

Group Dynamics and the Future of Gurdjieff Groups

It is now over seventy years since George Gurdjieff died, officially leaving the organizational responsibility for the continuation and develop of his teaching to Jeanne de Salzmann. In this period, the question arose, as it does following the death of any teacher, “What do we do now?” Under Madam de Salzmann, some of Gurdjieff’s disciples chose to work together under the organizational name The Gurdjieff Foundation, Other disciples chose to manifest their responsibility to keep the teaching alive in other ways, often establishing groups that have now their own “lineage”. Today there are also an unknown number of people working with Gurdjieff’s ideas and methods outside the umbrella of these direct lines.

This is the way with all “movements”. When the master departs, the weight of responsibility falls on the shoulders of the disciples. With great sincerity, they try their best to carry on the mandate of the teaching according to the understanding of each. Although some disciples may in time develop the understanding of the master and become one themselves, each of those left with this enormous responsibility can only meet it at their individual level of development at that time, some more advanced and some less. The quality of understanding, even at the beginning, is not necessarily uniform.

After the death of a founder, as the number of newly interested followers increases, the need to meet the requirements of that growing demand falls on the shoulders of the disciples and their second-generation students. More and more groups must be formed and organized to meet the growing need. Because much of Gurdjieff’s teaching is an oral tradition, the new generation of instructors must spread themselves thin or limit their energy to only a small number of students. As time goes by, in some cases, the responsibilities for transmission exceed the current level of development of those who find themselves in such a position. Gurdjieff foresaw the lawfulness of this phenomenon and explored it extensively in his writings, especially in *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* (1950,1964,1999 editions). His perspective will be examined below.

In addition to this inevitable process of dilution and distortion facing spiritual legacies, there are additional “laws” that govern the life and death of all organized groups which effect both religious and secular efforts with the same conditions and pressures.

The Challenge of Group Dynamics

Unconscious Individual Patterns

As a species, we humans are pack animals. From earliest life, we live in groups: family groups, school groups, sports groups, social groups, work groups. The frictions that arise between people living, playing, and working together often have their basis in unresolved family-of-origin dynamics. Groups create roles, official and psycho-dynamically unspoken. Leader and follower

relations often carry flavors of parent-child interactions. Interactions between followers often reflect sibling rivalry issues. As all the participants in a group had different childhoods with different parents and siblings ... or no siblings ... or missing parents ... each relationship pairing will have an idiosyncratic flavor.

Nevertheless, we all carry with us from our early conditioning experiences, unspoken and often subconscious, bias, preferences, tripwires, and sensitivities to different types of people and circumstances. To the extent these are still active and easily activated in participants, they will play a role in the form and quality of group experiences. Those in leadership positions may unconsciously, or consciously, take on a parental or elder sibling role which interferes with the responsibility of the role they play in the community. Some group members will vie with each other for status within the group. Much of the interpersonal difficulties that arise in groups are re-enactments of unresolved dynamics from childhood and/or from the lingering influence of unhealed adult relationship wounds. All groups, large and small, from marriages to organizations, from businesses to governments, are inhabited by people, most of whom carry varying degrees of these unresolved elements. This is one of the factors that play a significant role in the success or failure of these organized, human endeavors.

These inevitable conditioned factors are a major objective of self-study in Gurdjieff's, and other spiritual paths. As a result, when healthy, these communities can function at a level of cooperation, efficiency and creativity that far exceeds those of groups in ordinary life, because their adherents are working to identify, and take responsibility for, their own reactions. However, the study of these individual programmed personality tendencies must be carried out in real time while participants are still under the full assault of such old ongoing patterns. This confuses the process for a long time and requires guidance from "elders" who are, hopefully, fully engaged in the study of their own conditioned reactions. However, any remaining blind spots within a leader, will add to the problematic dynamics of the community.

Life Cycle of Groups

In addition, there is a life cycle for all groups. Groups are born, have a youth, a maturity, an old age, and they die. Extinction may be delayed if participants understand group dynamics, but not avoided indefinitely. Often the form, the name, and statements of fidelity to the original aim linger, but the group, the organization, even the country or nation, as originally formulated, has disappeared and a shadow or impostor remains.

One way this can happen with spiritual communities is reflected in the challenge a teaching faces to be able to be adapt and communicate its message with relevance in the face of changing language, psychology, and metaphors as the flow of time inevitably produces alterations in culture. An understandable conservative fear of distortion may instead lead to rigidity and failure to adapt the form of the teaching for circumstances in the future different from those prevailing at the time of the teaching's introduction. This challenging question will be examined later.

