

CONTEMPORARY STATUS OF THE WORK¹

Although almost 70 years have elapsed since Gurdjieff's death, his life and teachings continue to challenge and intrigue contemporary seekers of spiritual wisdom. Interest in Gurdjieff's teachings is also growing in the secular world, and many of his psychological and cosmological ideas have influenced various "Human Potential" and "New Age" movements and even entered the cultural and academic mainstream. His name and ideas appear in a surprising array of current cultural expressions:

- CDs and Internet downloads of the music of Gurdjieff and Thomas de Hartmann
- DVDs and videos of the Movements
- the emergence of the enneagram symbol as a type of cultural icon
- films, TV documentaries, radio interviews
- theatre, dance, drama, literature
- books, journals, magazines, periodicals
- scholarly study in academic fields as diverse as psychotherapy, ecology, comparative religion and quantum physics
- conferences, seminars, weekend workshops
- business applications, management training
- countless websites

The popularization of Gurdjieff's teachings is arguably a mixed blessing. Although larger audiences are now exposed to his ideas and practices, there is the real possibility that those who study his ideas outside the framework of an esoteric school with qualified teachers will experience little spiritual benefit, and may in fact misunderstand the teachings. Fourth Way author William Patterson sounds a cautionary warning about the consequences of injecting esoteric teachings into the mainstream, as "these ideas and practices are powerful in themselves, and when introduced into secular life they will necessarily be taken over by the ego and used for its own glorification and the domination of others." (1)

Gurdjieff himself clearly recognized that spiritual teachings could deviate from their original impulse toward serious distortion:

Think how many turns the line of development of forces must have taken to come from the Gospel preaching of love to the inquisition; or to go from the ascetics of the early centuries studying esoteric Christianity to the scholastics who calculated how many angels could be placed on the point of a needle. (2)

Gurdjieff took a number of steps to ensure the accurate transmission of his ideas to future generations. He preserved his teachings in written form, through music and the Movements, and trained a core group of pupils that he deemed capable of teaching and guiding others.

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In the years following Gurdjieff's death in 1949, senior students under the direction of Jeanne de Salzmann continued the Work and established the Gurdjieff Foundation as the official body responsible for the dissemination of Gurdjieff's teachings. But despite the efforts of those entrusted with the preservation of Gurdjieff's teaching in its original form, divisions among his students developed as differing interpretations of his ideas emerged. As John G. Bennett observes, this is a common, if not inevitable, pattern:

History shows that whenever a spiritual leader, small or great, leaves the earthly scene, his followers invariably divide into factions. Each claims to preserve and transmit what the teacher has brought to it, but one faction understands this duty literally; preserving every word, every memory, every injunction as if they were crystallized and fixed forever. Another faction secretly or overtly rejoices to be set free from the constraint of the teacher's presence, and goes off to do whatever their own impulses dictate. Yet another seeks to keep alive the spirit of what has been given, and is prepared to see the outward forms changed and even distorted if only something new can grow. (3)

Divisions that developed between Gurdjieff's successors have continued up to the present day. (4) Although the Gurdjieff Foundation is generally regarded as the authoritative source for the transmission of Gurdjieff's teachings, many other groups, organizations and centres associate themselves with Gurdjieff's name. Some of these are led by individuals who studied with students of Gurdjieff, while others have no connection with a recognized line of transmission originating from Gurdjieff. Other groups, schools and organizations have co-opted his name, including "implicit and explicit pretenders to Gurdjieff's mantle . . . who in fact never met him." (5) And some who claim to be Fourth Way "teachers" are clearly fraudulent. This proliferation of groups, teachers and organizations associated with the name of Gurdjieff poses a significant challenge to the discriminating spiritual seeker who is in search of authentic teachings.

Current Gurdjieff Groups and Organizations

Following Gurdjieff's death, his appointed successors in Europe and America endeavoured to ensure the faithful transmission of the Work. The establishment of the Gurdjieff Foundation and the publication of Gurdjieff's writings were important steps in preserving the essence of Gurdjieff's teachings for future generations. Today, the officially sanctioned Gurdjieff foundations form a worldwide network with branches throughout North America, Europe, South America, Australia, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. (6)

Reliable information on the membership of the Gurdjieff Foundation is difficult to ascertain, but some have speculated that there are approximately five to ten thousand adherents worldwide with "considerable diversity with respect to social class, age, occupation and educational background." (7) Other observers dispute this characteriza-

tion, describing the U.S. membership, for instance, as relatively homogeneous: white, urban, middle-class and college-educated.

Professor Jacob Needleman provides a succinct description of the current activities and teaching structure of the Gurdjieff Foundation:

The activities of the Foundation include the study of Gurdjieff's ideas, group meetings, study of the movements and sacred dances left by Gurdjieff, music, crafts and household work, the study of traditions, public demonstrations of work, and work with children and young people. In group meetings students verify the authenticity of their observations through expressing them in the presence of others. The place of group leader is taken by one or several experienced pupils, and great care is taken that these meetings do not revolve around the person of the leader or turn into speculative, psychological discussion or encounters . . . Group meetings and, where they are taught, the movements are comparatively invariant forms of practice of the Gurdjieff Foundation. The numerous other forms show more variety from center to center, depending on the makeup of the group and the specific line of inquiry that is held to be most useful at a given time or place. (8)

Gurdjieff's teachings are widely studied in a variety of contexts and have influenced the contemporary fields of education, psychology, science, art, entertainment and even business. The diffusion and impact of Gurdjieff's ideas can be gauged by the large body of literature (9) and the number of websites devoted to Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way. Although many welcome the wide public exposure of Gurdjieff's teachings, some senior Work students have expressed concern about the proliferation of workshops, seminars, conferences and videos on Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way, sensing that "something intrinsically precious is slowly and inexorably being eroded through this process of dispersion into the marketplace of that which has always been so carefully protected from the eyes of the casually curious and acquisitively oriented." (10)

