



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Is There Life After Birth?

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W. Burney Overton

My first reaction when this question was put to me was, “Where does it come from? What does it mean? What are you asking me?”

My second reaction was one of intrigue and interest. The obvious response was, “Of course there is life after birth.” However, I felt sure there was much more involved than my quick response would satisfy. And it turned out that I was correct about that.

Some three years ago, Rose Ann Hefner of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Wheeling, West Virginia, posed this question to me and suggested that she would like me to write a paper in response. I didn’t get around to it, but two years ago, she persisted by asking the question again, explaining herself further, and supplying me with the first part of the paper.

I still didn’t get the paper written, so, again this year; she pressed me to write it. So here it is, Number 5 of the 1990 Series of Burney’s Papers. The first part is Rosie’s writing.

Rosie wrote an introductory paragraph. “My real question is how are we living the fullness of life in time of pain and hardship? How can I believe that God invites us to live in joy and enjoyment of life when people are starving, etc.? It’s easy for me to believe in the fullness of life in good times. Help me with my thinking to believe it in the difficult.” She then wrote the first part of the paper as she envisioned it.

“Is there life after birth?”

I don’t know who was the first person to ask that question, but every time I hear someone ask, “Is there life after birth?”, the idea continues to intrigue me.

We worry about life after death and miss the life after birth. We talk about having opportunity to experience the fullness of life, but so often we don’t. I’m not sure if we know what that means.

I would like to express some of what this living the fullness of life, or living life to the fullest, means to me.

First, it means knowing that I am loved and am free to love unconditionally. My belief is in a God whom I see as loving me without strings, expectations, requirements, or limits. I am free to live my life out of the stance of knowing that I am loved, and of wanting to love others from this same basis of unconditionality.

Loving, and being loved, unconditionally has enabled me to experience a great wealth in relationships. My life is richer because of those who have loved me and those whom I have been able to love.

Not worrying about the future, knowing it is in the hands of a very loving God, and not worrying about the past, knowing I do not need to fear condemnation from God for my failings, leaves me free to live in the present moment. I am free to enjoy the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings of the moment. I am able to enjoy the gifts of this moment – the treasures that are my life today. I am able to enjoy the relationships that are present to me at this moment, and able to make the most of each moment and each day.

I don't have to worry about a future life, and I am able to enjoy the life that is present today. I can smell the roses and the burnt roast beef. I can hear the music and the baby's cry. I can see the sunset and the barren trees. I can taste the chocolate and the icky medicine. I can feel the friend's touch and the cold of winter. I can know that these are all part of this day that I have to live. I am alive today and can experience the many aspects of that life.

Jesus knew how to live this fullness of life, and he offers us the opportunity to see his example and live out that fullness. Jesus knew the wealth of relationships, especially the relationship with his father.

Now I ask myself what was so rich about Jesus' life. What is so great about being rejected, stoned, run out of town, condemned, and crucified? How is that living life to the fullest? What is so "rewarding" about all that?

I think Burney would say that it was rewarding because Jesus was true to who he was. He was faithful in his relationships with his father. It is probably his attitude that makes the difference. It is how he looked at the suffering in his life that made the difference.

"Now, here, Burney, is where I need for you to take off." Rosie wrote, "How is Jesus' life, with so much suffering, living life to the fullest? What kinds of attitudes enable one to experience the rejection and suffering that Jesus did, and still be able to feel the blessing of God – the fullness of life? What are the attitudes that enable people to experience eternal life in the hard times?"

Clearly, it is time for me to complete the paper. Moving in that direction, I asked the retreatants (Rosie was one of them) at the Directed Prayer Retreat in Wheeling, W Va in August, 1990, to discuss it. More questions, concerns, and points of view came out.

There was a paraphrased quote from Joseph Campbell. "If I say 'yes' to life, don't I have to say 'yes' to the bad and evil in the world as well as to the good?" Another form of the question was, "How does one experience the fullness of life with the negatives?"

Points of view were expressed.

“Fullness of life means all of it, not part of it – the negatives as well as the positives.”

“To experience the fullness of life is to experience the heights and depths of life.”

“I don’t want life to be difficult. I don’t want separation, leaving, grief to be a part of it.”

“If these things – the negatives – were not part of life, we would have no way to value the positives.”

“Don’t get so concerned with the issue of life after death that you miss out on the quality of life in the here and now – the life that comes after birth.”

“It is God’s intention that we enjoy this present life that God has given us.”

All these questions and points of view bear upon the answer to the question, “Is there life after birth?”, and we understand that we are asking about the quality of life that is possible to us in this world. We are trying to make sense out of a life that includes difficulties – hardship, rejections, separations, losses, suffering, grief, and much else that is unsatisfactory.

Ultimately, the answers are to be found in attitudes and beliefs that shape one’s outlook of life, and provide the interpretations for whatever happens in one’s life.

With Rosie, I raise the question, “What does it mean to live life to the fullest?”

If “life to the fullest” means that there isn’t going to be any rejection or stoning, or other kind of difficulty, then the quality of my life is in direct relationship to how little difficulty I experience.

I become ill. I lose my job. I make a bad investment and am on the verge of bankruptcy. A years-long significant relationship ends. I am on the unpopular side of an important social issue and I am condemned and castigated. Former friends aren’t friends any more. A member of my family dies. Any of these are weighty burdens in my life. If “fullness” means the absence of these kinds of experiences, my life is neither full nor rich.

Jesus lived as an itinerant preacher, “going about doing good” and teaching things quite different from what was commonly believed. He seemed not to be concerned with what kind of life he would have after this life. Sometimes, he seemed not to be concerned about what would happen to him in this life.

