

Gurdjieff and Now

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Coming across Gurdjieff was a wondrous moment in my life when in deep unease at being alive, indulging in existentialism, seeking answers in physics and being visited by feelings and thoughts that just could not fit into the worldview that seemed to be governing the world, he had the appearance of someone who had been through all of it and come out the other side. He belonged with many others such as Krishnamurti – and I would add today, Bernadette Roberts – who were speaking from another place. Yet he also had appeal because he offered ways of experimenting with experience itself that one could do here and now in the midst of life. He raised a new awareness of what it was to breathe, move, think and pay attention so that one could experience something of that Zen-like quality of ordinary life two inches of the ground. He brought into question the most ordinary and everyday things we take for granted.

Today, so much of what he pioneered has become more a part of mainstream thinking. The idea of ‘self-observation’ is now common in psychotherapy and an increasing amount of attention – though it is still marginalized – is being paid to the ‘discovery’ of sensation in bodily awareness and movement. The idea that ‘we are a multitude’ is to be found embedded in modern psychology.

He was also a pioneer in drawing attention to the deep thinking that had taken place in ancient times and his basic approach is now echoed in many fields. Of great importance was his portrayal of humankind as gaining – and then losing – important insights into our condition and the nature of man. His idea of *legominism* was a stroke of genius – transmissions from the past that encoded important information in ways that could only be read by people who could bring their own psyche into operation in what he called ‘the reason of understanding’. The search for ancient centers of wisdom has become now a common fad, but the nonsense that bedevils most of the attempts being made do not vitiate the importance of this work of re-evaluating the past.

The past is only one kind of possible source of wisdom and Gurdjieff also explored the question of how higher influences could reach us. His pupil John Bennett, with whom I had the good fortune to work for 15 years, took up this challenge in his quest for ways of communicating with higher intelligence. The question of higher mind and how we can understand this has remained with me as a matter of urgency and I took from Gurdjieff and Bennett a way of approach that did not require me to indulge in any appealing fantasy. Both had firm grasp of an ‘abstract’ method that was not based on belief but on the living action of deep enquiry. Bennett developed this into what he called ‘systematics’ – a way of understanding through number – but most people who have come to know about this have attached themselves to

superficialities and it has become a realm of belief instead of a starting point, literally ‘a way of starting’ for the rest is up to us.

Gurdjieff is widely recognized as being pretty unique in disdaining belief and advocating an empirical approach – find out for yourself. However, this has been taken unfortunately in the spirit of ‘verify for yourselves that what we say is true’. That is, there is an assumption that Gurdjieff is right and we just have to come to see this for ourselves. There has also been a tendency for many people to feel, in front of Gurdjieff’s evident genius, that they are so inadequate that they are not able to see for themselves what he means; with the result that Gurdjieff has been turned into some kind of saint or mage and acquired an immense amount of hagiography.

Along these lines, it seems to me that Gurdjieff’s famous ‘work’ has been turned into a set of techniques. People get together to do his movements, practical work, and to practice some kind of meditation or other supposedly derived from exercises he showed during his lifetime. Some have gone on doing this for fifty years – even though there is little evidence that any deep change is being brought about. It is just like the situation of someone being shown a mantra that will ‘liberate’ them and after trying it for some time asking why it is not working to be told that they have not tried hard enough!

I’ve always had a strong response to those anecdotes about Gurdjieff in which he is urging his followers to *think*. In one of his most splendid talks titled ‘connaissance’ (French word for ‘knowing’) he actually says that the whole point is ‘to know’. In introducing exercises as written up in ‘Life is Only Real’ he tells his audience to look into what the exercises mean. It is an astonishing passage. In contrast, I discovered for example in speaking with a member of the Gurdjieff Society in London that they hardly ever discussed ‘the ideas’! The inevitable result must be that we go on with various practices, read various books, but never get down to investigating what it means.

Meaning arises when we take hold of something for ourselves. We can only do this by investing something of ourselves. In doing this, we make something new. The prolific writer Patterson has argued that Ouspensky, Orage and Bennett are to be seen as ‘back magicians’ who distorted the pure message of Gurdjieff; but if they did any real work they will necessarily have changed what it ‘is’. Wim van Dulleman, who has done so much to make available the original material of the movements and music, has pointed out that Gurdjieff’s rendition of forms of eastern dancing were no mere copies but a creative transformation of them through his own being into a unique form. Incidentally, Gurdjieff himself provides a remarkable mythical metaphor for this process in his wondrous account of the ‘Choot-God Litanical Period’ (when God almost had to ask for help) that describes how liberated souls who come to dwell on the Holy Sun Absolute mix in their

individual vibrations with those of His Endlessness, resulting in a more chaotic emanation into the universe!