The tension between orthodox Gurdjieffians who believe that the Work should not be publicly promoted and those who feel that Gurdjieff's ideas should be made available to the widest possible audience has produced a significant division within the Fourth Way community. (11) Conflict between certain Gurdjieff groups has manifested as doctrinal quarrels, personal attacks and even threats of lawsuits. In the 1980s and 1990s some experienced second-generation Gurdjieff students broke their ties with the Gurdjieff Foundation and formed their own independent groups, much to the consternation of senior directors of the Foundation. In other instances, when the authority and judgement of the leaders was publicly questioned by students of the Foundation, the offending individual was expelled. (12)

The second half of the twentieth century closed a significant chapter in the development of the Work with the death of almost all of Gurdjieff's primary pupils. Following Jeanne de Salzmann's passing in 1990, representatives from a number of North American Gurdjieff groups attended a gathering in California to explore the current state of the

Work. (13) Many participants at this meeting had the distinct sense that the death of Jeanne de Salzmann, who was directly entrusted by Gurdjieff with the preservation of his teachings, marked a turning point in the Work, and that the continuation and future direction of the Work was now in the hands of the senior students who remained. The challenge confronting those who wished to preserve Gurdjieff's teachings was clear: "How to preserve the Gurdjieff canon from possible death or from dilution or distortion, while at the same time making it available to a wider populace and invigorating it with forces and in directions appropriate to the times." (14)

The task of maintaining the trajectory of Gurdjieff's teachings in the direction of higher development was formidable. (15) New teachers, groups and organizations associating themselves with Gurdjieff sprouted throughout the Western world in the 1980s and 1990s. They presented many different faces to spiritual seekers attracted to their Gurdjieff-derived teachings:

Some organizations are like Protestant sects dissenting from what they feel is an atmosphere of frigid severity and timid spiritual conventionality within the Gurdjieff orthodoxy. Others have been formed with more goodwill and imagination than direct or indirect connection with Gurdjieff. Some groups are just plain imitators; others are probably sincere . . . Certain organizations promulgating what they claim to be fourth way teaching have not been above the cult phenomena of rationalized violence, coercion, and sexual exploitation, but this has been relatively uncommon. What usually afflicts Gurdjieff-inspired groups is a sort of muddled stagnation and humorless rigidification, not outright banditry. (16)

The countless groups throughout the world who are studying and attempting to practise Gurdjieff's teachings fall into a number of broad categories:

- Groups authorized by and under the direction of the Gurdjieff Foundation, based in North America, South America, Europe, Australia and elsewhere
- Groups led by students who studied with the Gurdjieff Foundation but who have not been mandated by the Foundation to teach independently
- Groups led by individuals who were students of direct pupils of Gurdjieff
- Groups led by individuals with no direct line of transmission from Gurdjieff or his students but who claim they are "inspired" by Gurdjieff and his ideas
- Groups who combine Gurdjieff studies with other spiritual traditions
- Groups which are essentially leaderless and take the form of informal reading and discussion circles
- Groups and individuals who associate themselves with Gurdjieff's name for commercial or financial gain

- Groups run by individuals who use Gurdjieff's name and style of teaching as a means to exploit others

The fragmentation of Gurdjieff's teaching by so many different groups and organizations has raised concern both within and outside the Gurdjieff community. Critic Robin Amis argues that the current manifestation of the Work is merely a "mechanical reiteration" of Gurdjieff's original teaching and has failed to produce any teacher of Gurdjieff's magnitude. His claim is probably true to some degree, although it can be argued that many current Work teachers are able to transmit Gurdjieff's teachings effectively even though they have not attained Gurdjieff's degree of spiritual development. (17)

It is unclear what qualifications are required to transmit Gurdjieff's teachings, since there is no formalized chain of transmission that is universally recognized by all segments of the Gurdjieff community. Teachers associated with the Gurdjieff Foundation are the most likely to have received instruction from individuals who worked with Gurdjieff or his direct pupils. However, many other leaders of current Gurdjieff groups are either self-appointed or base their knowledge merely on study from books. (18) Others, although grounded in the ideas, have only limited first-hand experience with Gurdjieff's exercises and practices.

The landscape of the Work has been populated by both officially sanctioned groups guided by the Gurdjieff Foundation and a conglomeration of self-proclaimed teachers, groups, centres, organizations and websites. Non-aligned groups typically promote themselves through public forums, retreats, videotapes and DVDs, newsletters, journals, books and websites. Contemporary groups of both stripes have been accused of secretiveness, sectarianism, incessant gossip and "Work-faced funereal solemnity" and bear virtually no resemblance to the vibrant way in which Gurdjieff projected his teachings to his groups: "In its seriousness and sobriety, the typical Work group today bears more resemblance to a Quaker meeting than to the master's vodka-laced banquets." (19)

What period of study is sufficient to allow one to master the complexities of Gurdjieff's teaching and to effectively transmit them to others is an open question. John Bennett comments on the difficulty of selecting and training potential group leaders for the Work:

His pupils are generally agreed that at least seven years of intensive training are needed to form a group leader. The majority of those who attempt this training fall by the way or become so acutely aware of their own defects that they refuse to take responsibility for others. In consequence, those who have at different times accepted the task of guiding others have been overworked and overstrained. Dependence upon highly trained and rarely equipped teachers is a serious defect for which it is difficult to see a remedy. (20)

There may be inherent dangers in becoming involved with a group led by someone who has not been properly trained. (21) The techniques used by some "teachers" to transmit Work ideas can have a powerful and potentially negative effect on students if not properly

employed: “It has been reported that in an effort to provide the ‘friction’ or difficulties that are deemed necessary to the Work, ‘teachers’ have made their unwitting students endure extreme periods of sleeplessness, fasting, silence, irrational and sudden demands, extraordinary physical efforts, and so on.” (22)

