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The Persistence of Pattern

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W. Burney Overton

I grew up in a small town in the mountains of upper East Tennessee. To this day, I have a small town outlook on life, although most of my adult life has been spent in large city settings. Living in that small town community, I learned to see family, parents, teachers, ministers, law enforcement officers, heads of business and industry, and many other – and myself – in a particular way. I also learned a set of beliefs about God, Jesus, the church, the world, everything, and I assumed they were correct. I even assumed that they were the common and typical beliefs of most people. Further, I learned a value system, patterns of behavior, and ways of relating that governed what I did and said.

In the setting of that small town in upper East Tennessee, I know who I was – an average, reasonably well-behaved person who mostly conformed to what I believed was expected of me. It appeared to me that, in general, people liked me and seemed to approve of me, although I remember that I worried a great deal for fear that I wasn't measuring up. Whenever I got into trouble – and I did sometimes – I felt anxious, uneasy, and guilty until I could get back into everyone's good graces.

The small town environment, family, friends, church, and school all shaped who I saw me to be, my beliefs, my outlook on life, my attitudes, and my behavior. I brought all of them into my adult life. They form the foundation on which I have built. They were – and are – the early influences that put the patterns of my life in place.

All my life, I have felt a persistent pressure to keep those patterns in place. After all, they are the manifestations of who I see me to be, and, indeed, of who I see you and the world to be. They are where I started. They express – have expressed – my sense of my world and me in it. However, as I look back, I realize that I have changed many of the patterns, but not without a lot of struggle and often distress.

Through the years, I have had little need, nor desire, to change many of those patterns. And many of them have needed to be changed. In undertaking to make those changes, I have learned just how persistent patterns can be, and just how resistant I am to changing. When I feel unhappy or dissatisfied at home, or in the church, community, or world, I don't usually think in terms of me changing. I tend to place responsibility on other persons, and to think that they are the ones who need to change.

My first reactions, which often are quite persistent, are that you (whoever you may be) need to change. I'm not the one who needs to. I even tend to think that you ought to see that you are the one to change, and I'm not very good at understanding why you don't.

While my first reactions may be on target, I need to learn that getting you to change is not my task. However desirable I may believe it is for you to be different, my task is to deal with me – not you – in the area of changing. When I work this point of view through, I come to realize that the areas of change over which I have control are those within me.

For instance, let's say that we fight all the time. We just don't see eye to eye. I am convinced that the disagreeing and the fighting would stop if you would just quit reacting the way you do.

But you say, in no uncertain terms, "If you want our fighting to end, you stop."

"Me stop?" I scream. "I can't stop. I don't back down to anybody. Besides, I'm right, and you know it." In my belief system, if I were to back down, I'd be weak. Since I am afraid that you will think of me as weak, I just can't be the one who ends our fighting.

Besides that, I see it that you don't take me into account. In fact, I don't remember that anyone ever has.

When I face that situation and allow myself to do so, I see some things. I see my pattern. I'm always on the defensive about being taken into account. I believe I have to "stand up for myself" because no one else is going to stand up for me. So I fight with you. Even though I don't like it, I know how the pattern works, and I know who I am as I use it.

If I change, I have to alter some foundation patterns. My beliefs, outlook, attitudes, behavior, and my sense of who I am will all be different. What a strange new world that would be! Even though I don't like how it is, to change is, to say the least, frightening. I'm not sure I want to be involved in that much change.

Within the patterns that are in place, changes may be – are – helpful and desirable. Is it scary when they involve those that tell me who I am?

It works something like this. I'm not very good about picking my things up and putting them in their proper places. Consequently, they tend to pile up and the room gets pretty cluttered. My wife doesn't like it that I am this way, and she is quick to let me know it. I feel angry when she gets after me. At the same time, I don't like tension and conflict.

In an effort to avoid conflict, I choke my anger down, although I realize that it shows in my facial expression and body position. I do avoid open conflict because I just don't say anything. However, nothing really gets settled, and I know it. Even so, I want to escape the tension. In an attempt to do so, I decide to do better about picking my things up and putting them away. To do that is easier than to put up with my wife's expressed displeasure.

