



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Loop

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Some months ago, I was engaged in a conversation with a lady. She was telling me that things were not going particularly well for her at that time. She described some of what was happening and ended her conversation by saying, “I am always wrong.” She sounded thoroughly dejected and down on herself. When I heard her describe herself as always wrong, I wanted to find a way to help her realize it was not true. However, I realized that I faced a significant dilemma. At that moment, the idea for this paper came into being.

My dilemma was that I feared that I couldn’t be helpful to her because of the problem of THE LOOP. I wanted to say to her, “No. You’re not always wrong.” I knew, however, that, if I did, she would say in reply, “See. You are saying that, even when I say I am wrong, I am wrong. No matter what, I am always wrong.” That’s THE LOOP. It turns and twists on itself. If I see myself in a negative way, I interpret whatever happens to me as confirming my negative self-image. As a matter of fact, it is the only self-image I have. It follows that I would make every effort to maintain it.

I have found that dealing with THE LOOP is one of the most frustrating aspects of trying to be helpful to people. I understand the problem. Who I see myself to be is my identity. If it is taken away from me, I don’t know who I am.

This is how it works. I write in terms of myself to explain. Early in my life, in the more formative years, I learn how things worked for me in relationships. I learn ways to get what I want. I learn how to get in trouble and out of trouble with my parents and with others. I learn what gets approval and what gets disapproval. Particularly and especially, I learn a view of myself based on my experiences. I learn who I am – or who I see myself to be.

I learn that I am clumsy or agile, quick or slow, attractive or unattractive, the cause of problems or the victim of problems. I learn many things about myself and have little, if any, capacity to evaluate or sort out those learnings. As I learn, I establish patterns of behavior that include interpretations of things so that they confirm my established view of myself. It is my perceived identity. Gradually, those patterns that I have established become my way of life. More than that, they provide me with a means to interpret whatever happens to me. I not only interpret what is going on, but I also interpret how what is going on confirms my identity.

I learn who I am and how things work. My sense of security is tied up in these patterns and this identity. As a specific illustration of what I mean, I draw from the story with which I began this paper.

From those early-learned and long-established patterns, I come to know myself as a person who, it turns out, is always wrong. I remember many of the messages I received. “Can’t you ever do anything right?” “What did you do this time?” “Don’t you know better than to do that?” The list goes on. A big one was, “How could you do this to me?” Or I just sensed disapproval, which meant that I had done something wrong

whether I knew what it was or not. Or I didn't get the attention I needed, so I decided I must have been wrong about something.

In an attempt to keep my self-image intact, I put it together that, no matter what I do or how I behave, or how I attempt to defend myself, I am always wrong – or unacceptable – or inadequate – or unlovely – or a failure – or lacking in something.

Fairly early in my life the pattern is firmly in place. My image of myself is that I'm always wrong, (or whatever). That's who I am – one who is always wrong. What a LOOP! I stay in THE LOOP. I figure out how to interpret any experience to show that I am wrong. If anybody tries to enable or persuade me to see the situation, or myself, any differently, it just doesn't work. I see to it that I am who I see myself to be. It is the only identity I have. No wonder I stay in my LOOP with such determination. Whatever the patterns are that I have put together in my life to identify me and to interpret my world, I keep them intact by interpreting whatever happens to me as confirming that they are true.

I simulate another story.

My friend, whom I have not seen in several years, greets me when we meet. His first words are, "You've put on weight, haven't you?" Although he doesn't know it, when I was a youngster, I was often ridiculed for my weight, and that ridicule contributed both to my being supersensitive about my weight and to my having a very poor self-image. A reference to my weight always meant disapproval of me.

So, when he said, "You've put on weight", I immediately interpreted that he was expressing disapproval and making fun of me. Of course, my feelings were hurt and I felt put down by what he said. Although I tried to cover it up, I wasn't very successful. I actually showed that there was something the matter, and my friend was disturbed. He didn't know why and pressed me to tell him what he had said or done that caused me to be upset.

When, yielding to his pressure, I could finally tell him that I was hurt by his comment on my weight, he was equally hurt and distressed because, he said, "You misinterpreted me. I was trying to tell you how well you looked." I wouldn't allow myself to believe him. My LOOP was in place.

Our conversation went from bad to worse. Both us, because of our patterns and our self-images, put a negative spin on every statement we made to each other. Our meeting, much anticipated after those several years, was in shambles. Neither of us knew enough about ourselves and about relating to be able to get out of THE LOOP we both were in to find healing for our problem.

To put it mildly, my experience of THE LOOP is that it is extremely difficult to break – and with good reason. My identity and my security are at stake.