A more extreme distortion of the Gurdjieff group dynamic occurs in the case where the leader manipulates students for ego satisfaction or personal gain. (23) Some of these groups have all the characteristics of a cult. (24) Psychologist Charles Tart warns of the dangers of becoming involved in such groups:

Gurdjieff’s ideas readily lend themselves to authoritarian interpretations that turn work based on them into cults (in the worst sense of the term), giving great power to a charismatic leader . . . Some of these leaders are deluded about their level of development but are very good at influencing others. Some are just plain charlatans who appreciate the services and money available from devoted followers. It is dangerous to get involved with any group teaching Gurdjieff’s ideas. It may be led by a charlatan, it may be only a social group with no real teaching effect, it may be riddled with pathological group dynamics that hurt its members. (25)

Although some Gurdjieff-inspired groups have exhibited cult-like characteristics, this appears to be the exception rather than the rule as “they have been manifested at the margins of the teaching, where it is in contact with the ordinary world. These deflections, however noxious, have had their use in that they have served to test a seeker’s sincerity, intent and discrimination.” (26)

The majority of credible Gurdjieff groups remain close to Gurdjieff’s original intent, and appear to bring significant benefits to their participants. (27) Most groups meet privately and avoid publicity and proselytizing, consistent with Gurdjieff’s caution that esoteric ideas are prone to distortion if they are shared too soon or indiscriminately. Legitimate groups carefully screen and even discourage certain people from approaching the Work. Personal responsibility, sincere self-study and engagement with everyday life are actively encouraged. (28)

The challenging, uncompromising and “adult” qualities of the authentic Work set it apart from many other spiritual paths: “It’s an extremely difficult way: if it is approached wrongly or by a temperament which is not suited to it, there is a risk it may disrupt more than it may help.” (29) C.S. Nott, who studied with Gurdjieff for many years, warns of the unexpected challenges inherent in the Work and the necessity for a genuine commitment to the path of self-study and self-knowledge:

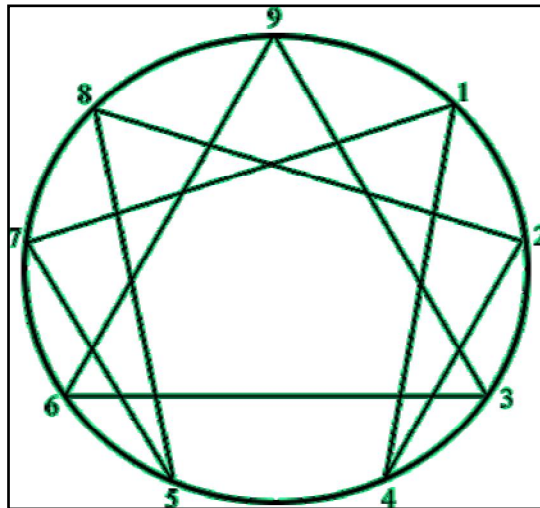
Many people now are becoming interested in Gurdjieff’s Teaching, and most want *just* to be interested. When their vanity and self-love begins to be hurt, as it must in any real group, pupils take offense and leave. Yet those who can compel themselves to see themselves as they are, whatever the suffering, reap a rich reward – they begin really to live, they become the twice-born. The practice of this Teaching, which at first appears easy, ‘just

what I was looking for,' is the most difficult thing in the world. Everything is against – both inside and out – the knowing of ourselves, against efforts to be conscious of ourselves . . . but by following the path and crossing the bridge a man receives blessings beyond price. (30)

The Enneagram Phenomenon

The enneagram symbol has been singled out from the whole body of Gurdjieff's teaching for special attention. Over the last three decades the enneagram has gained favour with psychotherapists, self-help groups, business consultants and New Age enthusiasts, and has entered the cultural mainstream through lectures, workshops, conferences, audio and video tapes, books and articles. Gurdjieff's name or photo is often associated with these ventures to establish credibility and authenticity. Today the enneagram symbol is something of a cultural icon, adorning jewelry, clothing and coffee mugs, and appearing in films, music videos and books.

Very few who are familiar with the enneagram know that it originated from the teachings of Gurdjieff. He first presented the enneagram to his Moscow and St. Petersburg pupils in 1916. While he taught that the enneagram was a unique and special symbol, Gurdjieff did not reveal its source: "This symbol cannot be met with anywhere in the study of 'occultism,' either in books or in oral transmission. It was given such significance by those who knew, that they considered it necessary to keep the knowledge of it secret." (31)



The symbol integrates two of Gurdjieff's most important cosmological principles: the 'Law of Three' and the 'Law of Seven.' Gurdjieff linked the enneagram to the assimilation of food, air and sensory impressions and the position of the planets within the solar system. Many of his sacred dances and Movements were based on the patterns of the enneagram. Gurdjieff referred to the enneagram as a universal symbol which synthesizes and helps interpret knowledge: "The enneagram is the fundamental hieroglyph of a universal language which has as many different meanings as there are levels of men." (32) Gurdjieff emphasized that only initiates in genuine esoteric schools knew how to interpret the enneagram and understand its symbolism:

The knowledge of the enneagram has for a very long time been preserved in secret and if it now is, so to speak, made available to all, it is only in an incomplete and theoretical form of which nobody could make any practical use without instruction from a man who knows. In order to understand the enneagram it must be thought of as in motion, as moving. A motionless enneagram is a dead symbol; the living symbol is in motion. (33)

Nothing was publicly known about the enneagram until the publication of P.D. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous* in 1949. Although the symbol was discussed in several books written by students of Gurdjieff during the next two decades (Maurice Nicoll, Rodney Collin, Kenneth Walker, John G. Bennett), it remained virtually unknown in metaphysical circles until the late 1960s.

