



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Mundane and the Ordinary

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Sequel to “Love, Romance, and Marriage”

No matter what I believe about it, and no matter how much I may fantasize to the contrary, the simple reality is that daily living is, almost all the time, mundane and ordinary. Even mountain top experiences become mundane and ordinary if they are everyday. This is true in any ongoing relationship, especially on as close as marriage. When I completed the paper, “Love, Romance and Marriage,” I knew that I had not written all that I wanted to write on the subject. I doubt this paper will express all that I want to write either.

I call your attention to examples of similarities and differences that may be evident in daily life with another person. Any two people will have their own examples.

I am a morning person. I wake up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and ready to go for the day. You are a night persona, and morning is a real drag to you.

You believe and practice the concept that there is a place for everything and that everything should be in its place, except when being used. I profess to believe the concept, but, actually, tend to leave things wherever I get though with them on any given occasion.

I drop things where I finish with them. You always put them back in their place.

I don't like to cook. For you, cooking is a pleasure, and you get great satisfaction from turning out beautifully prepared meals.

I think it is your job to run the household, and mine is to produce the income. You think I ought to help you with household chores.

I like to read in bed. You want the light out so you can go to sleep.

I tumble and toss when I sleep and take up the whole bed. You hardly move all night, and your sleep is disturbed by my thrashing around.

When I don't get my way, I pout and harbor ill feelings for days. You blow up, get it over with and are done with it. You hold no grudges.

I want a full meal for breakfast – even dessert, if possible. You are much more likely to settle for toast and coffee.

I really think you ought to pet and paper me. You don't understand why I'm not more attentive to you.

I'm a rabid sports fan. You don't know a completed pass from a home run.

You manipulate me. I allow myself to be manipulated. We both get angry about it and accuse each other.

I don't tell you what I want and/or what is bothering me, and expect you to read my mind. Then I get very upset and feel put upon when you don't.

I talk all the time. You won't talk, especially when you're upset. You won't let me handle the finances, spend time with my friends, watch TV when I want to.

You make me stay home; go out; wash the dishes, go to church, rake the leaves. I think you ought to do more of those things yourself, or at least help me do them.

You cut me down in public. You don't respect me nor my opinion. You criticize me and disapprove of me. And I do the same.

I get the feeling that I don't ever – can't ever – do anything to please you or make you happy.

I build walls between us, but build no bridges. In self-defense, you build walls, too, and tell me you want bridges. I don't know why you don't do something to build them.

I want you to be as I want you to be, and, of course, you want me to be as you want me to be.

What a symphony of complaints.

But I want to be fair. We have a nice home. We have financial resources to have pretty much what we want. WE enjoy many things together. We do complement each other many times. We like to tell other people about the special qualities that each of us has. We have many pleasant and enjoyable things in our lives – our family, for instance. Mostly, we respect each other, and we do love each other although we don't get along as well as we might.

Life together isn't so bad. Yes, it is mundane and ordinary. We need to understand that that is how daily life is with anyone. While there are exciting times and high point experiences, mostly it is just every day. It seems to me that we express the negatives – our discontent and fault-finding – too much. We don't talk with each other about things that matter to us. Not as much as we could.

In the midst of the mundane and the ordinary we face the reality that “in love” may not be a part of it. We may think that love isn’t, either, but that doesn’t have to be true. And we can have “in love” times in our life.

There’s great danger in where we are. Our relationship could be threatened.

I feel disillusioned, dissatisfied, unfulfilled, hungry, although I say very little about it except to be angry and upset. To myself, I raise the question, “Is this what life – married life or any close relationship – is all about?” We started out so well. We had dreams and visions. We were sure ours was going to be different. Where has all the excitement gone? And I allow myself to believe that you are the problem – not me. If you would only change, our relationship could be like I thought it was going to be. I think about escaping. How can you expect me to stay in a mundane and ordinary relationship marked by its day – today sameness- especially since you are doing so little (I tell myself) to make it any other way.

Mundane and ordinary is OK. In fact, I remind myself, it’s how the everyday of life is, in the main. But it doesn’t have to be dull and meaningless. And it certainly doesn’t have to be marked by discontentment, anger, and defensiveness. I don’t have to distance from you, nor build walls, nor run away. Nor is it fair for me to blame you for the state of our marriage.

If I want the situation to be different, I’m the one who needs to do something about it. What can I do? Where do I start?

