



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Crisis of Being Healed

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Certainly, anyone who is in need of healing would welcome being healed. That seems obvious on the face of it, doesn't it? And yet, I am not at all sure it is universally true. In fact, the more I encounter people who are unhappy with their lives, the more I find them resistant to the changes that inevitably follow if they are healed. This seems to be true whether the illness is of body, mind, or spirit. And it appears that people admit that they resist the changes that must come when, and if, they are healed.

Let me establish the setting.

If I have, in the main, enjoyed good health, and, therefore, am accustomed to being healthy, sudden and/or catastrophic illness severely upsets my status quo. The illness, itself, is a crisis. If it were to continue, for me, and those around me, there would be many adjustments, some virtually impossible to make. I might even try to deny my situation, and refuse to make the indicated changes to cope with my illness. So might those around me. Under such circumstances, healing would be most welcome. Then I – and we – could return to my status quo, and I could expect life to go on in its accustomed way.

My status quo was severely upset when I suffered a ruptured appendix the seventeenth year of my life. Few people enjoyed good health such as I had. My body was sturdy. My life style kept me in excellent physical condition. I hardly knew what it was like to be tired, much less ill. Then, one day my appendix ruptured, and abruptly I was in a crisis. I, and my family and friends, all wanted me to be healed. That's how we wanted the crisis of my illness to be resolved. I didn't figure I would have any difficulty adjusting to being healed. I wanted my status quo to be restored. I didn't want to have to make the required changes if it were not.

Similarly, my status quo was severely upset when I suffered a heart block in my fifty-sixth year. This time, the damage was permanent. I was not going to return to the status quo I had known for all those years. I had to learn to adjust to the limitations of a heart pacemaker, and I had to re-order my life in such a way as to make that possible. For twenty-two years, I have lived with the limits that a heart pacemaker imposes upon me. I wonder what I would do if, quite unexpectedly, or even with the wonders of modern medicine, my natural heart function would be restored and I would no longer need the pacemaker. I tell myself such an event would be wonderful. I would welcome it. I'm not sure that's how it would turn out.

The reality is that being healed brings on its own kind of crisis, especially when the illness of which one is healed is long-term.

It is true, of course, that not all illness is sudden or catastrophic. Illnesses of body, mind, spirit, and relationships can be very long term – like almost all of one's life, or long enough for patterns of living to be firmly established. I suppose they should be referred to as chronic illnesses. Under these circumstances, the healing itself may precipitate a serious crisis. In fact, it is more likely to than not.

The threat – or perceived threat – of the crisis of being healed can be so severe that the ill person refuses to allow healing to take place. Similarly, those most involved in the ill person’s life may not allow the healing to take place, or to last. Such resistance, of course, is sub-conscious or unconscious. Almost no one would ever acknowledge to self – much less to anyone else – that he/she feared not being able to adjust to being healed.

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The threat is real. The resistance can be very strong. But it does raise the question, “Why would anybody resist being healed?”

Resistance to healing, as to any change of the statue quo, is because of a number of things. They have to do with issues of belief, perception, power, and identity. They are tied to what the ill person – and those around him/her – is getting out of the illness. Hard though it may be to accept, rest assured that people do get something out of maintaining their status quo, even when it includes being ill.

For instance, suppose my heart were restored to full natural function. One thing that would change is that I would no longer have the excuse that I have to limit my activities because of the pacemaker. At times, that excuse can serve me very well. I can get out of something I don’t really want to do quite easily by pointing out that I have the pacer, and so I can’t do whatever it is that I don’t want to do. Nobody can blame me for that. Having that escape is a nice little “bonus” since I do have the pacer, and, having it, my activities are somewhat limited. What a temptation it is to use it to my convenience.

I don’t know which of the issues that bring resistance to being healed is the most significant. They seem tied to each other in such a way that they can hardly be separated.

For instance, I believe that my heart damage is permanent. That being the case, I’ve learned to look at life from the perspective of that belief. Having the limitation gives me a certain kind of power. I am not so much at the mercy of the needs and requests of other people. I can even get people to do for me because of the limitations imposed since I have a pacemaker. After more than twenty years, my sense of my identity is tied to the reality that I have a pacemaker. I don’t even know what my life would be like or how I would function if I no longer needed the pacemaker. I wouldn’t know who I was without it, and I would have to change my belief that my heart damage was permanent.

It occurs to me that every time Jesus healed somebody it created a crisis for those involved. The scriptures deal very little with this aspect of healing, so my only option is to speculate when I think about it.

For instance, let's consider the incident of the healing of the Gerasene demoniac. You remember it. It was important enough to the Gospel writers that the story is included in all three of the synoptic Gospels. In this writing, I am referring only to the account in Mark 5:1-20.

In the country of the Gerasenes, a man with an unclean spirit, who was so wild and strong that no one and no binding could subdue him, lived among the tombs. Jesus and his disciples came to that region, and encountered the man. Jesus said to the unclean spirit within him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" But the unclean spirit "begged him eagerly not to send them out of the country." Now there was a great herd of swine feeding on the hillside; and the spirits begged Jesus, "Send us to the swine." And Jesus allowed this to happen. Whereupon the swine, about 2000 in number, rushed down the steep bank and were drowned in the sea.

The healing of the man precipitated a monumental crisis, even for the man himself. "Don't torment me with this change," he cried out. As miserable as his life was, it appears that he was afraid to face the changes in his life that being healed brought about – so afraid that he loudly protested against the change.

