



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Courage to be Well

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What do you mean, “The Courage to be Well?” Who wouldn’t want to be well? Who in his right mind would choose to be not well? How can you suggest that it takes courage to be well?

Why does it take courage to be well?

It doesn’t if I already see myself as well. If I do not, that is another matter entirely.

I look at my body. I am overweight. I’m not healthy. I ache from arthritis. My head hurts for no apparent reason. I catch one cold after another. My blood pressure is too high. So is my cholesterol level. There are things wrong with my body. I’m sure that I am not well.

I look at my sense of myself – my mind. My self-image isn’t very good. I doubt my ability to succeed at anything. I feel inept. I am fearful and anxious and unhappy more than I want to be. Consistently, I have been told what was the matter with me, and how I needed to change. I never really pleased anyone, especially those not significant to me. There are things wrong with my mind. I’m sure that I am not well.

My spiritual outlook isn’t much better. I am moody, often depressed, and pretty much convinced that nothing is going to go right for me. My goals aren’t clear. I don’t know what to believe. It doesn’t feel like God is there for me at all. There are things wrong with my spirit. There are things wrong in my life. I’m sure that I am not well.

But I am convinced that I really want to be well. I want not to have the physical, mental, and/or spiritual difficulties that rise out of my not being well. I want to be rid of the pain and suffering. Why would you say it takes courage to be well?

Why? Because wellness is not a matter of freedom from physical, mental, and/or spiritual difficulties, although that certainly is one point of view. Nor is it a matter of being rid of pain and suffering. Rather, it is a decision I make about myself, my outlook on life, and my attitude. It is a position I take from which I interpret and respond to the circumstances of my life, and from which I live. It is a way I see myself, even in the midst of difficulty, pain, and suffering.

If I decide that I am not well, I am likely to focus my energies on trying to become well. Unfortunately, I may also try to make sure that I preserve my position of not being well. I may actually resist becoming free of difficulties, pain and suffering.

On the other hand, if I decide that I am well, then I focus on coping with the limits and infirmities of body, mind and spirit in the most constructive way I possibly can. And I do so from my position of wellness. I understand that I may not always be free of difficulties, pain, and suffering, but I am well at the core of my being.

Let's suppose for a moment that I have always believed that I am not well, and now I have decided to see myself as well. What would it be like?

You remember the cripple at the Pool of Bethzatha (John 5:1-18). According to the story, he had been ill for thirty-eight years. His life pattern was to be at the Pool, subsisting on the alms passers-by dropped into his cup, and hoping desperately, he said, to be the first into the water when it was troubled so that the miraculous waters would make him well.

One day, in a most unexpected way, the man got what he believed he desired. He met Jesus, who said to him, "You are well now. Pick up your pallet and go home."

Jubilantly, the man did as he was told. With rolled-up pallet over his shoulder, he went off down the street. Maybe he even whistled a merry tune, and danced a jig of joy because of his new-found wellness. After thirty-eight years, the man was well. At long last, he was physically able to take care of himself, and to be a responsible member of the community.

The man was to find out in a very short time whether or not he was ready to be a responsible member of the community, and to deal with possible consequences. He was to face the issue of whether or not he really wanted to be well.

It was the Sabbath when the man was healed. The Jews, believing it to be their God-required responsibility to do so, were out in force to see that no one broke Sabbath law. They saw the man, walking along the street with his pallet over his shoulder. Obviously, he was breaking the Sabbath law, and it was up to them to do something about it.

For all those years the man has lain on his pallet by the Pool begging alms, he had had little contact with the Jews. Occasionally, they would drop a coin into his cup, and he was supposed to be grateful. He had little reason to fear them, or to avoid them. But today, it was different. The Jews, showing their disapproval, accosted him, "You're in trouble. Don't you know you are breaking the Law carrying your pallet on the Sabbath. Why are you doing such a thing?"

What an unexpected development. And the man, now healed of his illness – well and responsible – could do no better than to say, "The man at the Pool told me to." And he didn't even know his name. Later, when he learned who Jesus was – to further excuse himself, I suppose – he pointed him out to the Jews.