Oscar Ichazo, a Bolivian esotericist, is generally credited with introducing to the West a theory of personality based on the enneagram. Ichazo travelled widely throughout the East in the 1950s and 1960s studying mystical teachings. In 1968, he presented what he termed "the enneagon of the fixations" to a group in Arica, Chile. One year later a number of prominent psychologists and psychotherapists gathered in Arica for intensive training in the enneagram and other esoteric ideas under the direction of Ichazo. One of the participants, Dr. Claudio Naranjo, carefully studied the personality typology associated with the enneagram, but broke with Ichazo and did not complete the training. Naranjo returned to the United States and further developed the ideas into a system, the "enneagram of personality," which he taught to classes in the San Francisco area in the 1970s. He explicitly requested that group members not teach his ideas publicly without his permission.

But, within a few years, students of Naranjo began to teach the enneagram personality system in classes and workshops, and starting in the 1980s a steady stream of books devoted to the enneagram began to appear in print. The symbol gained further prominence when the personality typology based on it was linked to the diagnostic categories of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM schemata) and the traditional Seven Deadly Sins of Christianity. It became a topic of study at Jesuit theological seminaries, especially at the University of California at Berkeley and Loyola University in Chicago.

Central to the enneagram-based theory of personality is the identification of nine basic personality types, each of which is generally identified by a number from one to nine. Various interpretations of these nine types led to the formation of different schools of thought, resulting in doctrinal disputes and questions surrounding the qualifications of those teaching the enneagram typology.

Meanwhile, Ichazo, who established the Arica Institute in New York in the 1970s, where he further elaborated his idea of “character fixations,” denounced Naranjo and strongly criticized the burgeoning enneagram movement as “dogmatic and irrational.” Ichazo became involved in bitter legal battles with the Jesuit community and authors of enneagram books over copyright to the enneagram personality system, cases which he eventually lost in court.

The orthodox Gurdjieff community watched these developments with a sense of disapproval and growing unease. They were alarmed at the way the esoteric enneagram symbol was reduced to the level of a simplistic descriptor of human personality not unlike newspaper sun-sign astrology: “The symbol’s exterior form has been copied without the smallest grasp of its interior dynamic: a conceptual instrument developed to transport objective ideas, is flatly reproduced as a means for coaxing down some personal advantage.” (34)

Those involved with the Gurdjieff Work had a number of objections to the popularization of the enneagram as a psychological tool. The first concern was the lack, in most cases, of any acknowledgement of Gurdjieff as the source of the enneagram. The enneagram teachers were also criticized for ignoring the established tradition of esoteric transmission which prohibits students from teaching esoteric ideas without authorization. (35)

Another concern was that “seed” ideas become impotent when isolated from the greater teaching of which they are an integral, though limited, part. Teachers from other spiritual traditions have also warned of the danger of fragmenting comprehensive teachings by focusing on one concept. (36)

A final objection is the relatively shallow use of the enneagram as a map of personality types rather than as a means of spiritual development. (37) Gurdjieff could clearly foresee how symbols like the enneagram were susceptible to misuse, and warned that they must be understood in the proper context:

In the hands of the incompetent and the ignorant, however full of good intentions, the same symbol becomes an ‘instrument of delusion’ . . . Symbols which are transposed into the words of ordinary language become rigid in them, they grow dim and very easily become ‘their own opposites,’ confining the meaning within narrow dogmatic frames, without giving it even the very relative freedom of a *logical* examination of a subject. (38)

Gurdjieff's words foreshadow the contemporary misuse of the enneagram as a mere personality descriptor or mysterious occult symbol. Today, the enneagram's multiple levels of meaning and inter-dependent relationship with a comprehensive system of spiritual ideas are largely ignored.

Challenges Facing the Work

In the transmission of a spiritual teaching, especially following the death of its leader, there are inevitable challenges and significant turning points. John Pentland, whom Gurdjieff entrusted to direct the Work in America, believed that there were critical stages in the development of an esoteric teaching where the life and inner dynamic of the teaching must be redefined and reinvigorated or else it will die. The current period with the widespread proliferation of Gurdjieff groups, books and websites, may present just such a challenge: "There are so many great forces at play now in the Gurdjieffian 'world' – so many different visions, or lack of vision; so many different agendas at so many levels, so many opportunities to lose the thread, to become identified with some confining perspective; so many people who do not see the scale of the difficulty but feel nevertheless that they are chosen to 'protect the faith'." (39)

Gurdjieff's current successors and supporters are faced with the dilemma of how to carry on his legacy in a way that remains faithful to his original intent yet is responsive to the changing circumstances and possibilities of the contemporary world. Gurdjieff studies today take many forms (academic, institutional, experimental, organic) each of which presents its own particular challenges.

Gurdjieff derided a strictly intellectual approach to higher knowledge as merely "pouring from the empty into the void." Nevertheless, in the contemporary world no subject, no matter how esoteric, is immune to some form of academic study and assessment and the Gurdjieff Work is no exception. Academic-based Gurdjieff studies generally take the form of books, monographs, scholarly articles, conferences, discussion groups and websites. Very few working in the field have any actual experience of the Work and their perspective is clearly a "view from outside." (40) The pedagogical or ivory tower approach to Gurdjieff's teachings has been characterized by his followers as "a destination often fatal to the transmission of essential meaning." (41)

At the other end of the spectrum are those who have been entrusted by Gurdjieff and his direct successors to preserve the Work in the form and manner in which it was transmitted by him. Yet the task of preserving the essence of an authentic spiritual path is immense and trying to maintain a teaching in its exact form may make it rigid and unresponsive to changing needs and circumstances. Robert de Ropp discusses this problem of "fossilization":

No matter how powerful the teacher, his followers can always be trusted to make a mishmash of his teachings and bring his world to a halt. This they generally do by creating a cult of personality around the teacher him-

self, and fossilizing everything in exactly the form in which it was given. Using this fossilized teaching they engage in mechanical repetitions of certain patterns of behavior, assuring themselves and each other that they will attain liberation and higher consciousness as long as they never, never make the slightest change in anything the master taught. But life is change, and what is appropriate for one period is not necessarily valid for another. So all this effort to hold on to certain forms only results in the arrest of development. (42)

The Gurdjieff Foundation and its affiliates are organized in an essentially hierarchical pyramid structure where authority flows from the top to the bottom. Critics have accused the Foundation of institutionalized secrecy, rigidity, insularity, control and “doctrinal fixations,” in their attempts to remain true to Gurdjieff’s original vision. The challenge for orthodox Gurdjieff exponents is to recognize the powerful process of “entropic descent” (described by the ‘Law of Octaves’) and try to resist this downward spiral by returning to the timeless universal heart of the teaching.