Having mentioned an example from what Denis Saurat acknowledged as a unique case of mythological creativity – Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson – it is relevant to mention the great significance of Gurdjieff’s break with his earlier teaching to adopt a new way of expressing the ideas. Gurdjieff said he hoped that his book would inspire future artists and writers, but this has scarcely come to pass. Part of the significance of this break was that it moved the ideas further away from systematic expression into a realm where heart and mind need to move together.

Many people, including my teacher John Bennett, struggled very hard to find ‘the sources’ of Gurdjieff’s ideas. I have argued (see my Preface to ‘An Index to In Search of the Miraculous’) that the supposition that Gurdjieff got his ideas from somewhere in particular needs to be questioned. I see him more as an exemplar of a modern western approach in which ‘all and everything’ is taken as a resource, drawing on the realization that we live in a global community. Gurdjieff himself did not disdain picking up ideas from contemporary science, in spite of his expressed attitude that ‘these modern scientists don’t really know anything’.

I think his approach was that in every field, the point is being missed, that we do not realize what is really going on, that we do not see the wood for the trees. In this respect, I picture his work as like a doorway. Included in this picture that we do not know what is on the other side until we go through it. We may even find that there was no door at all.

Whenever, in my small limited experience, I have caught a glimpse of the ‘other side’ I have felt, as expressed by Rumi, “When they lift the lid, how often they will say ‘This is not what we expected’.” The whole tenor of Gurdjieff’s teaching seems to me to suggest that our very consciousness is faulty. Krishnamurti in his wonderful dialogues with the physicist David Bohm enquires into ‘what went wrong in humanity?’ and comes up with his own alternative to Gurdjieff’s *kundabuffer*.

The buck stops here. I can’t do anything with profound teachings unless I make them my own. I need all the help I can get. I need to learn how to learn. The whole thing becomes a question of how to start. This was pointed out repeatedly by Idries Shah. Shah was one of many teachers who Bennett took on. He provided major insights into what we might call the psycho-sociology of human development. Bennett showed those of us who worked with him that it was necessary to be able to open to new influences in which ‘the teaching’ was being expressed in new ways, because persistence in one old way led inevitably into stagnation. Accused by many as being eclectic and heretical, Bennett had a firm foundation in systems thinking and realized that closed systems can only tend towards increasing entropy.

By taking in new influences, the spirit of the search is kept alive.

This has a great bearing on the question of practices. In a way, it does not matter what the practices are. What matters is whether they are *alive*. It is just the same with terminology, which is closely allied. If we use words over and over again they lose vitality and their continuing usage becomes a barrier to understanding. It is as if terms have a ‘half-life’ just as radioactive substances have. I say that maybe what the practices are does not matter, but there are still some criteria to apply. The practices need to challenge our assumptions. They need to liberate new insights. Some have rightly said that they exist to enable us to generate an ‘inner energy’ by which we can *then* see differently and thereby act differently. They can also be ways of consolidating that tenuous bridge in ourselves between the seen and unseen, between the two modes of consciousness that seem to define our predicament. But, the guiding authority in ourselves needs to be from the ‘other side’ and not from this one.

Paramount in all this is the recognition that we *need* to learn something that we at present do not. But this entails realizing that in fact we do not understand what we have always taken for granted and assumed we did. Take such an example as *reading*. Everyone assumes they can read and educationalists pontificate on the efficacy of this or that method of teaching reading to children, but I would agree with Gurdjieff when he declared to Ouspensky that the latter *did not know how to read*. How few of us have ever considered such a thing? Yet this is a major clue. We have to begin all over again to learn how to read, walk, think, etc. This for me is the root genius of Gurdjieff’s work. And it has to be borne in mind when we want to ascend into the heavens, into higher states of consciousness, and can be seduced into disdaining what is at hand in every moment.

There has been an assumption that Gurdjieff taught us methods of ‘waking up’ or some such. I say that the valuable thing he taught was to pay attention to what we normally do not. It can be said to ‘amount to the same thing’ but the spirit is very different. I learned from Bennett that ‘waking up’ – whatever that might mean for us – comes from within. Exercises are simply ways of helping us make sense of what arises spontaneously. In a similar vein, Bennett pointed out the immense damage done by those leading groups who bully or ‘apply shocks’ to their pupils supposedly to waken them up, which in fact just makes them dependent on such treatment and obscures their own inner spirit.