One would hope that communities dedicated to the spiritual development of their members would be wise and sensitive enough to try to mediate these inevitable dynamics. Realistically, as we all carry the burden of a conditioned personality and few leaders of such communities are

aware of the larger dynamics that will influence group life over time, these communities are not immune.

Leadership

Who is taking the responsibility to direct the group's activities and monitor the development and needs of individual members? Have they been given this position by their 'teacher' after sufficient 'training'? Have they assumed the position for themselves on their own initiative? What does the group leader use to make this determination? How does the self-appointed 'leader' make this decision about their own readiness? Does the leader have prior experience with groups or a background in guiding people? How will the new group 'leader' know how to 'lead' a group? Will they mimic what was given them? Do they understand the Work sufficiently to improvise, without distortion, when necessary? Do they understand the Work sufficiently to know when *not* to improvise? How closely does the leader manifest Gurdjieff's definition of a "remarkable man" (or woman)? "From my point of view, he can be called a remarkable man who stands out from those around him by the resourcefulness of his mind, and who knows how to be restrained in the manifestations which proceed from his nature, at the same time conducting himself justly and tolerantly towards the weakness of others." [*Meetings with Remarkable Men*, "MWRM" p.31]

Gurdjieff also provided another definition of such developed men/women in *Beelzebub's Tales* in the chapter about his character Saint Ashiata Shiemash, a "messenger from above" sent down to Earth to try and complete the failed missions of previous messengers. Using the criteria, "by their fruits ye shall know them", he says, "Of course, at that period also, there continued to be all kinds of chiefs, directors and 'advisor-specialists', who became such chiefly from difference in age and from what is called 'essence-power' ... and they then became such, neither by hereditary right nor by election, as was the case before this blissful Ashiatian epoch, and as again afterwards became and even till now continues to be the case. All these chiefs, directors and advisors then became such in accordance with the objective merits they personally acquired, and which could be really sensed by all the beings around them." [*Beelzebub's Tales ... "BT" p. 385*]

A traditional Gurdjieff group is structured so that potential new leaders may gradually be brought into leadership positions when their manifestations suggest sufficient understanding. To what extent, and with what level of success, the current leaders of Foundation and other lineage groups have trained their replacements is a question that awaits to be seen. The question is even more challenging in groups without such formal structure and peer overview.

And, how good a judge of character are the elders making these decisions? Are they willing to share and perhaps eventually give up the 'power' of their position to their apprentices? As in many organizations, some people rise to the top through time and attrition, not always merit. We may hope spiritual schools can avoid this nearly lawful phenomenon, but hope is not necessarily the reality.

Given that nearly all Gurdjieff's original pupils and many of their disciples are no longer alive, we are currently in the third and fourth generation. Although real "teachers" will continue to arise and be 'discovered' by seekers, many who occupy this role are appointed by established group leaders or appoint themselves. How to tell the genuine from the imitation?

Gurdjieff has Ashiata tell us that real leaders do not seek power. Rather, "...when a being has "worked consciously upon himself in accordance with these five strivings, many of them thanks to this quickly arrived at results of objective attainments perceptible to others. Of course, these objective attainments then, as it is

said 'attracted-the-attention' of all around them, who thereupon made those who had attained stand out from their midst and paid them every kind of respect; they also strove with joy to merit the attention of these outstanding beings and to have for themselves their counsel and advice how they themselves could attain the same perfecting." [BT p. 386]

Is the label "teacher", with its implications, still a viable role at this stage? What may be evolving currently out of necessity are more "peer" groups with "elders" who give some guidance based on experience. Teachers, in the traditional sense are rare. The romantic ideal of a genuine Teacher for every existing group, is a just that, a romantic image. It may even happen that leaders and groups reject or deny genuinely offered help, whether from inside or outside the tradition, which is vitally needed, because it does not conform to their understanding or self-image.

Roles and Levels of Development

J. G. Bennett explores the question of different levels of development that can be found in a human community, including the spiritual community, which he classifies as "*Psychokinetic*" in contrast to non-spiritual activities which he calls "*Psychostatic*". Exploration of this invaluable viewpoint will not be explicated here other than to mention the types of roles relevant to groups focused on transformation. The sensitive student who feels the call towards the higher dimension of values but needs help to find their way to the realm of others like themselves, and a practical way to seeking, he calls *Candidate*.

Above the Candidate in community hierarchy is the *Specialist*, "a person who has developed strongly in one particular field of external activity while at the same time acquiring a stable disposition towards Reality but continue to be motivated by their own qualities and impulses. They cannot act 'out of character' because they are not free in relation to their Divided Self." [The Dramatic Universe V. III p. 253] Such people may have great facility with the ideas and theories but are, personally, not yet consistently able to put them into practice.