The patterns that I have put together to tell me how it is, enable me to feel comfortable with myself, and give me a sense of security. When my picture of myself – my identity – is involved, to change my patterns is to shatter the image. I don't know who I am or how to act. I use the "I'm always wrong" story to illustrate what I mean. The person in the story sees herself as one who is always wrong. That is included in her image of herself. That is part of her self-identity. If she were to get out of THE LOOP, she would be forced to see herself in some other way. She would have to see that, at least some of the time, she was right. She couldn't maintain the image of always being wrong.

As it turns out, revising one's self-image is a difficult task. It can involve taking on a new identity and building a new security base. No wonder I resist breaking out of my LOOPS. It is like going from darkness to light when I have never been in the light before.

Sometimes I wonder if it is beneficial to try to help people see the LOOPS in their life, or to try to encourage them to make changes. Then someone comes along and says, "I don't like the LOOP that I am in. I want to get out of it. How can I break out of that LOOP?"

I've thought long and hard about how to answer that question. I recognize that asking the question is easier than putting the answer in place. Even so, I offer some suggestions, having warned you that one part of the process of breaking THE LOOP is to experience confusion, uncertainty, and insecurity – maybe even a fair amount of pain – a lot of pain.

The first step is to ask myself the question, "Do I really want to get out of THE LOOP?" When I think about all the implications, I probably answer most correctly by saying, "I think so", or "I don't know". Neither is a satisfactory answer. Therefore, I must come back to the question, "Do I really want to get out of THE LOOP?" When, at long last, I am able to answer, "Yes", even though tentatively, I commit myself to embarking on the process designed to move me through the steps involved in breaking out of THE LOOP.

Again, I use the story with which I began this paper.

I ask myself yet another question. "What does it mean when I see myself as always in the wrong?" The question is not quickly answered. It involves searching into who I see myself to be; how I respond to things and people; what happened earlier in my life to suggest and reinforce that I am always wrong; and, bottom line, what I really believe. My task is to identify all the parts of the pattern in THE LOOP.

The bottom line really is the issue of what it is that I believe. If I believe that I am always wrong, then I see to it that I interpret what occurs in my life to confirm that belief. If I believe that I'm always wrong, I search for and find ways to interpret anything said to me as a confirmation that I'm always wrong. "You're not always wrong" is a case in point. If I believe that I'm always wrong, it follows that there are never times when I am

right. I can't ever be right, since I'm always wrong. "You're not always wrong," can't be true.

The concept about which I've written may sound a bit far-fetched. However, I invite you to check me out by exploring some of your own LOOPS. Notice what you do when anyone suggests that you believe differently than your LOOP says.

It adds up to this. The first major hurdle in the process toward getting out of THE LOOP is to be able to claim ownership for the belief and beliefs that maintain THE LOOP. It means to be able to say, "Yes. That's how it is. I see myself as always wrong. I believe I see myself correctly." When I am able to claim ownership for that belief, I have taken the first step toward being able to change it. (How interesting! To keep my LOOP intact, I have to believe that I am right about always being wrong.)

The next major hurdle is to ask myself, "What do I want instead of THE LOOP that is presently in place? What beliefs must I abandon to break THE LOOP?"

I ask myself other questions. They include, "What image of myself do I want in place of the one that I already have? What perceptions and patterns of actions do I want to incorporate in place of those I already have? Most of all, what different beliefs do I want to embrace in place of those I already have?"

After I do my homework on the first two hurdles, I face the third one. "How do I establish the new pattern, image, and belief on which I have decided?" The answer? I practice, and practice, and practice. Even if the new way seems awkward and artificial, I practice. Even when I slip back into the old way – and eventually, I will – I embrace myself and practice the new way – even more consistently. In time, it becomes my way – naturally, normally, and comfortably. I am the new me I want to be. I am out of THE LOOP.

In brief, this is how it works –

I have a very poor self-image, I'm a klutz. All my life I've been told that I am a klutz. I believe that I am.

I want not to be a klutz.

No matter. I keep on being a klutz. I do what people suggest and I just prove that I am a klutz. I prove what I believe about myself.

I still want not to be a klutz. What is the answer for me?

I need to change what I believe about myself.

How can I?

What happened that I believe I am a klutz?

Is there any other way to establish a new identity?

I'm told that there is. I'm told that my value was given me from the beginning – not earned.

Even if I do klutzy things, I'm O.K. What I do and don't do doesn't give me my self-image.

Can I believe that? What do I have to do to believe that? Am I willing to believe that?

Yes, I am – I think – but I don't know what it looks like or feels like to believe I'm O.K. just because God made me that way.

I can't find out without reminding myself over and over that I am O.K., and that believing will bring the change I really want.

I know it won't be easy, but that's O.K. I'm worth all the effort.

What do I do?

I make a list of all the ways I'm not klutzy.

Then I say, "Even when I'm klutzy, I'm O.K. – because being O.K. is the identity God has given me."

I remind myself. And I remind myself. And I remind myself, until I have a new picture of me, and a new LOOP in place.