One of the most important areas of concern to us human beings is the way in which we talk together. I remember once asking John Bennett whether he thought that there was an equivalent organ kundabuffer for groups, as Gurdjieff said there was for individuals. Bennett admitted he did not know. I raise this because we all must have experiences of the way in which meeting together in groups we seem to be lacking in ability to work together and understand each other. We rely on leaders

and systems to ‘get something done’ and it is a common assumption that this is necessary and anything else is a waste of time.

I also mention groups because they have played a considerable part in the history of Gurdjieff’s work. Group work is usually accepted as axiomatic. The assumption has then arisen that Gurdjieff knew about groups and ‘work groups’ created in his name exhibit a superior methodology to ordinary ones. Looking at what Gurdjieff says about groups first, we can see that his approach assumed such groups had a teacher or leader who was supposed to be on a higher level than the rest. This has become enshrined in pyramidal institutions such as the Foundation, but it is also a feature of most ‘spiritual’ movements. Hierarchy and its concomitants of authority, ideology and the like are strong features of such groups.

I say that a dangerous feature of such groups is that no one can ever say what they mean. There is always the framework. Always control invested in one or two individuals. Always a sense that what they are about is *already known* – at least to the one in charge.

In contrast with this, the twentieth century saw an all important line of research and development into group process, mostly conducted under the auspices of psychoanalysis or psychotherapy, but by no means exclusively. A crucial feature of this line was that it *did not assume that we knew how groups worked at all*. People were actually willing to find out. It is significant to note that us then young lads around Bennett knew about some of this research, in particular the work of Wilfred Bion, now some fifty years old. His book ‘Experiences in Groups’ is a masterpiece of discovery and insight with direct reporting on Bion’s actual puzzles, questions, observations and faltering experiments. In fact, this line started way back at the beginning of the century with such pioneers as Trotter who was amongst the very first to suggest that groups have a mind of their own that exhibits phenomena we cannot otherwise access.

The contrast is stark. On the one hand the on-going assumption that we know how groups work to find out the truth by imitating what we believe Gurdjieff did. On the other, to start from scratch. What strikes me with overwhelming force is that what this line of research reminds me of is the way that Gurdjieff describes such associations as the *Akhaldan* – groups getting together to exchange observations, pose questions, do research and *find out for the first time what is really going on*. I might add into the picture my favourite character Belcutassi, who came to suspect that something not quite right was going on! Now, of course, most people would say, ‘That is all well and good for such extraordinary people as Gurdjieff is taking about, people of a caliber like Gurdjieff himself. But it is nonsense to suggest that we might actually do something like this ourselves.’ I say to that – baloney! I do not say this out of any naïve belief that we can just sit down and act in such an intelligent way as the society Akhaldan. I am deeply aware of the hazards and

difficulties of the process. But I think that without this approach we go round in circles, trying to learn about the truth in ways that make it impossible because too much is taken for granted in the first place.

Here we come to a crunch point. It has been expressed by an associate of Gordon Lawrence – creator of what is called ‘social dreaming matrix’ – as the choice between ‘the politics of salvation’ and the ‘politics of revelation’. This in fact turns out to be resonant with Gurdjieff’s own distinction between ‘reason of knowing’ and ‘reason of understanding’ but that is for another time. The politics of salvation working in a group means that it looks for a savior, for a solution to come in from outside, for the truth to be explained and shown. This is characteristic of all spiritual groupings (and documented in Bion’s work) but is also evident when for example a business organization calls in a consultant. The politics of revelation is very different and elusive to description. In such a group, there is no assumption that there is any answer, savior, etc. outside the group that can ‘solve its problem’. All that is entertained is what can emerge from the group itself.

This is a radical approach. The politics of revelation is like the old saying, ‘There’s nobody here but us chickens’. It is to suspend *all* the belief systems and authority based thinking that has prevailed for millennia (possibly at least since what Jaynes calls the rise of the Bicameral mind). It is a harrowing prospect, similar to that salutary prospect of considering that one will never know any more than one does right now, that this is all one has, and then what?

But the point is that Gurdjieff’s work has become caught up in the prevalent social mechanisms and worldviews that have the effect of displacing our own inner freedom into attachment to external figures and symbols of authority, truth, divinity and so on. Instead of leading back to ourselves, we may have allowed it to become a way of forgetting our ignorance. After all, ignorance was the great virtue approved by Socrates! It is all too easy to forget that we do not know when our minds are full of ideas that speak of how the universe ‘really is’ – if only we could quite grasp them. Here I am hoping that there is an echo back to my mention of Gurdjieff’s mythological approach – certainly just the first in the three acts of the Three Series of Writings but nevertheless the starting point.