At first, multitudes responded positively to him. Later, multitudes responded negatively to him. Eventually, he was rejected, condemned and crucified. And Rosie is right. There isn’t much great about these kinds of things happening to him.

If “fullness” means the absence of these kinds of experiences in Jesus’ life, then his life was neither full nor rich.

If “life to the fullest” means rewards, and rewards are measured in terms of positive things happening in my life, my life is not full when bad things happen. Instead, I feel deprived and unfulfilled. If I see it that I have been living the “right” kind of life, and doing good, I may well become angry and bitter when I do not receive the rewards that are supposed to go with living the right kind of life and doing good.

There isn’t much great about the things that have happened to Jesus. Certainly, having the multitudes turn against him, the religious leaders condemn him, and the Roman soldiers crucify him, doesn’t seem to be much of a reward for having lived the right kind of life and having done much good.

So how can I suggest that Jesus lived life to the fullest?

Obviously, I can’t without changing my belief and my point of view about what enables fullness of life.

If I believe that the purpose of life is to live it so that I obtain fullness of life, then I start from the premise that my life lacks fullness until I do the things that result in fullness.

I illustrate. I am at the beginning of my career and recently married. My salary is very low. I have virtually no status. What I am doing doesn’t seem to be very important to anybody. I live in a tiny, one-bedroom apartment, it being all we can afford at this time in our life. It is not a very exciting nor satisfying life. I have no sense of being fulfilled.

I dream of success. I will become outstanding in my profession. The work that I do will be deemed important and worthwhile. I will have an excellent income. We will live in a beautiful, ten-room home on a lovely wooded lot. I will own two cars, and a boat on a lake. Everyone will look up to me. Then I will be fulfilled. Or, so I tell myself.

If I believe that the purpose of life is to manifest and experience the fullness of life that God has already given me, then I start from the premise that my life is full and I decide what to do with it to express that fullness.

To illustrate, I tell the same story, and I recognize that, at first, life doesn’t seem to be very exciting or satisfying. I want the success dream to become reality. At this point, the story changes since I believe that the purpose of life is to manifest and experience the fullness of life that God has already given me. Life is hard at the beginning. It is a struggle to make ends meet at times. There are severe limitations. But it does not follow that life is not exciting and satisfying. I have the fullness given to me.

I bring that fullness to the early circumstances and to the later ones as well. I express the fullness of life that is already mine.

I believe that Jesus had this later belief and point of view. Therefore, the joys, as well as the pain and suffering, were all manifestations of the fullness of life he lived.

What was so rich about Jesus' life? All of it, including the rejection, separation, loss, suffering and grief. Yes, including the crucifixion.

Jesus made the decision that it was far more important to live the principles of the unconditional love of God than to try to keep bad things from happening to him. He experienced fullness of life because he was consistent and faithful in living those principles. Of course he suffered both physical and spiritual pain. Even his closest friends abandoned him at the most critical juncture of his life. Though he was a spectacle before the multitudes as he hung on the cross, he was terribly alone with no one to share his anguish or to comfort him.

Though Jesus' physical and mental suffering was acute because of what was being done to him, I expect that the greater suffering was because those to whom he had ministered seemed unable or unwilling to understand what constituted fullness of life. They didn't accept his message, nor learn from the way he lived his life. They didn't recognize how full and complete his life really was.

There were difficulties. Of course, there were difficulties. Even so, I expect that Jesus could smell the roses and the burnt beef – hear the music and the baby's cry – see the sunset and the barren trees – taste the chocolate and the icky medicine – feel the friend's touch and the cold of winter – even though there were difficulties.

No matter how much I dislike the difficulties, I think it is not possible to live without experiencing some of them. Even such difficulties as being unable to have things exactly as I want them to be – or having to give up something in order to have something else I want – or suffering because someone I love is suffering – or feeling destitute while I adjust to the loss of a relationship significant to me.

Is there life after birth? What I believe is that that is precisely where life is – between birth and death. If my life is rich and full, then it is the product of my response to all that happens in my life – all the positive and all the negative.

The quality of my life in the present is dependent upon what I believe and the outlook on life that goes with that belief.

I may live in poverty, be physically infirmed, have only limited contact with my friends and loved ones, have to forego many opportunities for fun and enjoyment, and live a rich and fulfilled life.

I may live in wealth, have perfect health, be in constant contact with friends and loved ones, act on all my opportunities for fun and enjoyment, and live a miserable and unfulfilled life.

What I believe makes the difference. My outlook on life makes the difference. Who I see myself to be makes the difference. How I evaluate what happens to me makes the difference.

If I have put it together that fullness of life means freedom from hardship, rejection, separation, losses, suffering and grief, then every time I experience any of these, I believe I do not have fullness of life.

If I have put it together that fullness of life is not something to be obtained, but a recognition of what already is, and is a celebration of that reality, then all the experiences of life are a manifestation of the fullness that is already mine.

How I have put it together determines the quality of my life between birth and death.

Is there life after birth?

Of course, there is life after birth. In fact, that is precisely where life is.

I quote Rosie again.

Not worrying about the future, knowing it is in the hands of a very loving God, and not worrying about the past, knowing I do not need to fear condemnation from God for my failings, leaves me free to live in the present moment. I am free to enjoy the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings of the moment. I am able to enjoy the gifts of this moment – the treasures that are my life today. I am able to enjoy the relationships that are present to me at this moment, and able to make the most of each moment and each day.

Of course, there is life after birth – fullness of life.