vary in intensity and severity. Both innocent and guilty experience them.

Suffering may result from willful disregard for the rights, feelings, and needs of other people – even of one’s self. Without thought nor concern for the wellbeing of the other members of the family, a man takes the food money for the month and bets it on the horses – and loses. A grown child, more interested in his own pleasures and comforts, totally ignores the plight of his aged parent who is living alone and is unable to care for himself adequately.

Suffering can be an outcome because environment and process aren’t perfect – like problem births and intruding illness.

Suffering occurs when the people of a community (whatever its size) disregard the “rules and regulations” for successful and effective community living for the well-being of all in the community.

Everyone contributes to suffering – and to reducing and preventing suffering. Maybe we realize our contributions, and maybe we don't. We can't avoid making contribution.

God, in God's wisdom, set it up that way.

Some experience more suffering than others. Some escape for a while. That's how it seems to work out. Accidents happen. Nature acts up. Illnesses – epidemics – occur. People get sick, or are injured, or die unexpectedly. Suffering to some degree is in the life and experience of every person, without reference to the amount of good and evil done by the person.

Out of need, desire, conviction, people abuse and misuse people – and contribute to suffering.

A variety of things happen that cause suffering. Jobs are lost. Careers end. Other misfortunes occur. Sometimes there is someone to blame. Sometimes not. No matter. Such losses cause people to suffer.

Sometimes there is an overload of suffering. It seems like too much, and one cries out, "Why me? Why me, God?" and the answer is not immediately apparent.

Since everyone experiences suffering, how it is handled both determines and measures the level of a person's health and wholeness.

Often, people believe that God causes suffering – and punishes for misdeeds, whether or not we know what they are. People aren't supposed to suffer unless they deserve it, and are being punished. For instance, in the violent thunderstorm, a tree blew down and crushed the roof of my house. On my way to find someone to repair the roof, I skidded into a ditch and crumpled the left front wheel and fender of my car. Two days later, I learned that my son was struck by lightning when he was on the golf course, and was in the hospital in critical condition. To add insult to injury, when I went to work, I was told that I had been terminated because the times were so bad. In utter dismay, I cried out to God, "What have I done wrong? What have I done to deserve all this? Why am I being punished this way? I must have done something very bad."

Those questions are based on beliefs about suffering. Maybe we need to revise what we believe – to have a different point of view – to see suffering and the causes of suffering in an entirely different context.

Why do the innocent suffer? For that matter, why do those who are not innocent suffer? I suggest some possible answers.

1. Because our lives are so intricately enmeshed that the life of every person, in some way, affects the life of every other person. I cannot make a decision or take an action in isolation, nor in a vacuum. If I pay attention, I can see the result upon those

near to me. I cannot as easily see the result on those farther away. I can be sure, however, that there is a result.

It isn't automatic that a particular event causes another person to suffer, but it may. Suppose, for instance, that I have gone to the shopping mall to pick up some merchandise that I have ordered. It will only take a minute to run in to get it, but there is no place nearby to park. I leave my car in the fire lane, and go in to get my package. Surely no harm can come from those few moments that I parked illegally.

However, as I go in the door of the store, a young child dashes out and runs across the lane in front of my car and out into the street just in time to be hit by an on-coming car. Because of where my car is parked, the driver cannot see the child. My action to save a little time – which ordinarily would cause no difficulty – caused the driver of the other car, the child, the parents and family of the child, and me to suffer a great deal. It isn't automatic, but it does happen. Our lives are that enmeshed.

Some products of a chain of events are positive. Some are negative. And some are a mixture of both. How they are seen often depends upon the point of view of the one who is seeing.

2. Because, built into the order of things, are the signals that warn us that something is the matter, and that corrective action needs to be taken.

I go to the doctor. His first question is, "Where does it hurt?" And he pokes and punches, and keeps asking, "Does it hurt?", until he can localize the symptoms, diagnose what seems to be wrong, and prescribe appropriate treatment.

When a person comes to my office for counseling, and tells me he is suffering from depression, he has given me a clue about his problem. Unless there is a physical reason for his depression, I know that he has lost something of significance, and feels helpless and angry about it. Therefore I ask him, "What have you lost?" The loss behind the depression is not always immediately apparent, but because he is suffering, I know that he has lost something of importance to him.

3. Because people don't care about each other, and maybe about themselves. A man beats his wife and children. A robber shoots his victim. A person, thirsty for power, sacrifices a whole race of people. And the person who doesn't care, suffers deeply because he does not care, as well as inflicting suffering.

4. Because people care about each other, and suffer with those who suffer. Watch a parent whose child has a severe stomach ache. Observe the loving spouse of a person in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease. Look at a friend standing by his friend who has learned that his house has burned to the ground and nothing was saved. Be there with a person devastated by grief over the loss of a loved one. When people suffer, those who care suffer with them.

Often those who care feel a desperate need to do something about the suffering of another – to make it go away. How utterly natural it is to want to assuage suffering. And yet it may not always be the wise thing to do. In many cases, not to suffer means not to care, or to have forgotten. My suffering is the measure of the depth of my caring and of my loving. I know you are well-intentioned, but don't try to take it away from me.

5. Because there are always consequences. I can't go to the beach and lie in the sun all day without getting burned. I can't go to the company picnic and play softball when I haven't exercised for six months without being sore all over the next day. I can't indulge my sweet tooth every day without adding pounds to my weight. I can't smoke, drink, or use drugs without it affecting my body and mind. I can't go without rest or sleep for long periods of time without it harming me. I can't neglect feeding my mind and spirit without dulling both.

I can't neglect, abuse, and misuse without suffering and causing others to suffer. What happens may feel like punishment, but it is not. It is the normal result of neglect, abuse, and misuse.

In seeking the truth about suffering, I need to understand that suffering is a reality of life. I don't want to suffer. I don't like it when I do. Sometimes I understand it, and sometimes I don't. But it is a reality of life.

A further reality is that the situation of suffering, though we do not plan for it nor seek it, has significant potential for teaching us a lesson. For instance, I naively listen to the persuasive sales pitch of the stock salesman offering a return too good to be true. I invest a large sum of money. Three months later, I learn I have lost it all – and have no recourse to regain any of it. I suffer from the loss and from my stupidity. I am disillusioned. And I learn. Or, at least, I have the opportunity to learn.

You may ask, "Where is God in the midst of suffering?"

If I believe God causes suffering to punish wrong-doing, or even to teach us a lesson, then God is the author of suffering. Since I believe that God is love, I have trouble with this answer to the question.

If I believe that suffering is a reality of life, and if I believe that God is love, then I believe that God is with me in my suffering even as God is with me in all aspects of my life. If anything, God suffers even more than I because God cares with such intensity.

As I said to start with, it is presumptuous of me to suggest that I know – or can write – the truth about suffering. And I have shared some of my beliefs and understandings. Suffering is a fact of life, and it is not imposed upon people to punish them for wrong-doing. I embrace this belief, and allow my suffering to be the constructive force in my life it can be.