



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Exciting Prospect of Being Mortal

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I'm going to die.

Don't be shocked. Nothing is wrong with me. My death isn't immediately impending. In fact, I haven't any idea when it may happen, but I just know that it is going to. One day – some day in the future – I'm going to die.

You see, I am mortal. Isn't that wonderful to know and accept? I, like all God's creatures, am going to die someday. Time and place and circumstance are beyond what I know, or can know. I just know it is going to happen. There isn't anything for me to do to try to make it not happen. In fact, I can't make it not happen. Having come to that realization, I discover that a great burden has been lifted from me, and that I feel wonderfully and excitedly free. The prospect – or rather the realization – that I am mortal is indeed exciting.

Don't misunderstand me. I don't want to die. I'm not looking forward to dying. I don't plan to do anything to hasten my dying. In fact, my plan is to take care of myself in sensible ways so that I live a long and fruitful life. Living here and now is much too exciting for me to want to shorten it any at all.

But do understand me. Neither do I want to be burdened and preoccupied by trying to keep death from ever happening to me. Just about everywhere I turn I find that people do, indeed, fear death, and often seem willing to pay just about any price to try to prevent it. It is described as the grim reaper and the last enemy. People appear not to want to grow old because growing old is getting closer and closer to that terrible day of reckoning that death is seen to be. Staying youthful, we seem to believe, staves off the day when this life comes to an end.

For some reason, we human beings seem determined to see ourselves as immortal. Our identity as human beings cannot end, we tell ourselves. There is life after this life. (More about this later)

But I am mortal. This life is sure to come to an end. True, I can pretend that it isn't going to. I can fight against accepting the reality. I can focus much of my attention and energy on trying to prevent it. And, sooner or later, I die anyway. What a relief to realize and accept that this is how it is, and so stop fighting!

Do you wonder how I can suggest that accepting that I am going to die is a relief?

Think about it this way. I see that, in our society, a great deal of energy goes into denying death and acting as if it can be prevented. Why waste energy trying to prevent what can't be prevented? Why not embrace the reality, let it be, and turn all that energy into making life – for as long as it lasts – as exciting and rewarding and enjoyable as possible? It is a relief to me to accept that this life does, indeed, end, and that I do not have the slightest idea whether or not I, with my present identity, continue in any form beyond death.

It appears to me that ending is a normal part of living. For instance, in so far as I know, very few people believe a day will not end. It appears that virtually everyone simply assumes that each day will. You know how it goes – sunrise and sunset – and then comes another day in which to do whatever it is that one does with a day. No one expends much energy – or even thought – on the task of trying to keep the day from ending, or pretending that it isn't going to. What a waste it would be to do so! How much better to focus on the joys and opportunities of each day – on the excitement of here and now – on the moment.

When I think about it, I realize that I bring rather remarkable resources to the task of making the most of each day. God has given me abilities. I have a mind. I can perceive and interpret and decide and act. I can learn from experience. I can remember – and benefit from remembering – the past. I can contemplate the future, and think about how I want it to be. I can plan and set goals for how I want to use each day of my life – and all the days of my life. I can enlarge and expand my awareness. By giving diligent attention to the task, and by practicing, I can develop skills in the directions of my choosing. I can see and hear and touch and taste and feel. I have these resources as well to enable me to make each day more exciting – to make my life more exciting.

If I focus on trying to keep the day from ending, I deprive myself of the opportunity to use the day and benefit from it. By the same token, if I focus on trying to keep my life from ending, I deprive myself of the opportunity to experience the full measure of it. I simply do not have the time and energy to try to be immortal.

It isn't just that I don't have the time and energy to try to be immortal; it is also that I don't want to miss out on the full potential of living here and now. I want to experience my mortality to the fullest degree possible.

“The Exciting Prospect of Being Mortal” was the theme for a workshop that I led in Atlanta in the fall. The discussions from that workshop point me toward the further development of this paper. Good questions were raised, and meaningful points were made.

For instance, one question was, “Why do people try to be immortal?” Variations of the question are, “What does death mean, anyway?”, and, “Do I have to believe in an afterlife to be able to cope with this life?” Indeed, one important question was, “What does it mean to be alive?”

“To be alive”. “As I live and breathe.” “Breath of life.” One meaning of being alive is that blood continues to circulate, the heart continues to beat, the lungs continue to function, and life-giving oxygen continues to reach all parts of the body. In fact, in this sophisticated age, we seem to have a hard time knowing when a person is dead. “Brain dead” is one criterion, but bodies can be kept alive even with a flat EKG. And there are instances of people having been deprived of oxygen for a lengthy period of time being restored to life. However, sooner or later, no oxygen means no life in the body. So, “alive” mean that the body is receiving enough oxygen to live.

Another meaning of being alive is that I am – each of us is – a spirit being. “Then the Lord God formed human beings from the dust of the ground, and breathes into their nostrils the breath of life; and they became living beings.” (Genesis 2:7) Since spirit and breath are from the same Hebrew word, maybe I should say, “they became spirit beings.” In any case, human beings, creations of God, are alive. God has breathed life into us. We are spirit – or breath – beings.

