



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Pebble in the Pond

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From about as far back as I can remember, I have known the illustration of the pebble dropped in the pond. I can easily see the picture. Indeed, upon occasion, I have enacted it.

There is this lovely little pond, mirror smooth, and shaded by tall trees. I stand and look at it a while. Then I bend over, pick up a small stone, and toss it into the water. Wavelets form at the point where the stone enters the water, and fan out across the pond in ever widening circles until the entire surface of the pond is disturbed. I drop one small stone into the water, and its influence reaches to the farthest bank of the pond.

That is the illustration, and the theory is that, no matter how small or large the body of water may be, the ripples caused by even a tiny object dropped into the water will continue across the water until they wash upon the shore. It would seem that the ripples would gradually fade away. “Not so,” say those who know about such things.

“In fact,” said a scientist friend of mine, when, on an occasion, we were discussing the theory, “You can throw a stone into the Pacific Ocean while standing on its shore in California and, eventually, the waves it causes will rock a battleship anchored in Pearl Harbor.” I have to decide whether to believe him or not, for I know no way to prove his statement. However, I can demonstrate the effect of one tiny pebble on the surface of a quiet pond in the forest.

One tiny pebble dropped into a quiet pond at any point along its shore will disturb the surface of the entire pond. Such is the influence of even one tiny pebble.

I am prone to think that I have little, if any, influence in my world. Vast as the world is, how can I have any effect upon what happens? Oh, I recognize some small influence upon things and people in the small sphere in which I live, but that is pretty much it. Except that the theory illustrated by the people in the pond suggests something different.

I tell myself, “I can’t change the world. I can’t even make much difference in the part of the world in which I live.” Only I can, if the theory is correct. I can and I do.

What an awesome thought! I have influence. I make a difference. I count for something. Whether or not I want to.

If I deliberately set about to change the world – or even a small segment of it – I will make a difference, although it may not be what I want. Whether or not I set about to change the world, my example and my witness does have an influence, and it may be in the way that I want.

Like it or not, I can’t not be in the world. I can’t not have some kind of effect on my world. I am influential.

Some people stand out more than others. People like Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Schweitzer, Mother Theresa, and a host of others. And even Jesus Christ. They, whatever their intent, have made a visible difference in my world. They, in my view, have made a positive difference. There are those who also have had a great deal of influence, only, as I see it, the difference has been negative.

Nonetheless, historically and currently, I see that one person has made – and does make – a difference in this world of which I am a part.

What difference do I make? I'm not a very important person. I don't exercise a lot of power. I travel in a rather small sphere. I don't think it makes much difference what I say or do.

Just in what I can observe and experience firsthand, I am aware that there are many problems that need to be solved. I encounter poor people, homeless people, hungry people, sick people, crippled people, troubled people, imprisoned people – and a society that tends either to ignore the problems or to try to solve them with a band aid approach. And, in the main, I feel helpless to do much of anything about these problems. Sometimes I can see things to be done – like alleviating the suffering of people devastated by hurricanes, earthquakes, or famines – but, mostly, in such situations, there isn't much that I actually can do to make any real difference. Doing something depends upon someone else. I certainly don't have resources to make any real difference.

I don't?

Usually, I see resources that other people have. I look at the billions wasted by the government. I hear about people receiving millions a year in salary. I read about people who have accumulated billions, and who spend lavish sums on personal comfort and pleasure.

Then I see a picture of suffering humanity somewhere in the world, and I feel outraged and indignant. How can “they,” with such resources at their disposal, stand by and do nothing about the ills of the world.? They could have so much influence if only they would. I am tempted to gather a cloak of such resources. And I am tempted to tell myself that, since I have so few resources, there isn't anything I can do.

There isn't?

True. I am just a little pebble dropped in a great big pond. And I am confronted with the reality that I make a difference whether I want to or not. I am influential. Because I live, and move, and have my being in this world, the world is different than it would have been. Therefore I ask myself, “What kind of pebble am I? What difference do I make?”

The imagery of the pebble in the pond breaks down at this point. Any kind of pebble dropped in the pond sends waves across the pond. It doesn't make any difference

whether it is large or small, dirty or clean, smooth or rough, the pebble disturbs the surface of the water, and affects the whole pond. Similarly, the action of mine – even non-action – affects my world in some way. Now, the issue becomes, not whether or not I have influence, but what kind of influence do I have?

It makes a difference what kind of pebble I am – or may be. I have to accept that the fact of influencing is universal and inevitable. Neither I, nor any other person, has the option not to be influential. But I do have options as to the kind of influence I have. And, whether I acknowledge it or not, I do choose how I am involved in my world.

