



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Mysterious Behavior of God

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How does God behave in the universe of God's creation? Perhaps more importantly, how does God behave among us? Is there an answer to the question?

Probably not in an absolute sense, but we tend to speculate about the answer, and come to a whole variety of beliefs about what the answer may be. Then, when we speculate, we tend to be convinced that the answer at which we have arrived is, indeed, **THE CORRECT ANSWER** to our question.

The range of answers is, from one extreme, that God is an absentee God who created it all, set it in motion, and left it to run itself, whatever the outcome may be. And, to the other, that God is intensely, actively and currently involved in running God's creation, ordering and directing even the most minute aspect of it, and intervening at will to make things come out as God has decided, no matter what the preceding sequence of events may have been.

In other words, the two extremes are that God is not involved at all, or that God is actively involved in running everything that goes on in God's creation. Said another way, God never enters into the operation of God's creation, or God intervenes at will in the operation of God's creation, and makes, or causes, things to come out according to God's deciding.

I doubt that the answer lies in either of these extremes.

How, then, does God behave among us – if God does?

The question is a thorny one theologically. It has to do with what kind of God we believe God to be, and with what we believe about how God lets us know that God really loves us and cares for us. How does God behave among us?

Jesus is quoted as having said, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them." (Mt. 6:26 NRSV) And, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you that even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." (Mt. 6:28-29 NRSV)

And then there is the song of the Psalmist (Ps. 121 NRSV) that ends with the words, "The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore."

Further, Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, assured them that, "My God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (Ph. 4:19 NRSV)

These, and many other scriptures, do seem to suggest rather specifically that God is very much involved in our lives – indeed, in one way of interpreting, that God actively

intervenes and causes things to happen, or not happen, in human life, according to God's deciding.

The interpretations we frequently give to events in our lives also suggest some of our beliefs about how God is involved in what happens to us.

For instance, the man came into the meeting and announced, "I do not know why I am here. But, God told me to come, so here I am."

And, in a television interview after a terrible accident in which several people were killed, including her daughter's best friend, but not her daughter, a mother said, "I thank God that he spared the life of my daughter."

I didn't know if that mother believed that God chose not to spare the life of her daughter's friend, or the others who were killed in that terrible accident, or what she believed. I did wonder. And I wondered what the mother of the dead girl believed. Did she see it, too, that God had chosen to spare one girl and not the other? And, if she did, what did she believe about the nature of God's love for her and her daughter, or, indeed, about the very nature of God?

I want to state up front that I cannot make sense out of, nor reconcile, the belief that God arbitrarily and/or capriciously "pulls the strings" in our lives and causes things to happen, or not happen, without reference to normal cause and effect. Stated more succinctly, I do not believe that God is an interventionist God.

I do not believe that God sets aside the order and working of God's created universe to cause particular things to happen, no matter how desirable they may seem to be. If God does, then I have real problems with seeing God as loving, and kindly, and merciful – or as unconditionally loving. I, also, have trouble seeing God as dependable and trustworthy.

I do believe that God is loving, and kindly, and merciful. I do believe that God loves unconditionally. I do believe that God is dependable and trustworthy and I do believe that God is intimately involved in God's creation, and specifically, in our lives. I just don't have an absolute answer as to how. I cannot believe that God selectively intervenes. If God does, what a terrible creator God is. I would not tolerate that kind of behavior in another human being. How could I possibly tolerate it in God?

To struggle with this issue, I decided to write this paper, "The Mysterious Behavior of God." Is it God's will that I do so? Has God intervened in some way to cause me to take on this task? Did I have a choice? Might I have chosen not to write this Paper? How is God involved?

Insofar as I know and understand, I did have a choice. God did not intervene. And God is involved. I don't know that I can be equally clear about how God is involved. I don't know that I can be equally clear about how God is involved. Simply

stated, God is beyond my full understanding – but not beyond my understanding and my believing within my capacity.

I have learned some of the Laws of God’s created universe. Many of them, like gravity and the movement of the universe, seem predictable and absolutely consistent and dependable. Then it occurs to me that all God’s Laws may actually be that way.

If God’s Laws are predictable, and absolutely consistent and dependable, I wonder how we explain that, in the events of life, things do not always come out the same way. Some people come down with pneumonia and die. Some come down with pneumonia and live. Some, even though everyone carries the pneumonia germ, I am told, do not come down with the disease at all. If God’s Laws are predictable, and consistent and dependable, what is the variable that changes the outcome? Is it just happenstance? Is it something else? Or is it, indeed, the result of God’s intervention? How does God behave in human life?