Other groups and organizations have tried to counter this natural dilution of an esoteric teaching over the course of time by experimenting, adapting and innovating, often mixing Gurdjieff’s ideas with other spiritual teachings. (43) John G. Bennett in particular exemplifies the integrative, experiential approach to transmitting Gurdjieff’s ideas and practices:

In the transmission of “method” Bennett introduced the cybernetic idea of “process correcting process” as a way of understanding Gurdjieff’s teaching about the deviation of the octave. In this regard, Bennett’s own voyage of discovery was an illustration. He saw that any given system that comes into operation with a group of people tends to become a law unto itself (i.e. autonomous) and gradually runs down. The only way for this not to happen was by allowing in “information” from another source. I believe he understood this in a way that cannot be equated with Ouspensky’s hope of contacting the “inner circle of humanity” – that is, the special people behind the scenes who had all the answers – but was much more pragmatic and scientific. For years many of his pupils listened to Krishnamurti – as strong a contrast to Gurdjieff as one can possibly imagine – and Bennett himself made the radical and extremely hazardous step of engaging with Subud, Idries Shah, Hasan Shushud and many others in a series of interweaving “corrections.” Decried by outsiders and critics as a mere “drunkard’s walk” it may well have been a demonstration of how to keep waking up (which one cannot do alone, anyway, according to Gurdjieff.) (44)

However, others argue that this open-ended approach can lead to abandoning the integrity and “true centre” of a spiritual teaching and creating a mishmash of teachings that leads nowhere. Innovation and creative experimentation, if they are to be productive and beneficial, require both comprehensive knowledge of potential effects and skillful application. Change for the sake of change leads to confusion and disorder. Adaptations

designed to make challenging esoteric teachings more comprehensible often result in the dilution and oversimplification of powerful ideas.

If the Gurdjieff Work is to retain its power to transform lives, individuals with exceptional qualities will need to emerge as conscious and responsible custodians of the teaching. Those entrusted with the responsibility of keeping a teaching alive require the proper intention, knowledge and foresight. (45) They must strike a difficult but essential balance: “How to infuse the original vibration of the teaching with new forces and energies appropriate to the present era without distorting the vibration.” (46)

To protect the accurate transmission of Gurdjieff's knowledge to future generations, the guardians of the Work must remember that the teaching is based upon critical thinking and personal verification. Gurdjieff insisted that his students continually question his ideas and judge for themselves the truth of his teachings based on their own personal experience. And, Gurdjieff's teachings are not an end in themselves but a conduit to a higher level of reality and understanding. When the river is crossed the boat can be left behind: “The Teaching remains the same; its outer manifestations change. Gurdjieff, when a phase of his work had served its purpose, liquidated and began something new.” (47)

Commentary

The Mulla Nasrudin story “The Duck Soup” aptly illustrates how a viable spiritual teaching becomes progressively weakened with the passage of time:

A kinsman came to see the Mulla from somewhere deep in the country, bringing a duck as a gift. Delighted, Nasrudin had the duck cooked and shared it with his guest. Presently, however, one country-man after another started to call, each one the friend of the friend of the “man who brought you the duck.” No further presents were forthcoming. At length, the Mulla was exasperated. One day yet another stranger appeared. “I am the friend of the friend of the friend of the relative who brought you the duck.” He sat down, like all the rest, expecting a meal. Nasrudin handed him a bowl of hot water. “What is this?” “That is the soup of the soup of the soup of the duck which was brought by my relative.” (48)

Many current Gurdjieff groups are undoubtedly serving the “soup of the soup of the soup” to their followers, providing a weakened taste of Gurdjieff's original potent formula. (49) Yet even these diluted forms of the Work may serve a useful function, as Gurdjieff himself recognized:

Pseudo-esoteric systems also play their part in the work and activities of esoteric circles. Namely, they are intermediaries between humanity which is entirely immersed in the materialistic life and [real] schools . . .

The very idea of esotericism, the idea of initiation, reaches people in most cases through pseudo-esoteric systems and schools; and if there were not these pseudo-esoteric schools the vast majority of humanity would have no possibility whatever of hearing and learning of the existence of anything greater than life. (50)

Contemporary Gurdjieff groups and teachers do not seem to be able to creatively adapt their teachings to the realities of the 21st century. (51) Gurdjieff continually modified the form and presentation of his teaching as external conditions changed. In the early Russian phase of his teaching career he utilized an occult-mystical terminology that resonated with contemporary cultural interests. In the decade following his 1924 auto-mobile accident he concentrated on preserving his teaching in written form as a legacy for future generations. The mid-1930s saw the establishment of small groups in Paris in which he worked intensively with carefully selected pupils. The final years of his life were devoted to teaching through service and example: “He adopted the role of servant, of doing for others, and reverted to simple, everyday circumstances as his tools for instruction.” (52)

Jacob Needleman stresses the organic nature of a spiritual teaching which can adapt to changing circumstances and the needs of individual students:

The process of awakening requires not only an understanding of the constituent forces and laws which govern man’s psyche and actions, but also a deep sensitivity to and appreciation of individual subjective needs and conditions. In other words, for an effective guidance, the principle of relativity must be recognized in the transmission of the teaching: individuals must be approached according to their respective levels of development and experience. Gurdjieff might have stressed one view to a student at a certain level of understanding and quite another view when that student had reached another level. This might give the appearance of contradiction, but in fact it was consistent in applying only those aspects of the whole teaching truly necessary at a given moment. The same principle applies to the ideas, some of which seemed more accessible at one period while others still remained to be revealed in the unfolding life of the teaching. (53)