Above this level is the *Counselor*, people with the knowledge of the Specialist, but who "are free from the urge to accomplish anything for themselves and are concerned with the objective needs of the Work ... the property of disinterested concern in the welfare of others, combined with an objective understanding of that in which this welfare consists ... a man (or woman) who has freed himself from the domination of his Divided Self ... (and) is not restricted by the limitations of his own character ... (such a person) sets himself to act in such a way that he is guided by principles and not by his own motivations ... a man of broad understanding that goes beyond the practical skills of his specialist days." *The Dramatic Universe*, V III, p.256-7]

Higher still is the *Initiate*, "free from Egoism (and) lives under the direction of his own 'I'. The Initiate communicates an illumination ... he (she) is a link rather than a source (and) is responsible for a special transmission. He is like thread that connects the outer circles of mankind to the inner ... (he) appears to his followers to be not just unique but uniquely significant. From this mistake comes the divisions and exclusion of the various ways." [The Dramatic Universe VIII, pp. 258-262]

Dependence

A degree of dependence is natural and appropriate for students new to the program. Novices want and need instruction and guidance. But Gurdjieff's oft-stated goal was to help develop *Individuals* capable of thinking for themselves. He admonished to accept nothing at face value but to strive to confirm to one's own satisfaction, through *direct experience*, before believing anything. He titled the first chapter in his magnum opus, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*,

“The Arousing of Thought.” After the basic ideas and methods have been imparted, emphasis should shift to the student, encouraging growing independence in experimentation and application of the methods, so that eventually the system can become embodied within the pupil. It is in our human nature to grow dependent in comfortable and ‘spiritually’ safe environments. A balance must be found between student and leaders to foster the gradual reduction in dependence. Often what is “comfortable” is what one is used to, not necessarily what one needs. In the words of numerous group leaders, students must learn to stop sitting in the group like baby birds with their mouths open waiting to be fed.

How and when does this dependence get addressed? Does it arise solely from the pupil’s personality or from their ‘essence’ and/or is it subtly or overtly encouraged by the group leadership?

There are examples of Gurdjieff apparently making this judgment for some of his pupils and literally sending them away, presumably, hopefully, to discover how to bring their inner growth into their *own life* outside the group and break their dependence on him and the community. Some others remained with him throughout his teaching life.

The seeds planted in the school must find a way to germinate in outer life situations for the Work to have a larger influence other than upon the limited membership of small groups. Of course, it is possible to make useful contributions to outer life while also remaining in a group. The students’ course of life in any group may also be invisibly directed by fate and destiny, knowledge that neither pupil nor group leader may have.

It may also be that a particular group or school is limited in its scope of competence. No one can lead another person to a level they themselves have not realized. For a leader to try to do so is a form of “lying”, pretending they know and understand what they do not yet know or understand. As in all group activity of any type, the “culture” of the community is established by the quality, understanding and teaching style of the leadership. In *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, Gurdjieff quotes a dervish as dramatically advising, “Let God kill him who himself does not know and yet presumes to show others the way to the doors of His Kingdom.” [MWRM p. 185] The appropriate response to a question for which a leader does not have an answer is, “I don’t know! I’ll get back to you ... when and if ... I can.” A leader secure in him/herself and who wants to model sincerity, can say this.

A Little History

In *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*, Gurdjieff proposes the Sacred process Antkooano. “And all cosmic truths usually become known to all on these planets, thanks to the fact that the beings of the given planet who by their conscious labors learn some truth or other, share it with other beings of their planet and in this way all the cosmic truths gradually become known by all the beings of the given planet without any distinction.” [BT p.563]

This impulse to share can be conveyed through writing, demonstrating, lecturing, instructing, dialogue, creating art, modeling. To share with a group of people appears to be more efficient than working one on one ... if you wish to reach as many people as possible. But is it necessarily more effective? Gurdjieff said that knowledge was *material* and spoke insistently on the greater importance of quality over quantity. “If... large quantities of knowledge are concentrated in a small number of people, then this knowledge will give very great results. From this point of view, it is far more advantageous that knowledge should be preserved among a small number of people and not dispersed among the masses.” [In *Search of the Miraculous*, ... ISM p. 37]”

Gurdjieff appears to have taught both in groups and individualized instruction. The recorded notes from his meetings made by his pupils, the stories about his *Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man*, beginning in Russia and culminating in France and the many reminiscences of pupils, have modeled, and encouraged most of Gurdjieff studies to take place in groups. This model remains the core of Gurdjieff Foundation groups across the world, as it is for many traditions.