I searched and searched, and now I suggest that the variable – at least among human beings – is that of choice and the outcome of choice. Creatures in the image of God as we are, making decisions is a part of our being. Inevitably, consciously, unconsciously, human beings make choices. There is no option not to. Even at the level of minutia of life, decision upon decision upon decision, acted upon, shapes and controls what happens in our lives and in our world. In this creation, it is just this way.

And the action that follows upon every decision, equally inevitably, has its effect – good or bad – positive or negative – little or large – in our lives and in our world. This is how this creation of God works.

As I observe what I can of the creation, I wonder if it may be true that all life that God has created makes decisions. We are led to believe that other life forms than humans act in response to instinct.

I wonder if this is true.

For instance, I planted some pole beans in my garden. The plants came up and soon began to put out feelers or runners. When I built a frame on which the beans could climb, I noticed that the runners turned in the direction of the frame, and soon were climbing it. Some of the runners were as much as two feet away from the frame and actually growing away from it. How did they know to turn and grow toward the frame? Did they, at some point, decide to do so? Or, was it just instinct?

How do bees know where to find flowers in their search for pollen? What goes on in a dog’s brain when he obeys, or doesn’t obey, his master’s command. What happens that, at a given time, an amoeba splits in two? Does the bee decide to go in search of the pollen? Does the dog decide to obey, or not to obey, his master? Does the amoeba decide whether or not to split? Or is it all just instinct?

Maybe those questions are too far-fetched. Maybe they don't need to be asked at all. I do wonder just how extensively in creation decision is a factor in what happens.

One thing is for sure. People make decisions and act on them. And the outcome plays a major role in what happens among people.

Inevitably, I choose and act – and so does everyone else. Equally inevitably, that choosing and acting has an outcome. From the creation of human being, this has been true.

I do not choose and act in a vacuum. Everyone with whom I am involved in any way is affected by what I decide and do. And far beyond any capacity I have to know, events and people are affected by my choices and my actions. In basic reality, I make no move, I engage in no action, without having decided to do so. And every choice and action has consequences and outcomes that I can't begin to trace. Some I can, but by no means all of them.

For instance, a number of years ago, a close friend of mine and his son were killed in an automobile accident. The accident occurred on a straight stretch of highway on a bright and sunny afternoon. The car traveling in the opposite direction, threw a rear wheel at just exactly the moment when the car could swing into the path of my friends car and cause the collision that killed him and his son.

If either car had been traveling one mile an hour faster or slower, the accident would not have occurred. As it turned out, if the other driver had not mounted a defective wheel on his car, the accident would not have occurred. If either driver had started his trip a few minutes earlier or later, the accident would not have occurred. However, numberless decisions were made and actions were taken that brought all the components together and the accident occurred.

Was God involved? How was God involved? Did God intervene and cause the accident? Or did God intervene and spare the life of the driver of the other car? If God was, how was God involved?

Although, as I have already said, I believe that God does not intervene and cause things to happen a particular way, I also believe that God is involved in all of the life of God's creation. And I believe that God cares very much what happens to God's creation in God's own image.

How? How does God show that caring? How is God involved? And how is God involved without cancelling the fact and reality of choice?

It appears to me that human beings – maybe all of creation – are created with the persistent tendency to be well and healthy, and to live fulfilling lives. We aren't all healthy, and we don't all live fulfilling lives. Nor is there anything that makes a long and fruitful life inevitable. Even so, human beings consistently display the capacity and the

determination to conquer adversity and to find fulfillment – sometimes, it seems, against all odds.

And God has incorporated in God's creation all the resources needed to find fulfillment, even against all odds, if we humans choose to search for and use them. The power and the means are in God's creation, and they are tapped by human beings deciding and acting. Through those resources – known to us or not – God is involved in what happens in human life.

I can't tell you the number of times I have been sitting with a counselee, and have felt totally without resources to respond adequately to the need presented to me. In those moments, I pray. I pray for God's guidance and help. I pray for insight. I pray that I may be able to say and do the helpful thing. I pray that I may successfully tap resources that God has already supplied.

Time after time, out of the blue, it seemed, the answer I needed came, and often, I didn't even know it was what was needed at the moment.

Similarly, on too many occasions to count, a person in crisis has phoned my office needing some counseling time that day and the time has been there, even though, typically, a person may have to wait two or three weeks for an hour to be available. In fact, some counselees tell me, "I don't ever make appointments ahead of time. When I have needed to come in, an hour has always been available."