The ability to teach in multiple modalities is one of the hallmarks of a genuine teacher. Perhaps this is the crux of the dilemma facing the current leaders of the Work. None appear to have attained the level of development whereby they can tailor their teachings to the needs of the contemporary world and the changing circumstances of ‘time, place and people.’ Most of Gurdjieff’s successors were limited in their knowledge and being and were unable to effectively teach “the method of inner development through self-sensing, self-remembering and self-observation; Conscious Labour and Voluntary Suffering, and the five strivings of Objective Morality, which are the basis for all inner work.” (54)

Traditionally, an authentic spiritual teacher had passed through the various stages of inner development and was authorized to teach by his or her own teachers. This ancient tradition is largely ignored in the cultural climate of the contemporary Western world:

The Eastern tradition that one learns until one is permitted by a teacher to teach (an ancient tradition perpetuated in apprenticeship and the granting of degrees in the West), is not adhered to in many non-academic areas of the West. The reason for this is not far to seek. In the West, the prevailing culture's emphasis is on haste, on getting something and passing it on . . . This has taken the form, in spiritual, psychological and other areas, of people trying to teach, to expound, to treat or cure, to communicate before they are properly fitted to do so. The fact that, in the West, anyone can set up as an expert, a teacher, a therapist or an advisor, compounds this error. (55)

Many of the contemporary “teachers” of the Work are self-appointed and lack the essential qualities to guide others on their spiritual path. They may be sincere, committed, well-versed in Gurdjieff's teachings and generous with their time and resources. But guiding others on their own unique spiritual journey requires a sophisticated knowledge of the human psyche, and training and support from a genuine school of inner development. The Work has great transformative power, but it requires a teacher of exceptional quality to unlock its inherent potential. Gurdjieff was clearly such a teacher. Whether Gurdjieff will ever have a successor with a comparable level of mastery capable of transmitting the essence of the Work to future generations remains an open question.

NOTES

- (1) William Patterson *Taking With the Left Hand* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1998), p. 40.
- (2) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p.129.
- (3) John G. Bennett *Witness: The Autobiography of John G. Bennett* (Tucson: Omen Press, 1974), p. 233.
- (4) Writer and scholar John Anthony West studied with the Gurdjieff Foundation of London for seven years and describes some of the divisions he observed in his article “Encountering Gurdjieff” in David Kherdian (ed.) *A Stopinder Anthology* (Mount Desert, Maine: Beech Hill Publishing, 2014, p. 58):

While in the Foundation, one of the most irritating characteristics was the incessant gossip, and the internal friction between the various “schools” all claiming to be the inheritors of the “true Work.” The Foundation-ites disparaged the Bennett people, and vice-versa while the various splinter groups in America, England and Paris were all increasingly at odds with each other. Twenty-five years later, that situation has become worse, rather than better, as the splinter groups themselves split into toothpicks and then matches. It seemed so unnecessary and I, like so many, wondered why it had to be like this.

- (5) James Moore *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth* (Rockport, Massachusetts: Element Books, 1991), p. 370.
- (6) Jacob Needleman describes the structure of the Gurdjieff Foundation in the web document “G.I. Gurdjieff and His School” (www.gurdjieff.org/needleman2.htm):

The main centers of study remain Paris, New York and London because of the relatively large concentration of first-generation Gurdjieff pupils in these cities. Most of the groups maintain close correspondence with the principal centers, usually in relationship to one or two of the pupils who travel to specific cities in order to guide the work of these groups. The general articulation of these various groups, both within America and throughout the world, is a cooperative one, rather than one based on strictly sanctioned jurisdictional control. There are also groups who no longer maintain close correspondence and operate independently.

- (7) J. Needleman “G.I. Gurdjieff and His School” (www.gurdjieff.org/needleman2.htm)
- (8) J. Needleman “G.I. Gurdjieff and His School” (www.gurdjieff.org/needleman2.htm)
- (9) See Walter Driscoll, ed. *Gurdjieff: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1985).
- (10) Don Hoyt “The Movement of Transmission” (www.gurdjieff.org/editorial.7-1.htm)
- (11) Anthony Blake, a longtime student of John Bennett, articulates the position that Gurdjieff’s teachings should not be limited to orthodox Gurdjieff groups in his article “A View of the Work in the Year 2000” in David Kherdian (ed.) *A Stopinder Anthology* (Mount Desert, Maine: Beech Hill Publishing, 2014, pp. 15-16):

Now that “the work” is in the public domain and no longer just for the privileged few – as it was up until fifty years ago – what it is must change. I have always valued Bennett’s honesty and open-mindedness in this regard, while remaining suspicious of his utopian dreams for social reform. He always emphasized that the work was not anyone’s possession, including Gurdjieff’s. He saw the substance of the work in the perfection of doing and that people who had never heard of Gurdjieff can be “in the work” more than those who identify themselves with Gurdjieff’s ideas. The criterion for “belonging” to the work is not dependent in fact on any line of transmission from the past, but concerns the nature of the present moment. When “the work” manifests in the present moment, it does so in a unique and creative way and one has then a natural affinity with others who have come to this moment. Gurdjieff put it in his own inimitable way by saying, “If a man can make shoes one can talk to him.” Doing anything well is the price of admission.