So, I make the change. I pick my things up and put them in their proper place. However, I make no changes in the basic patterns by which I live. I may alleviate the tension for a while, but I am no different. In all likelihood, I'll figure out a way to keep some conflict in our lives. After all, it is in my basic patterns to do so – and they haven't

changed. I resist changing those that express my beliefs, outlook, attitudes, and sense of identity. They tell me who I am in my world as I see it.

I ask myself, "Does that mean that basic patterns do not change? Does it mean they can't be changed?" Fortunately, I realize that changes can and do take place – even changes in the basic patterns. Nonetheless, I need to remind myself constantly that they tend to very persistently stay the same.

So I am confronted with the issue of when and under what circumstances I undertake to alter those basic patterns?

I wish it weren't the case, but it appears that I don't undertake to alter those basic patterns until I feel miserable enough and desperate enough that I have to have some relief – even if it does mean to change some basic patterns. Under these circumstances, I just may decide that I must come to grips with myself and make some changes. If I want my life to be any different than it is, I just may realize that it is up to me to change. It is my task and no one else's.

Because the established patterns are so persistent, I tell myself again that, when you change, I'll be OK. So you do change, and I tell myself that things are better.

After a while, I find that I continue to be miserable and unhappy. Your changing didn't make the difference I thought it would. Finally, I realize that I won't feel any different or be any different until I change.

The place to start is with my belief patterns. I realize that changing outlook, attitude, and behavior – even self-image – won't occur unless I change what I believe. Deciding that I am the one who needs to change is itself a change in what I have believed.

If I change what I believe, I tell myself, I will be able to make the other changes without a great deal of difficulty.

That may not be the case.

 Let me illustrate. As I see myself, I've always been rather unassuming and dependent. I've known for a long time that I need to be more assertive. And now, aware of my role in changing me, I decide to become less dependent and more assertive.

I try to express the "new me," and almost have a panic attack. Being assertive isn't me. It isn't how I am accustomed to functioning. It isn't how I see myself. Besides, I worry about what will you think of me? If not in a panic, I am at least quite upset and uneasy. I feel the pressure to revert to being as I am accustomed to being. When I take on this kind of changing, I need to understand fully that, both consciously and unconsciously – and especially unconsciously – I will resist at every turn.

Fortunately, these reactions do not mean that I can't change. They do mean that I must take seriously the persistence of the patterns that are already in place, and from which I get my identity and maintain my view of my world. For any substantive changes to take place in me, those patterns have to change.

First, I must come to grips with whether or not I really want to change, and, if I do, in what way, or ways?

So I decide that I do want to change. Now what?

I have been told that I will be stronger in my ministry if I make some changes in how I go about it. My first thought is that, maybe, some of the ways I behave are not helpful, so I undertake to alter them. However, I am not really sure just how that is going to help. After all, God, who is a very demanding God (as I believe), has called me to the task of ministry. I have a message from God that I am supposed to deliver. I can't water it down or vacillate in proclaiming it. God has given me the words of salvation, and the world needs to hear them. No matter what, I must proclaim them. I must beseech people to accept and believe them. I must point out where people are being sinful. I must admonish them to correct their ways. I owe it to them. I owe it to God. I owe it to myself if I am a faithful minister. I believe all this to be true.

Only my hearers aren't accepting my message. Since I am convinced that what I believe is correct, and that I am doing exactly what God wants me to do, in the way God wants me to do it, I see it as their problem. They are refusing to hear God's word. They are being stubborn. They are putting up barriers.

I don't need to change. My hearers do. All I need to do is to try harder.

Unfortunately, trying harder doesn't seem to make any difference. For some reason, I just am not reaching my hearers. Maybe it is time I looked at myself instead of blaming them.

I look at myself and decide to change my behavior, but not my message nor my beliefs.

Changing my behavior doesn't seem to make much difference either. My hearers aren't quite so distant, but no one really changes. They still haven't heard and heeded my message. They remain sinners in need of salvation. Almost in desperation, I finally decide to look at what I believe – especially what I believe about God.

