



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Help. Help! What Really Helps?

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I confess at the onset that I don't know the answer to my own question. It troubles me that I do not. It troubles me more that there is so much suffering in our world. A huge variety of programs are in place to help. Do they really help? I guess the answer depends a great deal on just what I believe help to be. Does help mean some kind of relief in the moment? Or a quick fix? Or taking steps that – long term – relieves the suffering, or eliminates it? Or all three of those? And then I must ask myself, "Who is supposed to be the helper, anyway?"

So I struggle with the issue of whether or not to help, and, if I choose to do so, how best to do it. In the midst of my struggling, I remind myself that I am a Christian, which raises the question of my responsibility, as a Christian, to do something about the suffering in the world – both local, country-wide, and world-wide.

I am thoroughly aware that the Christian message, both as I understand it from Scripture and as I hear it in the church, centers a great deal in helping – serving – ministering. For instance, Jesus is reported to have said, "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant." (Mt. 20:24)

In a parable, he said, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant." (Mt. 25:23)

And there is that frequently-quoted text, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Mt. 25:40) He might have said, "as you helped" instead of "as you did it."

The message is all through the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments. As a child of God, a follower of the Christ, my role is to help. To be a servant. To be a minister. The examples and the teachings of Jesus consistently emphasize this message.

So does what I hear from the church. Sermons, promotional material, and programs constantly appeal to me to "get in there and help." Do something – even a little bit – to help the imprisoned, sick, homeless, and hungry. Especially the homeless and hungry. It is my Christian duty – my stewardship responsibility.

I don't want anyone to suffer unduly. But I don't know what to do to make any real difference. I don't even know if those who suffer really want anything to be done to make any difference beyond some immediate relief and a quick fix.

The news media constantly remind me of homelessness, starvation, and abject poverty in many areas of our world. Churches have food pantries, clothes closets, and night hospitality programs, and regularly remind me that I should support them. A constant stream of people come by the church. "Where can I get help – food – shelter – clothing – medical care – money?" There is so much suffering among people.

We tend to focus on the suffering of hungry and homeless people, but it goes far beyond physical needs. There seems to be so much of it in human relations, too. More and more, I hear about and know about emotional, psychological, and spiritual abuse and

suffering. Sometimes it is brought about because people are negligent of each other, and, it would appear, indifferent to need in others. Sometimes it comes about as the product of the efforts of those who suffer to find some kind of relief, at whatever cost to others. Certainly abusers often seem to be suffering as much as, if not more than, those whom they abuse.

It is quite clear to me that many, many people are in need of some kind of help, or relief, or healing. In the face of this desperate and far-reaching need, how can I help? How can I make a difference? And I am forced to raise the question again, “What is really helpful anyway?”

I make note of the things that I do to help. I contribute to my church and to many charitable agencies. I volunteer for a variety of tasks. I try to be supportive with words, deeds, and money. But my helping doesn’t seem to make much difference. So I wonder if existing helping systems are sufficiently effective, or if I discharged my responsibility by supporting them. They don’t seem to have achieved a real resolution of the situation, although they certainly do provide much needed immediate and temporary relief. However, I wonder if providing “band-aids” without finding more permanent solutions really helps. The systems that are in place do a great work. But the hunger, homelessness, poverty, and sickness continue virtually unabated. And many people continue to suffer emotional, mental and spiritual abuse.

And then sometimes I wonder. How many of those who benefit from the functioning of the systems as they now are really want them to change?

A man showed up at the door of the church late one day. He was poorly clothed and not very clean. He and his family had arrived in town two days before, so he said, and were living in their car. However, he had a job starting tomorrow, and he could get a house in which to live if he could just raise the rent. All he needed was \$15.70 more and he could pay the rent for the first month. Just that little bit of help would get him through this crisis and back on his feet.

Two or three days later, I learned that he had made the rounds of all the churches in the neighborhood, telling his pitiful story. He had a system and a routine in place, and he was a good actor.

I don’t know if any of his story was true. Or what happened to him after he had made the round of the churches. However, judging from the information I got, I concluded that he had done rather well for himself financially that day. It was a profitable day’s work. I asked myself, “Have I really helped him if I accept his story as true, and give him what he asks? Or, for that matter, does he really want his lot in life to be different, or the system to change?” I don’t know, but I do wonder.

Recently, a friend told me of his effort to help a man standing at a busy intersection in town and holding a sign which read, “I am hungry and homeless, and I will work for food.” My friend stopped and offered him a job. But the man said, “I don’t

want your job. This is too good a corner, and I'm not going to give it up." It turned out that he received a lot more from passers-by who didn't offer him a job, but did give him a dollar or so, than he could ever make in a comparable period of time on a job. Under the circumstances, I don't blame him for preferring the street corner, but I wonder if it really helps him for me – or anyone – to preserve and support a system that encourages him to stand on a street corner and beg, instead of becoming a wage earner.

I hear the argument – a supportable argument – that it is better to do what we do than to do nothing. Then I wonder if doing nothing or doing what we do are my only options. I know, of course, that they are not.

It could be argued that a Welfare State, or a Communist Society, would eliminate hunger and homelessness. The early Christian community, we are told, tried that approach. "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, . . . There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds . . . and it was distributed to each as any had need." (from Acts 4:32-35) For a while, at last, there was no hunger and homelessness in that community. For whatever reasons, that option apparently did not prove to be permanently satisfactory. Nor has it ever been.

What option, or options, do I choose if I want to be really helpful? What do I do? Do I just continue my support of the systems that are now in place even though I know that they only give short term relief – and not enough of that? By doing so, do I create, or contribute to developing, a dependent population that settles for hunger, homelessness, handouts, and temporary shelter?

