



Writings of W. Burney Overton

Burney's Papers

1992 Series, No. 6

My Balloon is a Lead Balloon

January 7, 1993

W. Burney Overton

My balloon is a lead balloon. Or, maybe it isn't. It is up to me to decide.

Balloons are among the chief symbols of celebration among people.

Round balloons. Oval balloons. Long balloons. Short balloons. Balloons of many colors and sizes. Thousands of balloons released into the air at just the right moment to mark the peak of the celebration. Bouquets of balloons with small persons attached to the strings at the end of them. Mammoth multi-colored balloons floating in the sky with big persons standing in the baskets swinging beneath them.

All kinds of balloons everywhere.

And wherever they are, they signify festivity and celebration, happiness and joy. Except for one kind – a lead balloon. “It went over like a lead balloon,” they say, and they always signify something that “bombed”; an effort that was a failure – not festivity and celebration.

Suppose I were to choose a balloon as a symbol of my life. If I were to see my life as a failure, or less than happy and celebrative, I might choose to say of it, “My balloon is a lead balloon.” And I probably would label me a failure as well. My life is a lead balloon, and I am a lead balloon.

What a bleak outlook on life that would be! And it would be an outlook that I had chosen.

An outlook that I had chosen?

In defense of myself, I protest. I don't decide how to see it. It's how it really is.

How it really is? Do I have the capacity to determine how it really is? Or is it, after all, dependent upon my point of view? Do I, in fact, determine how I see it to be?

I remember a book, “Man's Search For Meaning,” written a number of years ago by Viktor Frankl. Dr. Frankl, when he was a prisoner in a concentration camp in Germany during the Second World War, discovered something significant about how people look at life; how they decide upon a point of view; and how that decision meant life or death for them.

All the prisoners were in the same horrible state. They were poorly housed. They were cold. They were hungry. They were sick. They were grossly mistreated by their captors. Virtually nothing was done to alleviate their suffering. Each day and every day, they faced the possibility – the likelihood, it seemed – that they might be dragged off to the gas ovens and be cremated, or of simply dying there in the prison.

Such were the realities of life in the German prison camps at that time. It could be accurately said of those prisoners that their balloon was a lead balloon. There seemed

to be no reason for any hope, let alone festivity or celebration. That is, unless they choose to see it differently.

Dr. Frankl discovered that the prisoners did actually choose a point of view about themselves and their situation, and responded accordingly. That point of view was not imposed upon them. It was their own choosing. And, as it turned out, their very survival depended upon the one chosen.

The prisoners who chose a positive attitude toward their situation tended to be the ones who survived the horrors of the concentration camp. Those who chose a negative point of view tended to be the ones who died. He discovered, further, that the ability to make that choice could not be taken away from them – no matter the threats, nor how horribly they were treated. These insights seemed so important that he decided to write about them in his book.

Dr. Frankl is by no means the only person to have made those kinds of discoveries about people and about points of view. Norman Cousins is another. Although he had been diagnosed as having a degenerative, irreversible, and incurable illness, he refused to give up on life. First, he decided to participate wholeheartedly in the treatment prescribed by the medical people, even though they made it clear to him that he could not get well. Then, he built a program of laughter into his life. Against all odds, he conquered the illness that was supposed to kill him.

Mr. Cousins believed that the change of outlook on life brought about by the laughter resulted in his being healed. Subsequently, he wrote a book, “The Anatomy of an Illness,” in which he set forth his theory, and told of his experience in support of it. It appears that a change of point of view and the activities that resulted was the difference between life and death for him. The balloon he chose was no lead balloon.

In the December, 1992 issue of Reader’s Digest, there was an article entitled, “Lighten Up!” that strongly supported Mr. Cousins’ theory. The article is taken from the book of the same title written by C. W. Metcalf. The thesis of the article and the book is that people need not to take themselves too seriously, but to lighten up. Those who choose to do so tend toward a healthier and a happier life – a life with more meaning. Don’t choose a lead balloon.

It seems that these people are all suggesting that whether my balloon (my life) is a lead balloon or not depends upon how I decide to see my life and all that makes it up. It depends upon my point of view.

My health, my happiness, my very life depends upon my point of view – which is not imposed upon me, but is the product of my choosing?

I’m not sure I am prepared to accept that theory. I have good eyesight. My other sensory systems function well. I am a rational person. I take pride in my ability to put

things together and sort things out. “Mostly, I see how it really is,” I tell myself, “I go by the evidence. I don’t choose one point of view over another.”

I don’t!

Well, do I? I need to think about that a bit.

I remember a time when I was standing on a street corner, and an automobile accident occurred right before my eyes. I saw the whole thing. I saw exactly what happened. I could describe the accident in detail. I knew who did what, and who was at fault. It wasn’t a matter of a point of view. The facts stood for themselves. There really wasn’t any question about any of it.

Anyhow, that’s how I saw it, and believed it to be.

As it turned out, the two drivers saw it differently than I did. They didn’t agree with my story, or with each other’s, so they ended up in a big argument. They brought suit against each other and ended up in court. Since I had been so outspoken at the scene of the accident about what I had seen, both people called me as a witness in the case.