This is not to say that all we have to do is to follow up on research into group process and practice dialogue and then we get insight into reality through some kind of back door. No. It is to say that we have to make a *start* and question any approach in which we attempt to build from our ‘false’ consciousness. If an exercise reveals something significant to us we have to take it on and follow where it might lead. Gurdjieff’s genius has helped us all catch glimpses but it is then up to us. We need each other, but it is painful to undertake the harrowing process of working together to understand each other. Exposed to this task in large groups, professional therapists collapse into anger and despair. The void threatens our very

life.

There is a saying amongst practitioners of dialogue such as the great pioneer Patrick de Mare who first introduced David Bohm to it, that we have to be ‘on a level’ with each other. I have pondered about this after feeling in my heart that this was supremely important. I realized that what was entailed was a ‘leveling up’ and not a leveling down. That a group on the level was in its own special way a true *elite*. It is only in a group of great maturity that such a leveling can occur. It resonated with an interpretation of ‘meetings with remarkable men’ I had felt – that what was remarkable about these men was in their capacity just to work together as equals, rather than in them being special beings. I further realized – in my own terms – that there is profound link between speaking and the will. Of course, this is in accord with the way John Bennett talked to us about the meaning of will and is not a widespread understanding of what it means. Everyone (more or less) can speak. It led Aristotle to define us as ‘rational animals’. But it means far more. During the seminar that was later published as ‘A Spiritual Psychology’ I asked him what was it that was truly equal in all human beings and he replied that it was the will. In reflecting on this while first committing myself to research into dialogue, I suddenly felt that the dialogue group had as its intrinsic pattern the ‘communion of saints’ that is, a group that participates together in will – or ‘seeing’.

It would be sad and bad to end with such lofty ideas without saying that, in spite of appearances, this can be a present reality, however much we fall into the malaise of misunderstanding. Others might then say, ‘Well, isn’t this what we claim anyway for our Gurdjieff groups? Is there not always the implicit presence of the true way no matter how mistaken and petty we seem to be?’ I think this view has merit but needs to be gone into. I would say that we need to consider that there is a kind of mysticism surrounding Gurdjieff work groups – that lends itself to projection and transference in relation to any group leaders – which might be expressed by the phrase ‘in the name of’. The psychoanalyst Lacan used the phrase ‘in the name of the father’ to indicate how meaning was structured in us and this concept applies here. Gurdjieff is the ‘father’. And how often we see that groupings attached to Gurdjieff’s ideas carry with them strong elements of family structure. People actually revert to such terminology as indicating something good and profound. It is not. The family is the basic group most of us have established in us and it is a barrier to being on a level with each other. The family is technically the ‘small group’ which most of us never get beyond. It is based on emotion and power.

The critical factor to my mind is to do with coming across what is *not expected*. This applies to our very sense of identity. In my book ‘Structures of Meaning’ I explore aspects of a kind of ‘self-remembering’ that becomes possible while being in dialogue and not otherwise. Mind proves to be multi-valued. It is rediscovered in dialogue and we ourselves appear very differently. Many people try out some kind

of what is vaguely called 'meditation' to 'look more deeply within' but these practices often entail deep misunderstandings about what is within.

Each one of us can take up some investigation and thereby join the company of all those other humans over the ages who have made some question their own and become 'slaves' to it, giving themselves to it, beating a lone path or in the company of a few fellow seekers (as epitomized in Attar's story of the Simurg!), full of trepidation. These people were not Sufis, or anything else. They were people. Whatever system they had going was just for social purposes. At the heart of it was just some basic human contact, one person meeting with another *just as they might meet themselves*. They played around, just as Gurdjieff portrays in his account of the Saturday meetings in Babylon devoted to theatrical improvisation. They got lost. They did not know what to do.

Let us not be deceived by imagination about some place of safety or attainment in which all becomes clear and we do not have to worry anymore! As Zorba the Greek said, 'Life is trouble. Only death is not'. I myself am much enamoured of Bernadette Roberts who talks of getting beyond God and duality but then adds that she still has her existentialist days! Myth is myth and wonderful stuff. In the Third Series, Life is Real then Only when 'I Am' raises the whole question of the enterprise. What is it about? What are we doing? What does it mean? Sooner or later we must give up on expecting anyone to tell us, though we must always strive to share with others whatever revelations have been vouchsafed to us. The Third Series (strangely reminiscent of Joyce's 'Ulysses') ends with an unfinished sentence. For me, that remains the essence of Gurdjieff's teaching here and now.

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