- (12) James Moore, author of the biography *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth*, was cast out of the Gurdjieff Society of London in 1994 after penning an article in a scholarly journal (“Moveable Feasts: The Gurdjieff Work” *Religion Today*, Volume 9(2), 1994) which sharply criticized both innovations introduced by Jeanne de Salzmann emphasizing meditative sitting and a passive opening to higher energies and the 1992 revision of *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* spearheaded by de Salzmann and senior leaders of the New York Foundation. Interestingly, the revision was also met with a strong negative reaction by many Work groups and teachers, notably A.L. Staveley of Two Rivers Farm, Oregon.
- (13) Dr. Michel de Salzmann succeeded his mother as head of the Institut Gurdjieff in Paris following her death in 1990. During the next decade, until his death in 2001, he convened a number of international conferences in Europe and America to coordinate the activities of disparate Gurdjieff groups. However, some felt uncomfortable with his succession as it seemed to solidify the existence of an “extensible dynastic line.”
- (14) Anna Challenger *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff’s Beelzebub* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), p.114.
- (15) Scholar Anna Challenger explores these issues in *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff’s Beelzebub* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002, p.114):

Gurdjieff frequently emphasized that no living organism, such as a teaching is, remains in a state of stasis: all organic systems are perpetually in flux, either decaying or evolving, degenerating or regenerating; but nothing living remains of its own accord in a stable state over time. And only devolution occurs mechanically according to the natural laws of entropy. “Each teaching is subject to the ravages of time unless great care is taken in maintaining the original vibration.”

- (16) Kathleen Speeth *The Gurdjieff Work* (New York: Jeremy Tarcher, 1989), p. 113.

- (17) Some practitioners of the Work point to the apparent inability of contemporary Fourth Way teachers to tailor their teaching to the individual requirements of their students. Francois Stahly examines this problem in his essay “An Exacting Way” in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 413:

To my knowledge, today nobody in the teaching allows himself to intervene directly with people, in a different way for each one. A specific

shock, destined for a certain person, such as are described in the writings about Gurdjieff – I don’t see anyone practicing that today.

- (18) Gurdjieff himself clearly indicated that it was not possible to transmit the essence of his teaching by or from books alone.
- (19) Richard Smoley and Jay Kinney *Hidden Wisdom* (New York: Penguin/Arkana, 1999), p. 224.
- (20) John G. Bennett *Witness: The Autobiography of John G. Bennett* (Tucson: Omen Press, 1974), p. 246.
- (21) Gurdjieff biographer James Webb warns of the possible adverse effects of Fourth Way psychological methods when applied by a leader who is only partially developed in *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987, pp. 567-568):
- For the Work to work, the pupil must be hit from his blind side; indeed part of the process will be to point out that he *has* a blind side . . . The Work operates by surprise attack, and if this attack is overdone, it may merely shock the pupil into a position of dependence which he or she will never be able to break. There must have been numerous unfortunates temporarily or semi-permanently warped for ordinary life by their experiences in the Work.
- (22) Joel Friedlander “The Work Today” *Gnosis* No. 20, Summer 1991, p. 40.
- (23) Frank Sinclair, a past president of the Gurdjieff Foundation of New York, with many years experience observing various Work groups, writes in *Without Benefit of Clergy* (Xlibris, 2005, p. 15) that many group leaders are “subject to weaknesses and sins, not to speak of downright ignorance, appalling self-conceit, unexamined arrogance, and presumptuous elitism: how many there are who profess to have been ‘specially prepared’ and singled out (often only by themselves) to carry the torch.”
- (24) An example of a cult masking as a Fourth Way group is the *Gurdjieff Ouspensky Center*, also known as the *Fellowship of Friends*. The organization refers to its studies as a Gurdjieff/Ouspensky teaching (although Ouspensky is clearly their major inspiration) and claims that it has expanded the scope of these teachings by introducing cultural and philosophical material from the world’s great spiritual traditions and thinkers. This organization differs from most Gurdjieff groups in their active recruitment of followers; and there have been a number of serious allegations about the organization and in particular the leader of the movement, Robert Burton. See James Moore “Gurdjieffian Groups in Britain” (*Religion Today*, Volume 3(2), 1986, pp. 1-4), Theodore Nottingham “The Fourth Way and Inner Transformation” (*Gnosis* No. 20, Summer 1991, p. 22) and William Patterson *Taking With the Left Hand* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1998).
- (25) Charles Tart *Waking Up*: (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), pp. 288-289.

- (26) William Patterson *Taking With the Left Hand* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1998), pp. 9-10.
- (27) Fourth Way author John Shirley believes that Gurdjieff's teaching is still vibrant and responsive to humanity's current needs. In *Gurdjieff: An Introduction to His Life and Ideas* (New York: Jeremy Tarcher, 2004, p. 274), he writes:
- The benefits of the Gurdjieff Work are quite real . . . People working on themselves keep things more in perspective in times of crisis . . . and they don't identify so easily with every apparent insult or emotional upset that comes along. Objective about themselves, they're likely to be more compassionate to other people, and that benefits everyone.
- (28) Jacob Needleman discusses these qualities in the web document "G.I. Gurdjieff and His School" (www.gurdjieff.org/needleman2.htm):
- By voluntarily subjecting oneself to such a work of self-study, the student may come to realize that not only is one responsible for one's own work, and that on one level the student can and must rely only on himself or herself but also that on a larger scale the student is entirely dependent on the help of others similarly engaged . . . Related to this orientation is the basic Gurdjieff idea of a "Way in Life." As practiced by the Foundation, it means that the student seeks to understand life as it is, without attempting to alter anything in the name of inner development. Relationships to family, vocation, personal ties, and obligations are, at least to start with, left intact both for the material they provide for self-understanding and for the ultimate value and force that all human relationships contain when they are engaged in with a more central and harmonious attention.
- (29) Francois Stahly "An Exacting Way" in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 412.
- (30) C.S. Nott *Journey Through This World* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1969), p. 248.
- (31) P.D Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 287.
- (32) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 294.
- (33) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 294.
- (34) James Moore "The Enneagram: A Developmental Study" *Religion Today* Vol. 5(3), 1990, p. 3.