I note, however, that those Hebrews of old seemed not to have had any real difficulty with the concept that living beings also ceased to live in due season. When the author of Genesis 3 was telling of the aftermath of the decisions of the man and the woman to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, he said, “By the sweat of your face you will eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19) They knew, though, that, until that event occurred, they were alive – spiritually alive as well as physically alive. And, it appears, they saw themselves as mortal, even though it might be observed that the decision made in the Garden was an attempt to take on being immortal.

I’m going to have to deal with the issue of life after this life, aren’t I? You ask, “Don’t you believe in life after death?”, and I have to reply, “I neither believe nor do not believe in life after death. I simply do not know if there is life after this life, and I am unaware of any way to find out.” Sure, I can speculate forever about whether there is life after death. I can cite all kinds of supportive “evidence” for any position I take. However, I end up knowing that I simply do not know.

I do believe that God is in charge of God’s creation – from beginning to end – in time and beyond time – and I can’t prove that either. I believe that whatever more there is – or may be – than this life, or beyond it, it is in God’s quite capable hands. Therefore, I trust God and focus on what I do with this life here and now. God will take care of “there and then” in a most satisfactory way. If God has in mind for me to keep my identity in other realms of God’s creation, I’m willing to leave that up to God. If I respond affirmatively to God’s desire that I live now the full potential of being a child of God, I see no need to be concerned about what may happen to me when this life ends. I certainly see no need to spend a lot of time and energy now trying to assure myself that I’ll make it to my “heavenly reward” if I just believe all the right things and do all the right things in this life. No. I believe I will stay focused on living this life in response to all that God has already given me and done for me. That’s exciting enough for me.

My body is going to die. My life as I now know it is going to end. It is not in my power to keep it from happening, nor do I want to. I don’t have to spend any thought, time, or energy trying to do something about it.

I am mortal. Not having to be concerned with immortality, I am free to focus on doing what I do with my life until it ends. I can devote all my thought, time and energy to going about the business of living here and now. What an exciting prospect this is! I see no need to worry and fret about what may be after this life. There doesn’t appear to be anything that I can actually do to prepare for it, anyway.

Insofar as I can tell, what comes after this life is a mystery. It is unknown in this life. As a matter of fact, I see it that there is a great deal of mystery – the unknown and unknowable – in my ordinary, everyday life. Yet I don't have to have the mysteries made known. I just go on about my living.

For instance, when I am driving my car, I regularly and routinely approach street intersections where there is a stop sign. At some point, as I approach, I move my foot from the gas pedal to the brake pedal and apply pressure on the brake pedal so that I stop precisely where I intend to stop. How do I do that? I don't know. I can't, for the life of me, tell you how I know exactly when to move my foot from the accelerator to the brake pedal, nor can I tell you how I know how much pressure to put on the brake pedal so that I stop exactly where I intend to stop. I learned, and I just know.

I could expand the illustration considerably, but suffice it to say, "It is a mystery in this life."

I can't explain how I know where to stand to hit a tennis ball back across the net, nor at what angle to hold the racket so that the ball goes across the net and not into it. I don't know how I know how big a bite to take out of an apple, nor how much water in my mouth is too much to try to swallow, nor - - - The list goes on. There seems to be no end to the mysteries in ordinary, everyday life.

I eat, sleep, exercise, use up energy, rest, get sore, get sick, get well, react favorably, react unfavorably, like, dislike, stay calm, get excited, find life dull, get depressed, find life exciting, am delighted.

I think about things – read – study – discuss – interpret – reach conclusions – make decisions – act on them – run into problems – blow them – resolve them. I feel good about me. I dislike me.

I don't really know how I do all this.

While I can think many things through and make sense out of them, there are many other things that I incorporate into my life just because they are there and seem to work. I can't explain just how they work or why. This life – this here and now – along with all that I know and can find out is full of mystery, too. How exciting!

Somehow, there is comfort and security – and freedom – in knowing that all things end. I draw an illustration from the discussion at the workshop. One of the participants said, "If there isn't an end to the song (a final note), I wouldn't (couldn't) enjoy it." Endless seems so boring – so undesirable.

There is a sense, of course, in which things do not end. Whatever happens in my life affects me in some way. So does any contact I have with any person. I do not always know what it is. In fact, I often do not know nor do I remember. The events and the

relationships that affect me most I do tend to remember. The good memories are beautiful, and I want to keep them. I wish I could forget the bad ones.

And God does not end. I don't know what may be beyond the grave. God does, and it is all in God's hands. As I see it, God has created me and called me to live this life. If you will, God has given me the reward of this life – not a reward – but a gift. Like all true gifts, there are no strings. God doesn't tell me what I must do with my life. Yes, because God loves me, God offers instruction and guidance. God shows me the way to have a satisfying and fulfilling life. Whether or not I heed the instructions and follow the guidance is entirely up to me. Whether or not I have a satisfying and fulfilling life is in my hands.

The point is that this life is about here and now – not about trying to assure myself of a future reward. I am mortal. Like all God's creatures, I am going to die. I allow myself to believe this, and I am free to be about the exciting business of living each day as the child of God that I am.

That is the exciting prospect of being mortal. It strikes me that God is very wise. Am I wise enough to respond affirmatively to God's wisdom?