I was amazed at what I heard in that courtroom. The testimony of the two drivers, and indeed, the testimony of other witnesses were quite different from mine. Even though I had been at the scene of the accident, observing all that happened, my testimony didn’t seem to carry a lot of weight. In the end, the case was decided quite differently from the way I would have decided it, given what I had observed. I left the courtroom feeling frustrated and outraged. I just didn’t understand how the others could have seen the situation the way they did. But they did, and my view was discounted.

Sometimes it’s hard for me to accept that what one sees is “in the eye of the beholder.” I see myself going by the facts. “Facts are facts.” I tell myself, “You can’t argue with facts.” Facts give me a sense of certainty. I believe that how I see it is how it really is.

Actually, I realize that such absoluteness – such certainty – cannot be. In a given situation, there are as many points of view as there are people viewing. While there may be many similarities, no two points of view are identical. It seems to me that this is a very important concept to understand and accept. No matter what the situation, for me it is always what I perceive and interpret it to be – as it is for every person involved.

Not only do I perceive and interpret the situation in a particular way, but I then proceed both to react and to act on the basis of that interpretation. I decide what kind of balloon my balloon is.

Dr. Frankl might have said, “This is an impossible situation in which I find myself. I am not able to survive it. The guards treat me cruelly. The other prisoners don’t care about me. They only care about themselves. This is a terrible place. This is a

horrible life. There is no hope.” Had he taken that attitude, his balloon would have been, for him, a lead balloon.

Norman Cousins might have said, “I have an irreversible degenerative disease that cannot be healed. The medical profession has been very clear and candid with me about it. I have seen the test results. There is nothing for me to do but to resign myself to my fate and wait for death as gracefully as I can.” That is a lead balloon outlook on life.

Or, I might say to myself, “This past year has been absolutely horrible, and I can’t expect the new year to be much better.” I could support that view by listing all the “bad” things that had happened. I could describe unsatisfactory workplace conditions. I could talk about how difficult it is to deal with the people with whom I have to deal. I could complain in all sorts of ways.

If I were to choose to see this past year from such a depressing point of view, then my balloon would indeed be a lead balloon.

My balloon doesn’t have to be a lead balloon.

I have choices. I can choose a very different outlook. I can say, “What a blessed year this past year has been!” I can acknowledge the adversities and the difficulties, such as they were, and be thankful for having been able to weather the storms when they came. I can look at the times of good health and happy activity, and allow myself to see the brightness of life. I can remind myself of the privilege of loving many people, and being loved by many people. Indeed, when I think about it, there are so many things that I can see in positive terms that I can only conclude that my life is a soaring, multicolored balloon, joyous and celebrative.

I’m not under any illusions. In life, there are difficulties. Tragedies occur. There are times of stress and trauma. People do not always function in the ways that I most prefer. I sometimes let myself down by my failure to carry through in the most productive ways available to me. Of course, there are negatives in my life. I either allow myself to be weighed down by them, or I see that they provide a contrast that lets me appreciate the positives all the more.

Is my balloon a lead balloon? It all depends on how I choose to look at me and my life.

I remember the Pollyanna books I read when I was a youngster. Pollyanna’s life was pretty sad. Her guardian was a crotchety old maid who seemed to have no understanding of her small charge, and was always displeased with her. Nothing Pollyanna did met with her approval. Whatever she had of clothes and toys came from the missionary barrel that arrived occasionally. There was little in her life that invited her to feel happy, or have a bright outlook.

Nonetheless, Pollyanna chose to have a happy outlook on life. Whatever the situation, she found something about which to be glad. Disappointed though she often was, she elected to be right and cheerful. She never allowed her balloon to be a lead balloon.

In those days, I often chose to “make the best of things” and be cheerful. I liked Pollyanna’s point of view and decided to adopt it. It made sense to me to try to be “up” even when things weren’t going very well.

However, my cheerfulness must not have been OK with those around me. I remember being admonished repeatedly, “Don’t be a Pollyanna.” I got the impression that reality, more often than not, was, or was supposed to be, dark and dismal, and that it wasn’t acceptable to “look on the bright side.”

I never have figured out what is wrong with looking on the bright side, and I’m glad I haven’t. Nor do I understand why people prefer to look on the dark side. The point of view that I choose has a powerful influence upon me. It affects everything I think, say, and do.

It turns out, then, that my balloon is a lead balloon or not according to how I choose to see it.

If I have a lead balloon view, I can always find someone with whom to be unhappy. I can see the people in a group I am leading as uncooperative and difficult. I can become impatient with a couple who come to me for counseling, and then do not put into practice what I suggest to them. I can be upset and critical when someone does differently than I believe he or she should. I can feel mistreated when I am not taken into account as I think I should be. I can berate myself when I do not succeed in accomplishing all the goals I have set for myself. I can be heavily burdened by all that I haven’t been able to do, and that no one else has done. I can feel angry, and depressed, and generally pessimistic about my life. I can dwell on the things that are “not right” in my life. I can be “down” on me. I can feel sorry for myself.

I don’t have to have a lead balloon view. Every situation to which I have referred can be seen in a different way. If I persist in having a lead balloon view, maybe the time has come for me to do some homework about my point of view and why I hold to it so firmly.

My balloon is a lead balloon.

No. My balloon is not a lead balloon. I choose to see my balloon as one that is many sizes, many shapes, many colors, and that soars and celebrates the gift that is my life.

You can make a similar choice.