And what about all the other kinds of suffering that people endure? What is my responsibility there?

While I struggle with trying to find answers to these kinds of questions, I realize there is yet another one. When I seek to help, what am I really trying to do – really be helpful, or take care of myself in some way? What are the motives behind what I do?

Maybe I am trying to assuage my feelings of guilt. I've been taught to be unselfish and to share what I have with the less fortunate. I grew up with the idea that, if I were a good Christian, I was supposed to put myself last on the priority pole. Only I haven't really been doing that. I haven't "given until it hurt." If I do a little more, maybe I won't feel so guilty, I tell myself.

Or maybe I am looking for approval and praise. Maybe I want people to see what a good Christian I am, so I give generously – or appear to do so. I don't really care about those who are to benefit from what I give. Maybe I want to be seen and known as one who is willing to give a helping hand to the down-trodden.

I also have to ask and answer the question about what I expect to get out of being helpful in the degree that I am. I know – although I am prone to deny it – that there must

be some kind of return to me if I am to participate in any way. It goes against what I grew up believing, but I know it is true. I don't do anything unless there is some kind of return to me – acknowledged or not.

Some kind of return! Some kind of satisfaction! Before I work out the issue of how to be really helpful, I need to come to grips with what is going on with me. What are my beliefs and expectations? Why, indeed, do I do what I do? What I believe at the core of me is involved, for I interpret the meaning of all situations in terms of what I believe, and I decide and act accordingly.

I ask myself, “What do I really believe about helping those who suffer?” AS a matter of fact, this question may be more accurate and important than the one about what really helps. I don't know that I can come up with great philosophical answers that, if applied, would resolve the problem of really helping those who suffer. I can search into my own beliefs.

I believe that the only enduring way to help people who suffer is to provide opportunities for them to help themselves.

I also believe that, in the community, we help each other. I gladly accept help to do some of the heavy tasks needing to be done around the house – like cleaning the gutters or taking up the carpet. I go to the doctor. I have someone else service my car. I buy groceries. While I am, in fact, a rather self-sufficient person, it just works out so much better when I utilize the help that is available. Sometimes, though, I really can't help myself, and then I need for someone to do for me what I can't do for myself.

Since, in response to my beliefs, I am a caretaker, and since I have some special skills, I tend to go to some lengths to be helpful. In the main, however, I respond to my beliefs and use my skills to facilitate people helping themselves.

For instance, a couple comes to my office seeking help. They are struggling with some variety distressing problems, and fear there is no solution but to end their marriage. I know, of course, that there are other solutions. I am tempted to just tell them what to do, and monitor them closely to see that they do what I have said. However, I do not believe I am being really helpful when I do that. So I encourage them to talk with me and with each other. I listen a lot. I try to guide them in their exploration of their situation and of possible solutions. Then I leave it with them to decide what to do, and to act on their decisions, although I try to be supporting of them in every way that I can be. If I am truly helpful, I must not take from them their responsibility for helping themselves.

In fact, I believe that it is of paramount importance that responsibility for helping self not be taken from anyone, even in the midst of acting in an emergency or a crisis.

I believe that it is also important to do everything possible to relieve suffering – only I want it to be done in such a way as to preserve the dignity of those being helped.

So the man shows up at the church and needs just \$15.70 more to be able to rent a house for his family – or so he says. If what he said were true, would giving him the money be the best way to help him? Probably not, but it might be all that I am willing to do. If that is true, I need to do that much.

However, I wonder if it would not help him more – given that his story is true – if I got involved in his situation and sought to learn just what it was and what long-term help was realistically possible?

To get involved in such a way would require a lot more of me than just giving him money. It might also expose him if his story were not true. That, in turn, could lead to his learning that there are more appropriate ways to take care of himself – and his family, if he has a family.

What really helps? As I said at the outset, I don't really know the answer to my own question. I do have some thoughts about it.

Of course, what we do now needs to be maintained and supported. It just isn't enough, and doesn't offer any real resolutions of the problems. I fear that real resolution involves changes in some wide-spread beliefs about how to help.

Suppose that our society – and each of us in it – were committed to being organized in such a way that every person had the opportunity to provide the essentials of life. Suppose we didn't have a welfare state, and had ordered ourselves in such a way that we didn't need soup-kitchens and shelters. Supposed we worked it out to be servants to one another. Supposed we were a community in which each of us contributed according to our ability and resources, and received according to our need.

I think about such a possibility and wonder if it is just a “pipe dream” and beyond our ability. I just don't know. And I wonder about my role.

I believe that it is my role to be clear with myself as to what I believe – and I do believe that it is my role to do what I can see to do to enhance and preserve the dignity of each one of God's children. That may mean to refuse to give a man \$15.70, or to behave in any way that allows and encourages a person to be a parasite in the community.

It may mean taking on a lot more responsibility for influencing the whole community to put in place the kinds of programs that enable and require each member to “take care of self” as long as mind and body allow – and then for the whole community to participate in the loving care of those who can no longer do for themselves.

I know that I do not have a lot of influence in the community – that is to facilitate many changes in the systems that are now in place. I can express myself, and I can practice what I believe to be the way within my resources that is most helpful. I will continue to contribute to my church and to helping agencies. I will continue to participate in the use of “band-aids” to cope with crises. I will continue to make use of

skills that I have to relieve suffering, and to enable people to find ways to help themselves. I will continue to speak what I believe, as well as to live it. I will continue to struggle with this issue, and to seek further understanding of what may be really helpful. Maybe – just maybe – somewhere in the mix I will have said and done something that really helped somebody.