



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Please! Please Listen to Me

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In a recent conversation, the person said, “Will you give me a bit of your time and listen to me? I just want you to help me hear what I am saying.”

The person went on to say, “I need for someone to really listen to me without trying to solve my problems nor tell me how to solve them. I usually know what I ought to do, and talking it out helps me make my decision to do it.”

The person enlarged upon the comment, “You want to be really helpful to me? Try really listening to me. Try not telling me your story, nor introducing your own problems, nor assuming I am asking you to solve my problems, nor concluding that I’m asking you to tell me what I must do to solve my problems.”

In other words, the person was saying, with intensity, “Please! Please listen to me.” It seems like a reasonable request.

AS easy as it is to really listen to another person, it doesn’t seem to happen a great deal of the time in people’s conversations with each other. For instance, I say to you, “I have a problem. I need to talk it out with someone. Would you be willing to listen to me?”

I may even say, “All I want is for you –someone – to listen to me; to be my sounding board; to reflect back what you hear and thereby let me hear myself. That way, I can work it out.” And, of course, you are more than happy to accede to my request. Only it appears that you hear a different request from me than I thought I made. I don’t know it, though, until I am actually in my sounding board conversation with you.

To spell the situation out, I will shift roles. You will be asking me to listen to you, and I will be graciously telling you of my willingness to listen.

“Please listen to me,” you say. “I need a sounding board. I need you to tell me what you hear me saying?”

“Of course,” I say. “I am your friend. I want you help in any way I can. I’ll be there for you as long as you need me to be. I’ll listen to you.”

So we arrange for a time to talk.

When the time comes, you have some difficulty getting started, and since my task is to listen, I wait. It is clear that you are pretty upset. You finally say, “I’m so worried about my little boy, and I just don’t know what to do.”

Your little boy is nine years old, large for his age, and behind a year in his schooling. “And,” you tell me, “He seems to e so unhappy.”

The details come tumbling out, often interrupted by your tears. You tell me about his difficulties with his classmates, how poorly he is doing with his studies, how withdrawn and angry he is at home.

I really hear you. I empathize with you. I feel so intensely that I, at this point, interrupt you. “You asked me to listen to you and reflect back to you what I hear.” So I reflect, saying to you, “I hear your pain and confusion. I’ve been where you are. I think I know some answers. Have you tried to talk with your son to find out what is going on with me?” (This is reflection?)

You assure me that you have, “And,” you continue, “he won’t talk, no matter how hard I try to get him to. He usually begins to cry, and storms from the room, yelling for me to leave him alone. I just don’t know what to do. I know he needs help, and so do I.”

Your plea for help amid your tears really gets to me. I have to solve this problem. No, I have to help you see what you need to do. I need to encourage and support you while you do it. I feel deeply for you. I identify with you. I remember a similar situation with one of my children several years ago. I really want to help you, and believe that, if I tell you what happened to me, I will be doing just that. In fact, I think I know the answer to your problem. I’m sure I do, or at least I know what you need to do.

So I say to you, “I really know what you are talking about because I have been there.” (Reflecting?) And I tell you in detail about my situation and what I did about it, ending up with, “and you ought to do the same thing.” When I finally stop talking, you just stare at me. I can’t read your expression very well, but I feel sure you know I care about you and am trying to help.

At last you speak. “I’ve tried most of what you’ve said, and it hasn’t worked for me.”

I respond with a barrage of questions and suggestions, all designed to help you see what you did wrong, what you need to do, and how you need to do it, if you are going to solve your problem.

You answer all my questions calmly and you consider all my suggestions. You tell me again, and repeatedly, that, though you have tried them, they haven’t worked for you, but I just won’t let myself hear you. I must get through to you.

You have a problem. You have come to me with it. I have to help you find a solution. I try. I try mightily, and I even get impatient with you when you seem to fend off everything I suggest.

I think, “You have asked me for help. Why won’t you accept the help I offer you? After all, I know from experience what needs to be done.”

We must have talked for over an hour. Your last words to me are, “Thanks for

your time, and for telling me about your experience. I feel so lost and so alone.” With that, you start out the door.

Despite my efforts, you don’t seem to be any better.

I walk to the door with you, “Come back any time,” I say. “I’ll always be here for you.”

But I feel uneasy. I am conscious of your distress, and I have a nagging sense that I haven’t really been of much help.

After you leave, I sit for a long time, mulling over our conversation. I can picture that tormented little boy, and I want to be able to solve his problem – and yours, too, for that matter. But somehow, I sense that I haven’t been all that helpful. I’m not at all sure why.

“What is the matter?” I ask myself. “Why doesn’t what I say to you help?”

In my mind, I retrace our conversation, and suddenly hear something that brings me up short. Your first words to me were, “Please listen to me. I need a sounding board. I need you to tell me what you hear me saying.”

“Please listen to me,” you said.

And I didn’t listen to you.

Not really. I didn’t really listen to you – not for very long. I didn’t reflect. I didn’t clarify. I didn’t let it be your problem. I wasn’t a sounding board. I hadn’t been there for you as you had asked me to be.

If I had really listened, how would the conversation have gone?