I can recall many times in my life when, without any clear indication as to why, I felt the urge to go and visit a person or to do a particular thing. When I responded to that urge, in the outcome, I always saw a reason for it.

If it would serve any purpose, I could recount many instances of apparent coincidence – or something – at work in my life and in the world around me.

How does all this work? I am not sure. I think this is what I mean by the mysterious behavior of God. In every instance to which I might refer, it was necessary for me to make a decision and to act on the decision. In every instance, I could have decided differently, and, of course, the outcome would have been different.

I believe in prayer, and I believe in the power of prayer. I believe in telling God how it is with me, and how I want something to turn out. I believe that, when people come together and pray, we tap into resources in God's creation to facilitate and enable prayed-for results. I believe that God has included in God's creation those mysterious-to-us lines of communication that, if used, facilitate the process toward healing and health, and overcoming adversity.

I believe that God is in our midst, cheering us on and urging us to make good use of what God has structured to enable us to make this a good life. I believe that God weeps with us and laughs with us and supports us with God's unlimited and

unconditional love. I believe that God does not tamper with our freedom to make decisions, to act on them, and to be responsible for the outcome.

If God were to tamper with that freedom and responsibility, or set it aside on any occasion, the result in our world would be utter chaos. God would prove to be undependable. God could not be trusted.

But God does not tamper with the factor of choice in human behavior, nor does God release us from responsibility for our choices and actions, nor from the reality of the outcome.

In an effort to understand about God, I think about my work with counselees. Frequently, they come to me wanting me to intervene in some way and fix the situation they bring to me. Typically, they want it fixed in the way they want without they, themselves, having to change.

I am well aware that it is neither my task, nor do I have the ability to fix things the way they want without any change taking place in them. I believe that I would be doing them a disservice if I were to try to accede to their request.

Instead, I listen to counselees. I facilitate their exploring and looking into themselves and their situation. I raise questions. I examine options and alternatives with them. I guide them in considering possible outcomes. I raise the issue of the costs involved in changing and not changing. I strive to be accepting, understanding, and empathetic.

Moreover, I remain clear with myself and with counselees that, for their own sake, I do not pick up the responsibility that is theirs alone to decide and act on their situation. Sometimes my position is frustrating to them – especially when they want someone to give them relief by taking over responsibility and fixing the situation. I value my counselees too much to take over in this way, and do this to them.

True, with my questions and observations and by my general demeanor, I seek to influence counselees, but I am careful not to intervene to cause anything to happen, nor to keep it from happening. No matter how much I care, no matter how clearly I may see that another decision and action may be more constructive or less destructive, I do not make the decision for the counselee, nor act on it. I am unwilling to do this destructive thing to them. I believe it would be grossly unfair for me to do so.

Nonetheless, I am deeply involved with my counselees. I care what happens to them and those with whom they share life. I want the very best for them. I express what I think that may be. I am supportive in whatever ways I know how to be. Always, I undertake to respect and honor them – to love them, if you will. They are worth it. They are that valuable. They need for me to be that consistent and that dependable.

As I think about it, my behavior with counselees is not mysterious. It is quite knowable and understandable. However I behave, and whatever influence I may have, what I do not do is set aside their responsibility to decide, to act, and to deal with the outcome. They can count on me for that.

Sometimes, it is a major temptation to intervene, especially when counselees put a great deal of pressure on me, and when what they are doing seems so unwise. I believe that I must not yield to that temptation – even though they may use all their persuasive powers to get me to do so. I remind myself, over and over, just how destructive to them it would be, if I were to do so.

I am a human being, with the usual limitations that go with being human. If my behavior with counselees is not mysterious, maybe I am incorrect to describe God's behavior as mysterious.

But I believe that I am not incorrect. So much more is involved in God's behavior than in mine. More completely than I ever can, God loves, supports, guides, understands, and shares with me whatever is going on in my life. At the same time, God is entrusting me with full responsibility for my life. God does not set aside the cause and effect of human decoding and acting. I can count on this being true.

God is involved in my life. God is involved in everybody's life. God is involved in whatever goes on in all God's creation. How God is involved is not always clear. However, since God's love is complete and without any limits, I am sure that God is involved in ways that are always for the ultimate well-being of God's people. Since I believe this is to be true, it is all right for the behavior of God to be mysterious.

I trust God.