The story ends at that point. We don't know what actually happened to the man.

In the long run, I wonder how the man coped with his wellness. Certainly, his life was totally different from how it had been for thirty-eight years. I wonder if he had the courage to stay well. Or if he ended up in his old situation – a cripple lying on his pallet by the Pool of Bethzatha, subsisting on the alms dropped into his cup.

So I take the position that I am well. And you tell me it would take courage?

Think about it. I would see my world from an entirely different point of view. I would see the people who are in my life in a different way. I would see myself differently. I would think, feel, and behave differently. The familiar patterns of interpretation, reaction, and behavior would no longer apply. In addition, the people around me would have different expectations of me. I would have to confront both their expectations and mine. Would I have the courage to accept that I am well?

I might not have the courage. Even though I had decided I was well, under pressure, might react as I always had when I believed I was not well. I might fear that I could not measure up to what was expected of me. I might fret, worry, not sleep, not eat, or eat too much. I might build defenses, look for excuses. I might yield to frustration and depression. I might slide back into the familiar position of being not well.

If I am well, I am well. I am beginning to see why being well might take courage.

I don't know how to be well. I don't know how to not fret, worry, complain, and be miserable. I don't know how to be pleased with myself; be secure in my relationships; be confident; feel and act positively; take on the responsibility of wellness. How can I be well? How can I make all the adjustments that wellness calls for? Do I really have the courage to be well?

How do well people act?

Ultimately, wellness is an internal thing. It is a belief, an attitude, and a position taken. In a very real sense, it is a decision I make about myself.

Suppose that I am in an accident and I lose my right arm – and I am right handed. What do I do?

I can cry. I can rail against my fate. I can feel sorry for myself. I can be a victim. I can be angry and bitter over this terrible thing that has happened to me. I can refuse to do anything to help myself. I can become a cripple and a parasite. I can be miserably unwell. Who would blame me? After all, I have lost my right arm and my way of making a living. Poor, poor me.

What I can't do is replace my arm and thereby – I tell myself – become well. A person who has lost his right arm can't be a well person. That seems pretty obvious to me.

Suppose, under these circumstances, I decide to see myself as well.

From my position of wellness, I survey my situation. The fact of the matter is that I have lost my right arm. I am right-handed, and my livelihood – up to now, at least – has

depended on my use of my right hand and arm. It is clear that something different has to be done.

I take inventory. I determine my limits, my capabilities, and my resources. What can I do now? What can I learn to do? How can I adjust and compensate?

I take charge of myself, and of my situation. I am realistic about it. I don't spend time and energy trying to do what I can no longer do. I do spend time and energy doing what I can, and learning what I need to learn. I have no time for "poor me". Having or not having a right arm isn't what determines my wellness. My beliefs, my attitudes, and my decision to be well is what does it.

While the illustration I have used it pretty graphic, the process is the same. Limitations of body, mind, or spirit do not determine whether I am well. What I believe and what I decide about my wellness does.

Unfortunately, my on struggle with the issue of wellness is not the only factor that I must face. Strange as it may seem, and despite what they may say to the contrary, those significant to me, especially in my family, may need for me not to be well. They know me as not well. They, also, may lack the courage to allow me to be well.

Suppose, for instance, that a couple come in for counseling.

She is unhappy with him. (Please keep in mind that it works the same way if I reverse the pronouns.) She wants him to change. She demands that he change. They've been married many years, and she has been trying the entire time to get him to change. She says he is indifferent to her. He refuses to make normal day to day, decisions involving them both and she wants him to. He never talks to her. Despite her best efforts, she can't get him to be like she says she wants him to be. At this point in their lives, they seem to have very little in common – little to hold them in the marriage. If he doesn't "get well", she wants out – she says.

He confirms everything she wants. He states that he is willing to change as she says she wants him to, but he believes that she will resist his doing so. She of course, denies this.