I can't not affect my world. I have both say and responsibility as to the kind of effect I have.

At this point, a curious factor asserts itself. When, by my behavior, I try to shape and/or control the behavior of others, I tend to run into problems. They just may not be influenced as I want them to be. I discover that I can never be really sure of their reactions and behavior. They may misunderstand my intent. They may show signs of being defensive. They may be stubborn or perverse. They may become angry and very resistive, no matter how benevolent or well intended I may be. The situation may turn out in a very different manner than I intended or hoped. When my aim is to shape and/or control the behavior of others, I nearly always encounter resistance and/or reluctance. Deliberate attempts to influence – manipulate may be the better word – turn out, in the long run, not to be very successful, nor very satisfactory.

Frequently, when people come to me for counseling, I see what I believe to be wise solutions to their problems. For instance, each one of a couple may complain that the other always says critical things: that virtually every encounter ends in harsh words. When I check for accuracy, each is likely to say, "Well, yes. A lot of the time I am that way. But he/she goads me to it. If he/she would change, I wouldn't say those kinds of things. It's not my fault. It's his/hers."

How do you like that for a pebble dropped in a pond? The changes that each needs to make are obvious. They should just stop responding to each other that way. I am tempted to say to them, "You can't go on this way. Between now and the next time you come in, I want you to say only nice things to each other. If you can't do that, just don't talk."

If I yield to the temptation and give the couple that directive, the report that I usually get is, "It didn't work. He/she didn't do what you said. I reminded him/her, but it didn't make any difference. He/she just kept on being mean to me." Or maybe they will just look a little embarrassed, and say, "I guess we failed on our assignment. I guess you are disappointed in us."

That couple continually influence each other, and, were I to give that kind of directive, I would certainly influence them in some way – but, not likely in the way I intended.

I think the lesson in this is that it is neither my right, nor my business to be trying to affect the lives of other people in particular ways – even when I am convinced that what I am trying to bring about is for the well-being of the person or persons I am trying to influence. That means that I can't choose to be a particular kind of pebble for the purpose of making particular kinds of waves in the pond to bring about a particular result.

Rather, I choose to be a particular kind of pebble because that is the kind of pebble I want to be, whatever kinds of waves may result.

Even so, since I have influence whether I want to or not, it seems desirable to pay attention to the kinds of influence that results from what I say and do.

For instance, I am standing in the check-out lane at the grocery store. The line is long, and I am already irritated because I couldn't get something I wanted and because other shoppers are so thoughtless as they wheel their buggies up and down the aisles of the store. They act as if no one else is in the store. At the head of the line, the person being checked out is incredibly slow about paying for his groceries and moving on. He fumbles getting his money out of his wallet. He stands and counts his change twice. He has difficulty getting the bills and change put away, and then manages to tip one bag of his groceries over so that he has to take still more time to get them rebagged before he can move out of the way to let the check-out girl get to the next customer.

By now, I am steaming – and vocal about my displeasure. I notice that other customers show increasing signs of irritation. Some join in the grumbling. The check-out girl hears them. Her jaw is set. She doesn't smile. She, clearly, is unhappy with the turn of events, and it shows in her every move.

Now, suppose that I have decided that I don't like being, and don't want to be, a griping and complaining customer, no matter what the provocation. I wait patiently. I converse quietly and cheerfully with others in the line. In time, I reach the check-out girls. I smile at her. I assist her by bagging my own groceries. I thank her for her service to me. There is a strong likelihood that my changed behavior will bring about a marked change in the attitudes of those involved in the situation with me. But I choose to be this kind of person because I want to be this way, no matter what others do with it.

Whatever kind of pebble I choose to be, if I am attentive, I soon learn that I affect how people respond to me. When their responses are different from what I expect or desire, I take a look at my attitudes and ways of functioning and ask myself, "How have I contributed to bringing about the response?"

When I identify my part in the encounter, I ask myself, "Do I want to make changes so as to bring about different responses, or do I want to continue as I have been – and why?"

I know that I am able to upset people. I can bring about anger and defensiveness. I can put distance between me and another person. I know how to influence in these ways. However, I don't want to bring about these kinds of reactions from other people. Therefore, I choose not to behave so that I get these results.

I like for people to respond favorably to me. I like for them to like me. I like for them to be in good relationship with me. However, I choose my behavior, not to bring about these results, but to be the person I want to be.

I am a pebble dropped into the pond that is my life and my world. I have limited resources to immediately and visibly bring resolution to the major problems that exist in my world. I have limitless resources to be positive and creative, kindly and loving, thoughtful and considerate, and a whole host of other things. I have no way to measure how much influence I may have in the long run.

But influence I will have – and do have. It can't be any other way.