



Writings of W. Burney Overton

Burney's Papers

1994 Series, No. 6

If I Let Go of You...

December 18, 1994

W. Burney Overton

What happens to be going on in my life at a given time tends to stimulate the subject matter about which I write in BURNEY'S PAPERS. Even though I didn't get it completed at the time, what happened at the 1994 Spiritual Nurture Retreat at Mount St. Joseph in Wheeling, West Virginia gave rise to this paper. The theme was, "The Challenge to Be," and materials from the Anthony deMello book, AWARENESS, were the basis of our worship and discussion. Among the thoughts that emerged were these:

- To be unaware is to be crippled.
- To cling is to be bound.
- To let go is to discover the freedom to be – and to be in relationships that truly satisfy.
- To do what is unfamiliar seems to be difficult.

These thoughts seemed to come into sharp focus when we were discussing what Mr. deMello wrote about "Detachment." I paraphrase (and sometimes quote) some of it.

Attachment means to be tied to "something or someone without which or without whom (I) think (I) am not going to be happy." It could be something I possess – money and property, for instance. It could be my work or profession; or a friend; or a lover, spouse, parent or child. I tell myself I must have/keep whatever/whoever it is or I won't be happy – and I must be happy.

However, attachments do not result in happiness. They tend to hurt more than to help. They tend to destroy both the capacity to love and to be happy. Therefore, it follows that it is highly desirable to let go of my attachments – in other words, to move from attachment to detachment. When I think in terms of relationships, it means to let go of you – to let go of the attachment to you.

When I turn over to you my power, my control, and my responsibility for my care, and well-being, and happiness, I am attached to you. When I try to retain my power and my control by prescribing how you are to take care of me, I am attached to you. When I try to manipulate you by prescribing how you are to take care of me, and become angry with you when you don't meet the prescription, I am attached to you.

And, for all practical purposes, our relationship is doomed.

The most obvious examples are parents and child, and husband and wife. Let's use the husband and wife to illustrate.

It appears that husbands and wives are often attached to each other in a very dependent way. It is a common occurrence, when a couple comes for counseling, that they will say to each other in my presence, "If you would only change, we would have a very happy marriage." Usually, then, both of them will have a list – sometimes even written – of the faults and the shortcomings of the other.

"You never pay any attention to me." "The house is always a mess." "Why can't you help out when you come home from work?" "All I want is a little support from

you.” “You never tell me you love me.” “If you’d stay home now and then, we might have a decent meal occasionally.” “I work my fingers to the bone for you and the kids, and you don’t care.” Each is convinced that the problem in their marriage is the behavior of the other.

I often say to the couple, “Since you are so dissatisfied with your marriage, do you want out?”

Most of the time, the answer will be, “No, I don’t want out. I love him/her. I just want him/her to do his/her part so we can be happy. Besides, what would I do without him/her?”

These two are really attached to each other. They don’t want to release themselves from the marriage. They look to each other to be made happy, and they look away from their own participation in the unhappiness. They are bound to each other in a way that can only lead to the continuation of the unproductive relationship.

The only real solution is for them to be able to let go of each other – to let go of the attachment – to detach from each other – to give up the idea that personal happiness depends upon the other person.

I am aware that I have no right to require that you love me, nor to require that you function in certain ways to show me that you love me. Even so, I recognize that I am free to try to impose such requirements. If I do, I can count on it that you will find our relationship a most unsatisfactory burden – and, in the long run, so will I.

Am I willing to detach? Do I dare risk it?

I may be willing to detach, but I am afraid. How can I take a chance on letting go of you? You might choose not to be in relationship with me. Then what would I do? Almost without realizing it, I am back to attachment. I am requiring that you be responsible for my well-being and my happiness.

I need to think about what letting go of you really means. Not only do I fear that the relationship might be over, but I fear that letting go could mean that I no longer care about you or about what we share.

If I don’t “hold on”, you could easily decide that I have become indifferent to you. If you were to let go of me, I know I would fear that you no longer care about me and/or that you are simply indifferent to me. I don’t know if I could take that, and I certainly would feel terribly insecure.

Whether I’m happy or not, I feel a certain amount of security in clinging to you. If I can tie you to me, maybe you will take care of me and meet my needs. When you resist the binding and refuse to accede to my demands, I refuse to see that I am the problem. I just try to hold on tighter.

But such attachment is not good. It is destructive to everyone involved. It has to do with issues of love and self love, dependency, responsibility, power, and control. It has to do with who I see myself to be – my identity – and how I function in this world.

I insert an observation. Even my sense of my own identity may be an attachment. If I cling to a view of myself as the needy one unable to take care of myself, I could try to force you to confirm the truth of my view. If I fear that I am always the one at fault, and that unhappiness is my lot in life, I may try to make you declare these things to be true of me. If I am not who I think I am, even though I see myself in a negative way, I feel even more insecure.