The keepers of the swine, astonished and probably frightened by the unusual things taking place, fled to the city and told what had happened. I expect that, among other things, they were afraid of being blamed for the loss of the swine, and of the possibility of losing their jobs. I doubt that it made any positive difference to them that the wild man was now clothed and in his right mind.

The people from the city who rushed out to see what was going on appeared to have little concern for the wild man now healed, either. What had happened demanded of them that they change more than they were willing to. How could they adjust to the loss of the swine, or to the wild man now being sane? Their response was to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. It seems that what was most important to them was that things be returned to normal – normal as they knew it. They weren't prepared to cope with one who had been a wild man in their midst and was now healed.

Coping with the crisis of healing is still a major problem for us today. If you are involved in my life to any degree, and you change in any way, your changing precipitates a crisis in my life, as well as in yours – even when I tell myself, and you, that I really want you to be healed, no matter what changes may result.

Let me simulate a situation. My wife and I aren't as happy in our relationship as we tell ourselves and each other that we want to be. We get upset with each other. We even get in arguments about it, blame each other, and angrily distance from each other. Each of us knows exactly what needs to be done for us to be happy, or so we tell ourselves. The other one needs to change – be healed, if you will.

However, if either of us were able and willing to make the changes the other

demanded, we would still face a major problem. The simple reality is that, if one person changes in a relationship, the other person has to change in some way. I can't continue to be as I have been if my wife changes in any of the ways she relates to me. If, in our relationship, either or both of us are in need of healing and the healing occurs, we have a crisis on our hands. Being healed changes everything, and so everything has to change.

Why is this true? Why is it necessary? What makes healing such a crisis anyway? Probably the most concise answer is that healing, after long-term illness of whatever nature, forces a change in status quo, in point of view, in belief, in the use of power, and, in all likelihood, in the sense of identity of each one involved.

To illustrate, let us suppose (and it is supposition, not fact) that my wife suffers from agoraphobia, and that she has since her teen years. The symptoms of this illness are that she is afraid to go out into the market place. Crowds and open spaces are just too much for her to handle.

Shortly after we began to date, I discovered that she suffered from agoraphobia, and, of course, with the confidence of youth, I was sure I could help her overcome her fear. And, besides, she probably would grow out of it in due time. It wasn't going to be any kind of problem.

Then, I didn't even know what agoraphobia was. I'd never heard of such a thing. I just knew that my wife-to-be resisted every suggestion I made, and every inducement I used to take her out among the people. As it turned out, she didn't know what was the matter either, and she was having a hard time with her self-esteem because of it.

We never realized the implications of her illness in our relationship when we married. The next several years were, to put it mildly, rough. It was something of a miracle that we stayed married. However, since divorce wasn't an option for either of us, we chose to try to figure out some way to adjust to her illness. Somehow, we managed to do it, having finally learned the correct name and explanation for her difficulty.

Since, at first, we knew of no cure, we set about to accommodate the situation and to build a life that both took it into account and was satisfying to us.

In time, the roles of each were worked out and clearly defined. She was the homemaker. She was the at-home caretaker for me and the children, and she filled her role in an excellent way. She was tender, and loving, and attentive, and comfortably in charge of the household and its operations. She was a powerful influence in the life of every member of the household, and reached the point where she felt pretty good about herself despite the illness. I had made my adjustments as well, and felt OK with myself and with the relationship. Taking her lists and her requests, I simply did what needed to be done in the market place. I represented us socially. I was the one who went into the crowds when necessary.

However, my wife was never willing to give up on the thought that something

could be done about her illness. When she learned of a treatment program for agoraphobia victims, she decided to give it a try. It was a long and sometimes difficult experience, but she was persistent, and it proved to be effective. She came home from the program a new person.

Very soon after, we realized that we were again in a major crisis. Nothing was the same as it had been. The patterns that had been in place for so many years no longer served us. During the months of her treatment, she had dealt some with the changes that would occur and had explored her new identity.

I had no such preparation. All of a sudden, who I had been all those years wasn't who I needed to be. My role was no longer the appropriate one for me. Although I didn't realize it at first, my power base was severely eroded. In a very real sense, I didn't know any more who I was in the relationship. The first time she went by herself to do the shopping, I said to her, "Are you sure you don't want me to go with you?" When she said, rather impatiently, "No, I don't want you to go," I watched her drive off alone, and I turned back into the house feeling both lost and alone. It was obvious that I needed to do some serious adjusting.

While it is true that what I have written is just a simulation, I think it fits the situation of the crisis of being healed. Under those circumstances, each one involved must revise beliefs, alter points of view, interact in a different way, and, in fact, form a new identity.

"Must" is the operative word. IF the healing occurs, remaining unchanged is not an option.

Fortunately, God has gifted all of us with the capacity to make whatever changes may be indicated. Not easily, nor quickly, of course. And not without their own kinds of trauma. But they are entirely manageable.

When one has suffered for years with an illness, it is wonderful to be healed. It may come as a surprise that the joy, for everyone involved, is tinged with feelings of dismay, frustration, fright and anger. It may be a relief to know that this is completely normal—and quite manageable. The adjustments can be made. The new beliefs, patterns, points of view, and ways of relating can be put in place.

Both being healed and adjusting to the crisis of being healed can be a blessing.