

The Authentic Voice of G.I. Gurdjieff

by Robert S. DeRopp

Everyone of late seems to be talking about Gurdjieff. Those who aren't talking about him are writing books about him. *My Life with Gurdjieff*, *My Glimpses of Gurdjieff*, *Gurdjieff This and Gurdjieff That*. Worst of all are the former pupils of Gurdjieff who insist on explaining his teachings. *Gurdjieff Made Easy*, *Gurdjieff in Three Simple Lessons*, *Essence of Gurdjieff*, *Gurdjieff for Beginners*, etc. All this in spite of the fact that Gurdjieff loathed explanations and intentionally concealed the significant doctrines in a tangle of verbiage so complex that even the arch-ingenious Lucifer could only with difficulty find his way through the maze.

Offering explanations is the curse of Western teachers. Instead of contenting themselves with a few cryptic phrases, a gesture or two, or simply a significant silence (the traditional method of the Eastern guru) the Westerner lectures and lectures, explains and explains. In the process he not only succeeds in confusing himself but also deprives his students of the chance of thinking for themselves by imposing on their minds his own conclusions, always subjective, often muddled and sometimes completely erroneous.

It is therefore a refreshing change, in this welter of gossip, commentaries, speculations and interpretations of Gurdjieff, to find a book in which the voice of the Master himself speaks loud and clear. This is *Views from the Real World: Early Talks of Gurdjieff as Recollected by his Pupils*. The reports are of uneven value. Gurdjieff never allowed his pupils to take notes and what they wrote after hearing his talks tended to be colored by subjectivity. In spite of this the authentic voice comes through even though the recording may be fuzzy in places.

What was the authentic voice of G. Gurdjieff? What did it say? Actually there are several voices. One that vibrates on what one might call the specific Gurdjieffian wavelength can be heard in the lecture given in Essentuki about 1918: "When speaking on different subjects...." In the course of this talk Gurdjieff describes a certain seeker after psychic powers who spent so much money chasing after anything miraculous that he ended by going bankrupt. To remedy the sad state of his finances, he gathered together all the knowledge of the occult on the accumulation of which he had spent his fortune. From this knowledge dealing with such subjects as telepathy, clairvoyance, astral projection, levitation, hypnotism and other magical powers, he put together a series of lectures called, *A Course in the Development of the Hidden Powers of Man*.

The book was an enormous success. Its author began to receive letters from readers written in reverent tones, addressing him as "dear teacher" and "wise mentor." Finally there came a letter informing him that, with the help of his lectures, the writer had, in about a month, become able to levitate.

We hear the authentic voice of Gurdjieff as he relates the writer's comments:

"I am astonished at the absurdity of things that happen. I who wrote the course have no very clear idea of the nature of the phenomena I am teaching. Yet these idiots not only find their way about in this gibberish but even learn something from it, and now some super idiot has

even learned to fly. It is, of course, all nonsense. He can go to hell....Soon they'll put him in a straight jacket. It will serve him right. We are much better off without such fools."

This forthright commentary on the subject of human stupidity recurs like a theme song through all Gurdjieff's writings. Not only does the human psyche suffer from inborn errors which prevent man from understanding the sense of his existence, but also, owing to the operation of credulity and suggestibility, it can attribute to itself all kinds of powers it does not possess. A man may realize that all is not well with him and begin to struggle against the forces that keep him in sleep, but all too easily he loses himself in a morass of charlatanism. He listens to some glib con-artist who can perform a few psychological tricks. Having begun to awaken he sinks back into sleep, but the last state of this man is worse than the first. Previously he was merely asleep, now he sleeps but dreams that he is awake. Like the sheep in Gurdjieff's story he is still a sheep but now he has been hypnotized into thinking that he is a magician.

Later, in the same talk, Gurdjieff states that crumbs of truth are scattered everywhere but that, in searching for truth, "it is far better not to venture at all into the dark labyrinths of human stupidity and ignorance than to go there alone. For without the guidance of someone who knows, a man at every step without noticing it, may suffer a strain, a dislocation of his machine, after which he would have to spend a great deal more on its repair than he spent damaging it.

Man can indeed hope to find a guide who knows but, in order to find such a guide, he must develop discrimination. We live in an era of confusion in which traditional values have been abandoned. To fill the spiritual vacuum which has resulted, a host of charlatans has developed, all willing to guide the seeker, if the seeker is prepared to pay enough. Some of these charlatans have become both rich and famous. Their followers are numbered in thousands, even in millions. This swarm of guides makes it hard for the seeker to decide who to trust. He must step very carefully.