I turn to the Bible for help, and, for the first time in my study of it, I am struck by a consistent message of God's love. I see that God is a loving God more than a demanding one. Realizing this, I change my belief about God. That, in turn, leads me to change what I believe about the message I am to preach, and how to preach it. I stop trying to correct people. I abandon admonishing them. I tell them that God loves them and longs for them to experience that love. I discover that my own attitude toward them

changes. I feel more loving and more tolerant. I express to them that I value them and care for them. Because I have changed my beliefs and my attitudes, my actions change as well – and, mostly, I discover, my hearers are more responsive than they have ever been. I believe I am on the right track.

Even with the changes, I am aware that the old patterns tend to re-assert themselves – especially when I am troubled, or when my hearers seem particularly sinful. Those old patterns are persistent. However, I think I have learned how to handle them. When they come back to haunt or tempt me, I remind myself of what I now believe and how I have now chosen to behave. Then I file the old patterns away again, and get on with my new way of life.

In the process of working out my own adjustments, I make another discovery. It isn't just my patterns that persist. It is also those of the people in my life with whom I am most intensively involved – especially family members.

The members of my family, as well as others who are a part of my life, are quite accustomed to my behavior. On numerous occasions, they've heard me express myself about what I believe, and about my outlook on life – over and over they've heard me, whether they like it or not, or agree with me. And they've worked out their ways of adjusting to me and my behavior, although they have been quick to tell me that I need to change.

Now I have changed in some pretty basic ways, and this creates an unexpected problem. When I change how I am and how I act, those involved with me also change – whether they want to or not. They have to. If I am no longer holding forth about a just and demanding God, and no longer pointing my finger at people who, in my judgment, are sinning, their patterns of reacting to me are no longer appropriate. If, instead, I talk about a loving and merciful God who forgives sinners and calls them to a more satisfying life, those around me have to deal with me in a different way.

No matter how desirable they may be, my changes have created a whole new environment in which to interact. It turns out that, since long-term patterns are also in place for the people around me, my changes tend to be unsettling for them. I have disturbed the status quo. I have rendered established ways of relating inappropriate. They may even seem pointless.

Since sense of identity rises out of beliefs and outlook for all of us, to have to make adjustments because one person changes can be very upsetting. As I change, I need to remember that, consciously or unconsciously, those around me will try to keep their own patterns in place – unchanged. In the process, though they may not realize it, they are likely to use every means at their disposal to keep me from changing, or to force me to revert to my old patterns. I also must keep in mind that, even though they have been wanting me to change all along, they aren't likely to acknowledge that they are uncomfortable with my changes, and that, deep down, they wish I would go back to being

my old self. How can they? They've told me often enough that they wish I would change, and how. Nonetheless, they resist. Their patterns are persistent, also.

It turns out that long-established patterns are determinedly persistent – in me, and in everyone. They do not easily nor graciously allow for change. After all – I remind myself – those patterns, centering in what I believe, my outlook on life, and my attitudes, both give me my identity and prescribe my behavior. They are familiar to me. With them in place, I know who I am, and my behavior makes a certain kind of sense. Besides, I am not really familiar with any other patterns, and I'm not sure I feel secure enough within myself to risk a journey into what is unknown to me.

I know, however, that I can't really go on the way I have. It hurts too much.

Therefore, having decided that I really do want to change, I carry out my decision by doing my homework about what I believe, my outlook on life, my attitudes, and my behavior. I commit myself to "small steps" instead of trying to change everything at once. I start the journey, fully aware that the going won't be easy. The old, established patterns are pretty persistent. They are familiar. I am "comfortable" with them. I even feel secure with them. But they aren't the patterns that I want in my life.

Slowly – often painfully – I build the desired changes into my life. I put new patterns in place. Those old, persistent patterns that do so much harm can be changed, and I am changing them.

I have another thought. Wouldn't it be wonderful if I made doing my homework about what I believe, my outlook on life, my attitudes, and my behavior a regular pattern in my life – my way of life, if you will – so that making desirable changes was no longer slow and painful, but something I entered into with anticipation, zest and joy?

Wouldn't that be a wonderful persistent pattern for all of us?