1. First, I would listen – really listen – to you. I would be aware of your nonverbal as well as your verbals.
2. I would reflect your words back to you, in the context of your nonverbal. I would ask you if I were hearing you accurately.
3. Where I saw some inconsistency, or felt some confusion, I would ask you questions designed to clarify – not to give answers.
4. I would suggest that you tell me the things that you have tried to do, and the outcome of trying them.
5. I might ask you to explore more deeply how you see the situation, and what you believe your options are.
6. I might ask you to talk about the situation through your little’s boy’s eyes. For instance, I might wonder with you about the message to which he was responding when he cried and ran away and yelled for you to leave him alone.
7. Always, every response of mine would be designed to communicate my concern

- and understanding to you, and to encourage you to continue to talk.
8. Somewhere in the conversation, I might say to you that I've had similar experiences and ask you if it would be helpful for me to tell you anything about them and what I did.
  9. Of course, if you were to tell me you thought it would be helpful, I would share my experience and my point of view with you – but always briefly.

So I would listen. And reflect. And seek clarification. And facilitate your exploring. And keep it clear that I was listening to you as you had requested. I would know that the problem was yours – and not mine – to solve.

Our conversation would start out the same way.

Even though you seem to have some difficulty getting started, I just wait quietly. Clearly, you are quite upset. I want to give you time to compose yourself, and say whatever you want to say in the way of your choosing.

Finally you blurt out, "I'm so worried about my little boy, and I just don't know what to do."

I continue to sit quietly, just waiting and listening.

Somewhat haltingly, you begin to tell me about your little boy. Then the details come tumbling out, although often interrupted by your tears. You finally end with, "He seems to be so unhappy. What can I do to help him?"

My mind races. My emotions feel to me as if they are almost as intense as yours. I think of things I might say – experiences I might share – ways to solve your problem – but I express none of them. You have asked me to listen to you and to be a sounding board.

So I say, "It seems to me that you have a good reason to be upset. Let me check to see if I have been hearing you correctly. Most of what you have said is about things happening at school. Do you believe that his difficulties center there?"

"I'm not sure," you say. "His classmates make fun of him because of his size and because he makes mistakes in class when the teacher calls on him."

"And he comes home from school angry and upset?"

"Yes," you respond, "and he won't talk to me, no matter how I try to get him to. He usually begins to cry, and storms from the room, yelling for me to leave him alone."

"When that happens, you must feel pretty helpless and frustrated."

"I do," you say. "I just don't know what to do. I know he needs help, and so do

I.”

I am sorely tempted to try to tell you what to do. But that won't do, both because you have asked me to be your listener, and because I am well aware that I don't begin to know enough about the situation to draw conclusions, nor to offer suggestions. I don't want to do that anyway until you have indicated clearly that you want some views, opinions, or suggestions of mine. Your statement that you know you need help wasn't asking me to take over that responsibility.”

I decide to encourage you to continue to talk to me. I say, “You said that you weren't sure his problems center in the school situation. Do you want to talk more about that?”

As you talk, it seems evident that lot more than school is involved. He is the middle child, and has clashed with his older brother from the time he was walking. In addition, he often seems angry with his little sister. “I can't seem to keep them from fighting with each other, no matter what I do to stop them,” you tell me.

“Would you like to talk about what you have tried?”

That touches off another torrent of words.

I say to you, “I'm a little confused by what you have been saying. You first told me of your son's unhappiness with school, but, as we have talked, I get the impression that he is troubled about other things as well.”

“You know,” you tell me, “you are right and I just haven't seen it. He has been troubled a long time – at home as well as at school.”

I reflect with you a moment. “When you talk with him and he gets so upset, I wonder what he believes you are asking or saying to him.”

“I don't quite understand what you are saying,” you reply.

“I just wonder what the messages are that he receives. I hear your caring and concern. I know you want to help him. But I wonder if he thinks you are displeased with him, or if he believes you are scolding him.”

“How could he?” you point out. “He knows that I love him.”

“I'm sure you love him. I just wonder if he really is getting the message. Could it be that he believes that he is the cause of your upset?”

“I haven't thought about that,” you reply. “As I think about it, I guess I am upset with him more than I affirm him or tell him I love him. But he has to know that I love him, doesn't he?”

“I don’t know how to answer your question,” I say. “It may be that he is desperate for someone to listen to him, even as you were when you came to me.”

I saw your eyes light up. “You’re right. I haven’t been listening. I’ve been pressing his hard to tell me what is the matter, and I guess he really doesn’t know. And when I keep nagging at him, he gets more frustrated than ever. I was so sure I knew what he needed that I didn’t really listen.”

As we continue the conversation, I might share with you that I had similar experiences, and, if you thought it would help, I might share some of them.

So I would listen. And reflect. And seek clarification. And facilitate your exploring. And keep it clear that I was listening to you as you had requested.

Listening to another really is easy. But only if I am willing to be clear with myself that my task is to listen, and reflect, and clarify. I like to see myself as a problem solver. Often, I think, I have excellent solutions to other people’s problems. That, of course, isn’t true. What I have are solutions to problems as I see and understand them. I might more accurately say that I have solutions to my problems. They may or may not work for anyone else.

In any case, I see it as an act of real friendship and caring if I am both willing and able to be the listener when you talk with me about something going on with you. In fact, it strikes me as a good idea to assume at the outset that my chief role is to be a listener when you share anything of yourself with me.

If you want more than that from me, you will let me know.

When you let me know, I will, in response, disclose something of myself to you.

In the meantime, I will listen – and reflect – and clarify – and facilitate – and keep my opinions and my solutions to myself.