1. I release myself and you from the demand that you be different. I decide that I will work on changing me.
2. I identify and own my part in these things as they are. I make no excuses.
3. I accept that the normal pattern of life is accurately described as mundane and ordinary, and confront my responsibility to make it more meaningful.
4. I get specific with myself about what I can do so that our mundane and ordinary life together is richer and more fulfilling.
5. I name what I can do – how I can change – to enable that richer and fuller life together. And I commit myself to making those changes in me and my way of functioning.
6. I focus on the pluses that are already in our relationship, and work to have more of them.
7. I have up complaining, and withholding myself. I give up acting angrily.
8. I work on understanding myself more completely and, if you want to hear it, I share with you what I’ve come to understand.
9. I take you into account. I listen to you and make sure I understand you. I treat you with respect and caring. I look for ways to affirm you and I do it.

Neither the list of similarities and differences between us, nor the list of what I can do to make our mundane and ordinary life richer and more fulfilling is complete. Even so, they are long enough to seem overwhelming. Under the circumstances, I may

tell myself it is too much and too hard to make the changes. If I take that position, there is at least one more thing for me to do.

I need to be realistic and patient with myself, and make my changes in manageable bits. Most of all, I need to recommit myself to doing what I can to make our relationship what I envisioned that it can be.

Yes, daily living is mundane and ordinary. The mountaintop does become mundane and ordinary if we stay there, but mundane and ordinary doesn't have to mean dull or deadly or hollow or empty. It can mean fullness and richness and joy and satisfaction – a life worth living.

I want our life to be that way.

I offer an example of what I can do by using one of the ways in which We are different. And over which we clash.

We are reacting to our being different in ways that create barriers; makes us defensive; drives us apart; and causes us to react with anger to each other.

We remember – We remember so well – when our relationship was new and exciting and beautiful. We were convinced that it would always be that way. We were best friends. We could talk about – share – anything. We had no secrets – or so we told ourselves. And we were lovers – wonderful lovers.

To my great surprise, it wasn't as We thought it was going to be at all. The little things – the everyday things – our normal, typical ways of functioning in which we differed, kept getting in the way. And, all too often, living together was marked by our silence, our carping, and our distancing from each other. Much of the time, I felt miserable, frustrated, and angry. I certainly didn't feel much like friend or lover. Just about anything that I did got a negative reaction from you, and I reacted much in the same way to you.

What happens when I drop things where I finish with them is a case in point.

The other morning, for instance, I overslept and was running late getting ready to go to work. In something of a frenzy, I showered, shaved, and dressed. My pajamas lay on the floor where I got out of them. I left the Wet towel in a heap where I finished with it. Water was all over the bathroom floor. Both bedroom and bath were a mess – but, after all, I was late and in a hurry. Surely it was reasonable to expect you to understand, and to graciously pick up after me.

When I came into the kitchen, breakfast wasn't ready, and I was angry. "Don't you know that I am running late? Why can't you be helpful when I need you to be? IS that asking too much?" I stormed out of the house without waiting for your reply, and without even saying, "Good bye."

I didn't know what had happened to you until I came home from work that evening. I found out then. At first, you were grimly silent. When I tried to get you to respond to me, you burst out, "I've had it up to here. It's not my fault that you didn't get up, and it's not my job to clean up after you all the time."

That precipitated an argument that lasted all evening. It isn't too hard to imagine the dialogue. And we weren't even speaking to each other when we went to bed. We weren't friends. We weren't lovers. We weren't very close, each wrapped in a cocoon of outrage and hurt feelings.

It didn't have to be that way.

I could have hung my pajamas on the hook in the closet. I could have been a little more careful about splashing the water. I could have put the towel on its rack. More importantly, I could have taken a different attitude. I could have apologized to you from leaving such a mess. I could have accepted you as you are, and made some adjustments.

I could have been thoughtful enough to ask your help if I really were so pressed for time. I could have chosen not to be upset when breakfast wasn't on the table when I came into the kitchen. I might have supposed there were good reasons for it not being ready. I might even have said, "It's all right, honey." And given you a hug and a kiss before going off to work.

I didn't have to be demanding and angry.

When you are upset with me, I don't have to go defensive and try to retaliate. I can listen to you and accept you're upset. I don't have to knuckle under, nor even admit to being wrong – unless I am. Nor do I have to defend myself against your upset. If I care about us, I can be with you while you tell me about your upset. I can be committed to talking it out with you, but without insisting that you accept how I see it to be, or trying to establish that I am right and you are wrong.

The secret is in the attitudes I choose to bring to our relationship, and the commitment I make to keeping meaning, and richness, and fulfillment in our experiencing of each other.

I can't get away from it. The daily routine is, in the main, mundane and ordinary. But the mundane and ordinary of every day can be rich and full, marked by highlights of pleasure and excitement, and by deep satisfaction in the long stretches.

I want our life together to be that kind of life.