Let's say that I see myself as weak and inept. No matter what I try to do, I manage to mess it up. Nothing ever turns out right for me. But I keep trying. I repeat things that I have tried before, but I always blow them some way. I take on new things, usually with lots of hope that, this time, it will work. It never does. I see myself as a failure, no matter how hard I try to succeed.

You, of course, keep trying to encourage me. You affirm everything I do, even when I obviously have done poorly. You pet me and soothe me. You are always positive with me. You try to keep my hopes up. You make suggestion after suggestion of things for me to do, assuring me that, this time, I will succeed.

I never do. I cry on your shoulder. I seek affection from you. I let you take care of me. I even tell you over and over how much you mean to me and how much I need you. "I just can't make it without you," I say. But I don't ever take charge of my own life and stand on my own feet. Suppose I do. Suppose I let go of you. Suppose I decide to take full responsibility for me and what I do. Suppose I do!

Will you stay in the relationship with me? Will you still love me? I know that is up to you. No matter how much I want you to stay in, I know that I must not require it of you. As hard as it is for me to accept, the simple reality is that, if you are not free not to love me, you are not free to love me. If you are not free to be out of relationship, you are not free to be in. If I pressure you and you accede to my demands, I don't have a way to know if you really care about me.

Thus, I need and want to let go of you so that, if you stay in relationship, I can believe you really care. Whether or not you do, if I let go of you, I have broken my attachment. I have become detached. I stop clinging. I claim my own being. I think my own thoughts. I own my own beliefs, values, goals, and intentions. I make use of my own resources.

True, I am frightened. If I detach from you, I am not at all sure I can handle the changes – and changes there will be. I can count on that.

Attachment – I am tied to something or someone without which or without whom

I think I am not going to be happy. Without you I just won't have a life, I tell myself. My very well-being is tied to being attached to you. You are in charge of me. You are responsible for me. Or so I believe.

Detachment – to be so secure within myself that I don't need – really don't need – anything or anybody. How I understand the word “need” is the key, and I express it in this extreme form to underscore the concept.

Of course, there are many things I need in life, such as oxygen, water, and food. Without them I will not survive. I also need to be valued, to belong, to see myself as useful. There are many things that are – or seem to be – essential to sustain life and to enrich it. However, when it comes to relationships, if I detach, I don't really need anything or anybody to be in charge of me, or to be responsible for me. I do need to stand on my own feet; use my own judgment; identify and live out my own values and beliefs; take responsibility for my own thoughts and behavior.

I need to be clear that, when I do detach, I don't devalue cooperation and support in our relationship. I accept the value of being in community. I know what it means to be in relationship that satisfy and fulfill. Indeed, I seek them. I rejoice in them. But I don't need any particular ones to survive, nor to live a quality life.

Given my conditioning, I struggle with the idea of not needing you. I fear that, if I let you – or me – know that I don't need you, you will cease to be in the relationship. You may even see it that I don't care about you. In my uncertainty and anxiety, I tend to think that letting you know that I need you will somehow bind you to me. It will tell you that I do care about you, and it will keep our attachment intact. Of course, I am wrong about that.

If I let go of you, I claim my own being. I discover or re-discover my own resources and use them. I think my own thoughts. I accept ownership of my own beliefs, values, intentions, and goals. I move toward the only real security I can have in life – namely, to learn to stand on my own feet.

If I let go of you, both of us are free to be in, or out, of our relationship. I do not make demands of you, nor try to bind you, nor cling to you. Then, when you choose to be in, I know that it is because you really want to be. It is of your own free will. And the same is true of me.

Am I willing to detach? Do I dare risk it?

Letting go is truly freeing, and it seems to be a risk. I am not at all sure that I feel secure enough within myself to let go of you.

It helps me, though, to be in touch with my own feelings when I am the one to whom another is attached. When I am the attaché, there is a heavy weight on my shoulders. I feel trapped – captured – decidedly uneasy. I sense that I am losing myself,

and I resist. I am much more likely to try to end the relationship.

It is almost as if there were a dichotomy. If I want to keep our relationship, it is necessary for me to let go of you. Neither of us can stay in with any real satisfaction if we are not both free to be out.

I am amazed at how frequently Jesus' teaching about gaining and losing one's life comes up. Here it is again. If I try to gain my life, I lose it. When I stop trying to gain my life, that's when I am free to live it. When I stop clinging to you, that's when we are free to have and to enjoy a satisfying and fulfilling life. That's when we can enjoy each other. That's when we both feel valued and cared about. That's when we enable the very best that is in each of us to blossom and bear fruit.

I don't want to be crippled. I don't want to feel bound. I don't want to suffer imprisonment. I want to be healthy and whole. I want to be free. I want to be in relationships that truly satisfy.

Even though approaching life this way is unfamiliar and seems difficult, it is clear to me that I want to release myself from my attachments. Whatever effort it takes, it seems worth it.

I want to let go of you so that we are in our relationship – by the free choice of each of us. I want to let go. I will take the risk.