Gurdjieff himself made things difficult for his students and made no attempt to attract a large number of followers. Certainly he could have done so had he wished but this was evidently not his aim. His teachings were harshly practical, unsentimental and not at all comforting. Man did have a chance to escape from the prison of his illusions but the chance was a very small one. Most people did not even know they were imprisoned. Of the few who did know only a minute fraction would escape. The majority would prove either too lazy or too stupid, would be misled by charlatans into using methods which could not give right results, would fall into the trap of imagining they were free when, in actual fact, they were as much in bondage as ever.

The teachings of G. Gurdjieff had one special quality. They started with man as he is, not man as he might be. They were, above all, practical. What is the use of demanding of man something that he cannot do? He must start with that which is possible. He is a machine and a very complex machine. Before he attempts to change the working of the machine he must know a lot about it. Otherwise, in trying to correct one defect, he will merely create another.

In a talk given in New York in 1924 Gurdjieff made it clear why it is so difficult for man to change his level of being. To explain the problem Gurdjieff compared man to a conveyance, horse, cart, driver, passenger. It is not too difficult to educate the driver (the intellect) but the

real problem is how to educate the horse (the emotions). It is, after all, the horse, not the driver that pulls the cart. Maybe the horse can understand some language, but it is not the language understood by the driver. Maybe the driver speaks English and the horse only understands Arabic. But when it comes to moving around in the world it is the horse that does the moving. The driver thinks, the horse acts, and where the cart goes depends on the motion of the horse, not the thoughts of the driver. The driver may have read all sorts of books on how to live rightly, how to behave in a worthy way, but unless he can communicate this wisdom to the horse, what use is it? The driver wants to behave like a saint but the horse knows nothing about it. It kicks, bites, runs away, won't obey commands. The driver is helpless.

In order to communicate with the horse the driver first has to learn the horse's language. But this is very difficult. The emotions are lightning fast, the intellect is slow. Before the driver has even put his thoughts in order the horse has taken fright and run away, or laid back its ears and kicked a hole in the cart. Even saints had trouble with the horse. * 'O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do." This from Paul of Tarsus who had plenty of horse trouble despite his saintliness.

In a lecture on Essence and Personality delivered in America in 1924 Gurdjieff shed further light on the reason why the driver has had a hard time communicating with the horse. The driver is largely in Personality. He has been strongly influenced by things that he has learned, things "not his own." But the horse is a part of Essence, its qualities are inborn, not acquired. It may be a phlegmatic, choleric, sanguinic or melancholic horse but it did not choose these qualities. It was born this way.

It is not difficult to influence personality. The persona is a mask. People can readily learn to wear different masks. But it is very difficult to influence essence. Words written in the persona are like words written on sand, easily inscribed, easily erased. Words written in the essence are like words carved in granite, hard to inscribe and hard to erase.

How can one influence essence? Can one in fact influence it at all? For most people it is impossible. They are not willing to be sincere with themselves and without sincerity nothing can be achieved. If however man learns to observe himself objectively, to see in himself both that which he likes (the "good") and that which he dislikes (the "bad") he may be able, little by little, to learn the language of the horse. Once he has learned that language he will attain a certain degree of completion. For the total conveyance is made up of horse, cart, driver and master. The master gives directions to the driver, the driver passes them on to the horse. Before our nature was spoiled all four in this team were one, all worked together. Now they are fragmented and at odds, the horse is neglected, the driver is drunk or asleep, the cart is in disrepair and the master is absent.

"The point is to re-establish what has been lost, not to acquire anything new. This is the purpose of development. For this one must learn to discriminate between essence and personality, and to separate them. When you have learned to do this you will see what to change and how. Meantime, you have only one possibility - to study!"

Once again, the authentic voice of G. Gurdjieff. Begin from where you are. You are weak, you are dependant, you are slaves. Above all you lie to yourself and others. As long as you

continue to lie you will never know the truth. If you work with others who are struggling against their own lies you may be able to learn faster. But no one can force you to see if you don't want to and no one can force you to awaken if you prefer to sleep. Only make up your mind. One or other, you cannot have both. Either sleep comfortably or strive realistically to awaken.

"Happy is the man who sits in his ordinary chair. A thousand times happier is the man who sits in the chair of the angels, but miserable is the man who has no chair."