



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Don't Shatter My World

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I am familiar with my world. I know how it works. In the main, I know what to expect. And I know who I am in my world. If any significant changes occur, my world is shattered. At best, I feel confused and uncertain. At worst, I feel lost. I don't know who I am. Everything in me cries out, "Don't shatter my world."

It is true. I have put my world together in a particular way, and, pleasant or not, my security, and my sense of my own identity are tied up in how I have put it together. I was trained to see it the way I see it.

From the beginning of my life, the training process went something like this. Things happened. People said and did whatever it was. I, in my unformed state, interpreted the meanings of the events and of the words and actions of people. Then I worked out my own interpretation and response to those stimuli. After a while, I had worked out an understanding of the things that happened to me, and of who I was in relation to them. In time, I worked out how I saw it to be, what I believed, and who I was in my world. I developed patterns of outlook, interpretation, and response. So my world came into existence, and I lived in response to it.

For instance, I was a child of the Great Depression of the 1930's, and the second of four children. My mother was an "at home" mother, and my father was a clerk in a grocery store. Because there was very little money, I learned to make do with what I had. I wasted very little. Often, I learned to use things differently from the way they were intended in order to have something that I wanted. As I recall, I managed very nicely, and life was reasonably pleasant.

Because I grew up in a situation of material poverty, I learned to be imaginative and creative about what I had, and how to make use of it. Solving a problem became a challenge. Its solution brought feelings of satisfaction. I learned about my world and how it worked. I learned about me in my world, and my role.

By the time I was in my teens, my world, as I knew it, was a small community in the East Tennessee mountains. It was my family, my school, and my church. By then I had learned that, if I wanted something, it was up to me to figure out how to get it. It wasn't going to be handed to me, and it wasn't going to come to me without serious effort on my part. By my late teens – certainly by the time I reached adulthood – my outlook on life, my beliefs, my patterns and my expectations were firmly in place. I expect things to be as I saw them to be. I assumed that people would act as I was accustomed to their acting. I responded according to my sense of who I was, and what I would typically do in a situation. I felt secure and comfortable.

One of the belief-patterns that was firmly in place was that Christians don't work on Sunday. I admit to some confusion as to what activities were allowable and what were not. For instance, I could not go to the movies (they were not even shown on Sundays in those days), nor could I go swimming. However, it was all right to visit in the homes of friends, and it was acceptable for the family to go riding on Sunday afternoon, or on Sunday evening after church. I confess that I had some difficulty with those concepts, but I accepted them as how it was supposed to be. I was upset when people

worked on Sunday.

Those patterns, beliefs, and expectations defined my world. Further, they defined people in their several positions and roles. And, perhaps more importantly, my sense of identity was tied to how I saw and defined my world.

In my adult years, I bring those images from my training years to every aspect of my life. I know what I expect of myself as a worker. I have a picture of the parenting and the spousal roles. I came into adult life with a pretty clear idea of who I see God to be, and of what the church ought to be in the world. My political and social views were not so well formed, nor did they seem to be as important as some other positions and beliefs.

Although I have been an adult for many years, I find that I cling too many of those patterns. It is understandable that I do. They are familiar to me. I know how they work. I feel secure when they are working as I expect. They do not threaten me. I feel comfortable with them. I find that this is true of what I could see were negative and destructive patterns, as well as those that were positive and constructive.

However, I think the most important reason that I tend to cling to my patterns is that I see them as defining me. In the midst of the familiar, I know who I am. I may or may not be pleased with who I am, but I know.

For instance, I am a “fixer.” If you let me know that you have a problem, I believe that I am supposed to do something to fix it. Also, I learned that I must always do what I promised to do. If I accept responsibility for doing a task, one way or the other, I will get it done. I also learned to procrastinate, especially as it had to do with things that were my task and did not involve other people so much. For many years, I didn’t get my tax return until the very last minute, or even past it. I became somewhat “notorious” in the family because of this.

How I function manifests who I see myself to be in my world as I see it. If I believe that something is threatening my world, I give much attention to keeping it from changing.

If I have to change any of my patterns, my world as I know it is shattered. I don’t know how things work. I don’t know what to expect. I don’t feel very secure. I am afraid and anxious. I don’t know who you are, or how things are supposed to work. I don’t know who I am. My world is (feels) shattered.

Small wonder that I, or anyone, would cry out, “Don’t shatter my world!”