- (35) Claudio Naranjo concurred with this position in an interview published in *Gnosis* magazine (“The Distorted Enneagram: The GNOSIS Interview with Claudio Naranjo” *Gnosis* No. 24, Fall 1996, p. 24.):

You ask me what I think about the enneagram being taught “outside the laws of the oral tradition” and “reduced to a mere psychological point of view.” Certainly no one in the genuine esoteric tradition would think of teaching without permission to do so; and such permission traditionally does not come from years alone, courses taken, or passing exams, as in secular universities. It surely requires personal readiness and right relationship to the teacher.

- (36) Idries Shah writes in *The Commanding Self* (London: Octagon Press, 1994, pp. 286-287) that:

It is, however, only if you are in harmony with the meaning of the enneagon (and the great diagram of which it is a part) that you can know what you are looking for. Merely to seek familiar representations for an enneagon which you can recognize by its shape as your ‘enneagram’ is ridiculous. Numbers and diagrams are meaningful to us only when we are associated with their reality.

- (37) Gurdjieff described the distinction between essence and personality in a conversation with his students recorded by C.S. Nott in *Teachings of Gurdjieff: The Journal of a Pupil* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1962, p. 65):

Essence is everything that we are born with: heredity, type, character, nature; essence is the real part of us. Essence does not change . . . Personality is an accidental thing, which we begin to acquire as soon as we are born; it is determined by our surroundings, outside influences, education, and so on; it is like a dress you wear, a mask; an accidental thing changing with changing circumstances. It is the false part of man.

- (38) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), pp. 283-284.

- (39) Frank Sinclair *Of the Life Aligned* (U.S.A.: Xlibris, 2009), p. 20.

- (40) Scholarly studies of Gurdjieff’s life and his teachings are not without value and should not be summarily dismissed. Many students of the Work have written or edited books based on original research and utilizing standard academic methods of investigation and reporting [Rodney Collin *The Theory of Celestial Influence*; John G. Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World*; James Moore *Gurdjieff: The Anatomy of a Myth*; William Patterson *Ladies of the Rope*; Paul Beekman Taylor *Gurdjieff and Orage: Brothers in Elysium*; Keith Buzzell *Explorations in Active Mentation*; Jacob Needleman *The Inner Journey: Views From the Gurdjieff Work*]. A number of independent scholars have also made meaningful contributions to the

Gurdjieff corpus [James Webb *The Harmonious Circle*; Michel Waldberg *Gurdjieff: An Approach to His Ideas*; Charles Tart *Waking Up*; Anna Challenger *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff's Beelzebub*].

- (41) Frank Sinclair *Without Benefit of Clergy* (U.S.A.: Xlibris, 2005), p. 224.
- (42) Robert de Ropp *Church of the Earth* (New York: Delta Books, 1974), pp. 156-157.
- (43) Adaptation and innovation would seem at first glance to be a most promising approach. A meaningful spiritual teaching should be responsive to the needs of contemporary humanity and relevant to the social and cultural frameworks of the time. In the words of Charles Tart (*Waking Up* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986, p. 247)):

To be effective, a Fourth Way teacher has to transcend fixed forms. To simply lecture in a traditional way in “time-honored” words or to perform demonstrations or exercises the way “it has always been done” is often to lose much effectiveness. Individuals can be very different from one another. The general structure of people’s consensus consciousness in the same culture can vary greatly from generation to generation. A formulation or exercise that was very effective for your own teacher or for you may now work well for some people but be completely ineffective or even misleading for others.

- (44) Anthony Blake “A View of the Work in the Year 2000” in David Kherdian (ed.) *A Stopinder Anthology* (Mount Desert, Maine: Beech Hill Publishing, 2014, p. 13
- (45) Anna Challenger has carefully explored the possible future direction of the Work in *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff's Beelzebub* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002, p. 115):

The only viable option, then, for those who would preserve this extraordinary body of lived wisdom and keep it flowing along the lines of its original vibration, is continually and consciously to rethink, regauge, and reapply it; or, in the words of Lord Pentland: “It means organizing it; and re-organizing it; and re-organizing it, in accordance with the appearance of new pressures and forces in the environment, both from very high up and from the general environment.”

- (46) Anna Challenger *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff's Beelzebub* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), p. 114.
- (47) C.S. Nott *Journey Through This World* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1969), p. 249.
- (48) Idries Shah *The Sufis* (London: Octagon Press, 1984), p. 61.
- (49) C.S. Nott comments about this situation in *Journey Through This World* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1969, pp. 248-249):

As a body of real ideas spreads and more people become interested, groups increase, and they have to be organized. The ‘Teaching’ is one thing, organization another. There must be organization but inevitably some become identified with it, become identified with their own attitude to what they call ‘the Work’; some even forget what the organization is for. This is also according to law. But serious strivers, while recognizing the necessity for regulations, can remain unidentified with organization and remember their real aim. Where the soil is rich weeds grow in plenty. Already there are appearing those who profess to expound Gurdjieff’s ideas and to teach the movements – people who do not have the smallest idea of the inner teaching; whom Gurdjieff calls ‘stealers of essence values.’

(50) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 313.

(51) Some argue that Gurdjieff’s teachings were transmitted and intended for certain people, in a certain form, at a certain time and for a specific purpose. Idries Shah describes the inability of most current Work practitioners to make the teaching relevant to contemporary times in *Knowing How to Know* (London: Octagon Press, 1998, p. 120):

People take ‘ideas’ which were intended to be ‘prescribed’ for specific situations and groups to enable them to learn. These they imagine are ‘laws’ or perennial truths. The result is a mechanical system which is next to useless.

(52) Anna Challenger *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff’s Beelzebub* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), p. 9.

(53) Jacob Needleman “Introduction” in Jacob Needleman, ed. *The Inner Journey: Views from the Gurdjieff Work* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2008), pp. xx-xxi.

(54) C.S. Nott *Journey Through This World* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1969), p. 238.

(55) Idries Shah *The Commanding Self* (London: Octagon Press, 1994), p. 6.