



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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My Son and Me

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This paper is about my son and me. It is not autobiographical, and is not intended to be. It is, perhaps, more accurately a parable.

I am at the hospital, standing at the window of the nursery, looking down at my new-born son. A multitude of thoughts and feelings are coursing through me. This is a supreme moment in my life – the moment of the fruition of a creation for which I am responsible.

That baby – that beautiful baby boy lying there in his bassinet – is my son. I have brought him into being. I have breathed life into him. He is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. He is my son, created in my image, and I love him. Oh, how I love him. I cannot find words to express how much I love him.

Yes, I love my son. I could not love him more, nor more completely. He is my son. What more can I say. How can it be otherwise?

As I stand there looking at him, I think about what I have already given him, and what I will give him as he lives his life.

I have already given him his life. I have given him my genes. I have given him talents and abilities. I have conferred upon him the quality of decision making. As he grows to manhood, I will train him so that he is equipped to be the mature and fulfilled person that I have created him to be, and, because I love him so completely, want him to be.

I am committed to providing him with all that he will need to enter into adult life as a free and responsible person who lives fully and with much satisfaction. I am committed to seeing to it that he has the outlook on life and the resources that enable him to reach his potential as a human being.

All these thoughts and more go through my mind while I stand and look at my newborn son.

The years of growing up are full of many things for my son and me. He watches me, and tries to do the things he sees me do. We do many things together. We work and play. I teach him what I know about daily living. I observe his interests and his latent skills, and help him to develop them. I guide him as he becomes more proficient in relating to other people.

Not only do I help my son to develop, but I also have an urgent desire to protect him. I want to make sure that he is safe from all harm. I know, however, that, in the long run, the only real way that I can provide that protection is to teach him what I can, and then leave him free to make decisions about himself and his life and to experience the outcome of those decisions.

Even though I know he must, ultimately, be responsible for his own decisions, I am very concerned that my son makes the right ones. I am sorely tempted to try to control what he decides so it will happen. Only, I know I must not do that. If I control what he decides so it will happen. Only, I know I must not do that. If I control his decision making, he won't learn to make decisions – good or bad – nor to be responsible for the outcome.

If he, as an adult, is to be free, and independent, and responsible, my son must learn to make his own decisions, to be responsible for them, to act on them, and to deal with the consequences. I must accept the risks involved, and allow him to experience them. I want him to be free, and independent, and responsible. I love him enough to do what I can to make it possible.

Time goes by. My son is grown. To my deep sorrow, he appears to have decided against accepting his freedom, independence and responsibility. He seems to like the appearance of being on his own, but, in reality, repeatedly claims that he is only interested in doing what I want him to do. He declares his complete devotion to me, and says over and over that all he wants is to do my will.

Only, my son says, he has a hard time discovering my will for him.

From when he was a little boy, I have told my son that my will for him is that he be free, and independent, and responsible – a decision maker who stands on his own two feet. I have sought to guide him so that he is skilled in weighing the pros and cons of a situation. My goal is to enable him to be able and willing to set goals for himself, and to lay out the course of action to reach the goals. Both by word and example, I have shown him how to take other people into account. I have given him my values. I have undertaken to demonstrate to him the wisdom of the high standard of service to the good and well-being of all people. I have put before him the principles which, when lived, make life worthwhile.

It seems to me that I have given my son every opportunity to know clearly what my will for his life is. I want him to confront the issues of his life, and decide his own involvement. I want him to see and accept his freedom to make choices and to live out those choices. I want him to understand that I do not have a particular plan for his life that he is to discover and put into practice in order for me to be pleased with him.

My desire – my will – for my son is that he take charge of his own life.

I know, of course, that if I free my son from being accountable and responsible to me, he can go about living his life in a very different way that I might prefer. No matter how much I love him, I have to risk that he may choose neither to love himself nor anyone else. He might even choose to deny me, to break relationship with me, and to be ruthless in his use of people to gain what he wants – or believes that he wants.

If my son, as an adult, is to be mature and fulfilled, he has to be free and responsible for himself. My recourse is to hope and pray that he will choose to be, governed by what he had seen in me, and by the teachings to which he has been exposed. But I know he cannot choose this way of life unless he is truly free not to choose it.

However, no matter what he chooses, I will always be there for my son, and will always love him. Over and over, I have told him that, when he reaches adulthood, trying to please me was no longer the point. Of course, I will be pleased when he is loving and giving. I will feel a great deal of satisfaction when he puts the values he has been taught into practice and finds that they are, indeed, appropriate, realistic, and practical. I will rejoice in his joy when he feels fulfilled in his life. But pleasing me is not the issue.

Maybe the world out here is too scary and threatening to my son. Maybe the safe haven't of the home in which he has grown up is too appealing to him. Maybe he is too accustomed to having everything provided for him. Maybe --- I don't know what. In any case, now that he is adult, he refuses to accept his freedom and responsibility. He refuses to take charge of his own life. He seems to prefer to cling, demand, make excuses, and to see himself being victimized by life. But he doesn't acknowledge it. He just keeps saying that his only purpose in life is to discover my will for him and do it.