However, changes do take place, and need to. If I am troubled and distraught in my life, there is little likelihood of relief unless I made changes. When things are rough for me, I want relief, and I am willing for some changes to be made. Typically, I look at my world and the people in it, and I say, “The situation needs to change. The other person needs to change. Then I will be OK. I won’t hurt so badly. I won’t be so

dismayed.” I want relief and I want something or someone else to change.

I have come to realize that it just never works to look to other people to change, or to the situation to change, for me to get relief. They may need to change. I don't challenge or question that. However, if I don't change my outlook and my own beliefs and patterns, the changes of other people will be distressing to me. Probably even threatening. They might shatter my world.

I am aware that my world doesn't have to be shattered because changes take place. If they are imposed upon me, I resent them. If I am told that it is necessary for me to change, I resist. “You have to...” almost automatically sets up resistance barriers. I fight against changes not of my choosing.

However – I repeat – making changes doesn't have to a shattering experience. I can make changes one step at a time by my deliberately choosing to take those steps and bring about those changes.

In my own experience, I expect that my shift from segregation to an integration position may be a good example.

I grew up in a virtually totally segregated community. There were no African-Americans, and my home community wouldn't tolerate any living there. I won't go into detail, but, as I matured and became an adult, I also began to question the segregation position. At first, I recognized that it was unfair, if not downright wrong. But I was steeped in segregationist philosophy. As time went by, I read, I studied, I thought, I observed. Gradually, I came to realize that the segregationist philosophy was no longer one that I could embrace or support. So I embraced the integrationist philosophy.

It's true that living out my newly-adopted philosophy put me at odds with many people. It's accurate to say that my world, as I knew it, was shattered. It's also accurate to say that, because I had followed the process I had, I – my sense of myself – was not shattered. I learned that I could “shatter my world” without shattering myself.

My experience taught me that if I really want change, it is up to me to bring it about. I also learned that I had to find my world as I knew it pretty unsatisfactory, before I would take on making changes. I learned, further, that the process of making the shifts in my outlook on life meant to endure considerable struggle and discomfort. But what I learned most of all was, that, if I saw the changes threatening my own sense of identity, I simply would not make the changes – no matter how desirable they might seem to be.

It appears to me that what it adds up to is that changes are imposed upon me, unless I choose to remain in charge of me, and work out the changes that seem to be indicated and desired.

I don't want you to shatter my world. I want to stay in control of me, and what I do with my world.

True, I live in a time when significant technological, sociological, and political changes are taking place. The first airplane I ever saw – itself a miracle in that day – is very markedly different from the airplanes I see on pretty much a daily basis today. Now, air travel is commonplace. I have adapted well to the change, and make use of air travel and its convenience. That kind of change doesn't attack my sense of my identity. I adjust very well.

The changes that affect my sense of my identity have to do with what I believe about me, and how I live out what I believe. It has to do with what I believe about you, and my expectation of your functioning in relation to me. I don't adapt to changes in these areas quite so easily.

But I can.

My first step is to allow myself to believe that I am, at my core, God's person, whom God has gifted in particular ways. From that belief, I can look at any of the patterns in my life, and the beliefs behind them, and call them into question. A simple guideline for me is that, if the patterns that are in place are not bringing about the results that I really want, those patterns needed to be examined with care, and changed so as to enable results that I want in my life.

For instance, I grew up believing that God was fearsome and vengeful. If I disobeyed God's rules, I would be in trouble with God and subject to a painful punishment. When I allowed myself to see God as loving and forgiving, it occurred to me that God would handle my digressions in some other way than by punishing me. Then I discovered that I couldn't turn responsibility for my behavior over to God. I was responsible. At first, I was somewhat dismayed, and then I was very pleased. I like the idea of being responsible for me. I liked the idea of a caring, loving God who loved me enough to leave me responsible for my decisions and my behavior. Coming to that belief, I realized that I had more self-confidence, and felt more secure in what I chose to be and did. I liked me much better than I had. Interestingly enough, I also discovered that I was considerably more tolerant toward other people.

People, confronted with necessity for changing significant patterns in their life, tend to cry out, "Don't shatter my world," even though they may not realize that's what they are doing. The ultimate answer for us all is to be able to believe that the patterns in place do not define the person. Rather, the person can let the patterns in place be manifestations of the identity of the person. With that shift in view, we can take on the task of coming to grips with our view of our world, and determine whether or not it really fits the manifestation of who we see ourselves to be. If it doesn't, the necessary changes can be decided upon and enacted.

Don't shatter my world. I take on the responsibility for coming to grips with me in my world, and for making such adjustments as I perceive need to be made for me to manifest to the world that I am God's beloved person.