However, he is probably correct. They have lived in their un-well situation many years. They know how it works. They know what to expect of each other. But neither of them knows how it would work if he were well – nor if she were well. Whether she realizes it or not, she is likely to interfere if he changes. She may not have the courage to allow him to be well. If he decides that he is well, and acts accordingly, she has to make as many adjustments in beliefs, attitudes, and behavior as he does – maybe more. It is no easier for her than it is for him. Besides, she tells herself, how can she trust that he really has changed.

Husbands and wives want each other to be well – and do not want wellness. So do parents and children (both not grown and grown). Mostly, people do not like their status quo disturbed. It calls for more adjustments than many want to make.

It takes courage to be well and to stay well, both in terms of self, and in terms of the resistance of the significant others in one's life. It takes courage to decide to be well, and to stand against the efforts of others who are trying, consciously or unconsciously, to keep the changes from taking place.

Mother earnestly desires for Son, now in his early twenties, to be well. He is, and has been, confused and mixed up. He had difficulty holding a job. He believes that he is incompetent, and unable to succeed at anything. He decides to seek counseling and finds it beneficial. He begins to function in a more positive manner.

Mother, of course, is delighted. “Maybe you are finally going to be somebody,” she says. “But remember. You haven't succeeded at anything yet. Don't get your hopes too high.”

Her response is like a blow to the face. Son wonders why he feels so let down. He doesn't realize that Mother really needs for him to stay not well so that her world remains intact. She may not realize it herself.

What purposes are served by being not well? What issues are involved?

If I see myself as not well, and have for a long time, I have a “tried and true” way to preserve a poor self-image; to call attention to myself in ways that are accustomed; to anticipate my failures and to excuse them when they occur; to maintain a certain kind of power and control. Since the pattern of my life is to be not well, I know how that works. I don't know what it is like to be well. Even though I am not well and miserable in my un-wellness, I depend on feeling secure. Inexperienced as I am, to be well means radical change from the familiar. It means stepping into the unknown. I just may be too afraid to make the decision to be well. It may take more courage than I have.

What happens if I decide that I am well and have the courage to be well?

I hold myself in high regard. Interestingly enough, I also end to hold you in high regard as well. I am confident and self-assured. I accept, and act on, the opportunities and challenges that come my way. Maybe I even go seeking some of them. I assess the situations and circumstances of my life from a position of wellness. I accept the real limits without excessive upset. I focus my energies and abilities on what seems possible and feasible for me. I bring an attitude of wellness to my outlook on life. I acknowledge my fears, doubts, and weaknesses, as well as my strengths. I give up being miserable. I stop seeing myself as a victim. I have a zest for life and that brings me job and happiness. I am confident that I can confront the problems of my life and find constructive solutions.

I was created to be well, but that doesn't mean faultless and without blemish, nor to be free of difficulties, pain, and suffering. So I do not have my right arm. Or I have fewer talents than some other people. I have physical and/or mental limitations. The years go by, and I lose some agility and skill. The normal wear and tear of life takes its toll. And I am, at the core of my being, well as a person and as a creation of God. Do I have the courage to believe that this is true?

You ask me what I mean when I say it takes courage to be well. You ask me why it takes courage to see myself as well.

I repeat. It doesn't if I already see myself as well. It does if I see myself as unwell.

Un-wellness, then, is the position from which I view myself and my world. I am familiar with it. Even though I am miserable, experience pain, and suffer from my limitations and infirmities, I feel secure. I know how it works. I can excuse myself and my failures. I know the things to say and do that preserve my un-wellness.

If I choose to see myself as well, I have taken a new position from which to view myself and my world. It is not familiar to me. I don't know how anything works from this new position. The limits are different. I no longer have the excuses.

If I do not already see myself as well, it takes courage to be well. It means to face the unknown – to step out into the darkness, as it were. It means to reorder the way that I see myself and my world. It means to cope with and to resist all the pressures within me, and around me to see myself as unwell.

The courage to be well. Do I have the courage to believe differently about myself; to see my wholeness and my wellness as a gift from God; and to live my life accordingly?

Do I have the courage to be well?