It appears that I haven't really gotten through to my son. He doesn't seem to want the gift of life I have given him. He doesn't seem to understand – yet – how truly rich his life can be when he stands on his own feet.

Every time he has a problem, my son comes to me with it. That part is OK. Only, he wants me to take full responsibility for deciding what to do and for pointing him in the right direction. He showers me with praise. He tells me how wonderful I am. He reiterates how important our relationship is to him. He expresses his great love for me. He says that he wants to serve me. He declares over and over that all he wants to do is whatever I will for him. He keeps pleading, "Tell me. Show me. Help me. All I want in life is to serve you."

It is difficult for me, for I just don't seem to get through to him. Sometimes it seems as if it would be easier just to go along with him.

Even so, I know that, if I do what my son keeps trying to get me to, it will destroy him. If I make his decisions for him, he will lose the essence of this being. If I enter into his life and control what happens, he just won't have much of a life. I love him too much. I am not willing to do that to him.

Neither am I willing to turn him away.

When my son comes to me, I try to give him the time he seems to want. I listen to him. I tell him what I understand him to be saying, and he either confirms the accuracy of my understanding or tells me again. I ask to think the situation through – whatever it may be – and to consider his options and alternatives carefully, and what the outcome of

any of them might be.

Sometimes my son becomes very impatient with me. “Dad,” he demands, “Why won’t you tell me what to do? You are wise and experienced and powerful. You know the answers. Just tell me what to do and I will do it.”

I feel the pressure of my son’s demands. He tries so hard. He seems so sincere. He is a good person. And I certainly have my ideas about what is best for him to decide and to do. I am tempted to yield to the pressure and tell him – especially when he is about to go in a direction that I know may be destructive for him.

But for my son’s sake, I must not take over in that manner.

I watch my son go about his life. I know he is unhappy. I see many signs of anxiety and fear. Sometimes he is depressed. Sometimes he is angry. Sometimes he is harsh toward his wife and children. And then he is filled with shame and remorse and guilt. That, in turn, seems to feed the depression.

In those difficult times, my son turns to me. “Please, Dad, forgive me. Show me your way. Make me a better person. Don’t let me do those horrible things. You know that I don’t want to be that way. Please, Dad, help me.”

His plea is very persuasive. My son doesn’t seem to realize that he is trying to get me to be responsible for him and his life. Or, he doesn’t acknowledge that he is.

I have thought about really confronting my son, and saying to him, “Look, son, you are adult now. It is time for you to take on the responsibilities of adulthood. That means that you are the decider. The burden of your life is on your shoulders. It isn’t right for you to turn to me to tell you what to do. If I do, I will end up destroying you. I love you too much to do that.”

I can envision my son’s reply. “Dad, you are unhappy with me. You don’t want to help me. You won’t support me. You just want me to make up my own mind about things. At least, now I know your will for me. Don’t worry about me – he would tell himself – he would stop talking with me while he did his version of deciding for himself. And his reason would be to do my will – to please me.

No matter how it turns out, I can hear my son saying, “I’m doing what you want me to do, Dad.”

It won’t do any good to confront my son. If he is to find his way, I must leave him free. I must leave him free to be lost as well as to find his way.

Time goes by.

One day, my son comes to me and it is immediately apparent that something has

happened in his life. His first words tell me what. “Dad,” he says, “I have finally allowed myself to see what you mean. All my life, you have told me how important it is for me to take charge of my own life. I have been trying to do that as the way to be obedient to you and to earn your favor. I have devoted my life to trying to please you, and, finally, I understand that pleasing you is not the issue. I like it when you are, but I must not let that be the reason for my deciding and my doing.”

My son goes on to tell me that he now realizes that he cannot experience the fullness of life if he does not take charge of himself. The issue is for him to pick up that responsibility and pursue his life accordingly because it is what he wants – not because it is what I want for him.

Of course, my son knows that what he is telling me pleases me very much, and he likes it that I am pleased. He is clear now, though, that he is not ordering his life this way for the purpose of pleasing me.

My son says to me, “Dad, you have taught me well. You have shown me how to go about living my life. You have provided me with ideas, principles, and concepts. You have opened to me the ways to come to grips with my life and to experience the richness of it. You have let me see what it means to take on life every day and to taste its fullness. I am grateful. I am proud to be your son.

I know that my son may never choose to take charge of his own life. No matter how much I want it for him, it may not happen. No matter how much I love him, I can’t make it reality for him. If he doesn’t, I know he won’t ever know fulfillment and wholeness. And I will be sad.

I also know that I can’t give my son fulfillment and wholeness. I can’t make his life rich. I can’t fix things for him. No one can give these things to another.

What I can give my son – and have given him – are the resources that, when appropriated and used, enable him to experience fulfillment and wholeness. I also give him my companionship and my availability – my steadfastness and my constancy.

And, no matter what, I give him my love. After all, he is my son.