Usefulness of Groups

“There is no particular benefit in the existence of groups in themselves and there is no particular merit in belonging to groups. The benefit or usefulness of groups is determined by their success.”
(ISM p.232).

Several aspects of group life seem necessary for the process Gurdjieff brought. His Sacred Dances and “Movements” can only be effectively taught and practiced in groups. The “sharing of impressions” from weekly ‘tasks’ and personal “work on oneself” allows group members to compare and contrast their own experiences with that of their companions. As the group leader responds to observations and questions from one member, all the others are listening and can apply those responses to their own unasked questions. Thus, presumably, learning can be facilitated vicariously at an accelerated rate due to the larger pool of shared impressions. The tradition of long Work retreats, ranging in duration from a few days, to multiple weeks, seems based on the initial, live-in format of Gurdjieff’s Institute, which he abandoned, but may have been reconsidering shortly before his death. The effort, physical, emotional, and intellectual, that is inevitably demanded by such intensity, breaks down defenses and can open participants to extraordinary experiences and impressions about themselves that are rarely available in ordinary life.

A primary content for these teaching-impressions is the internal friction felt by each person as they struggle to execute the methodology, i.e., self-remembering, self-observation, non-identification, sensing the body. To study “myself” necessitates seeing and acknowledging, as fact, my inconsistencies, my negativity, my suggestibility, my hypocrisy, my judgments, my projections, my weaknesses, as well as my strengths. I can’t stop judging others until I am honest with myself about the existence in me of the very manifestations which I often most vehemently criticize in others. Until the conditioned negativity in me is self-acknowledged, understood to its roots and de-potentiated, my development may be stalled at the “First Conscious Shock”. [3] What better environment to stimulate these reactions in me, for my inner study, than the friction experienced with people of other typologies and reactions? Thus, groups have great utility for creating conditions that evoke this internal friction which can then be “observed” in myself and shared as impressions with the group while other members share the same in return. This allows for the practice of sincerity, but most importantly, learning how not to identify with my mechanical concerns about what others think of me. The practice of non-identification with my egoic concerns about self-image is foundational to the transformative experience of “dying to oneself” and the maturation of “higher being bodies”.

This can also build trust with my companions; trust that I can expose the underbelly of my personality without fear of rejection as others are risking the same. This growing feeling of trust can bring members closer to a shared understanding of this type of inner work and its aims. From

one perspective, the members of the group can begin to share an emotional ‘body’ of value and wish, both generating and being generated, by their spiritual search. Dr. Keith Buzzell [1] referred to this sharing of value and meaning as a “group Kesdjan body”. *Kesdjan* is Gurdjieff’s other term for the “Higher Emotional Body” of an individual or what he suggests can be thought of as the “sack or vessel of the Soul”. In contemporary language applied to “normal” life, we recognize reverberations of this phenomenon as *Esprit de Corps*, team spirit, loyalty, camaraderie, brotherhood, sisterhood. Such a bonding can facilitate results, for better or worse, not easily obtainable under less connected conditions. Whether this type of climate or group culture can appear depends very much on the understanding and personal style of the leadership.

This is not to imply that transformation always requires a group. The history of spiritual and religious teachers clearly shows that an opening can occur spontaneously on “the road to Damascus” as well as many other locations. And, a corrupted group, due to leadership or groupthink or both, is disastrous and dangerous.

Remaining in or Leaving a Group

Of course, “every stick has two ends”. Involution and evolution wrap around each other like a caduceus. What goes up can certainly also come down. When the Higher meets with the Lower, a rising up to a higher Middle is not guaranteed. The Lower can also pull the Higher downward. There needs to appear a reconciling factor to appropriately blend them.

If the “Gurdjieff Work” represents a “school”, then do people ever graduate? What would that mean? Who decides? Paraphrasing a story related by C. S. Nott about a conversation he overheard at the “Prieure”, Gurdjieff was asked by a visitor, what he did at the Institute. Gurdjieff is reported to have replied that the school was like an automobile repair shop. “Here we take broken cars and repair them.” “And what happens Mr. Gurdjieff, when they are repaired?” “They can then drive off into life in a state of repair.” [*Teaching of Gurdjieff: Journey of a Pupil*]

J. G. Bennett offers a number of practical suggestions about choosing groups and teachers. He also observes that after sufficient time in a group or school, if the student doesn’t feel they are learning and growing in a direction that interests them, not moving in the direction of their aim for self-development, then it is time to leave and look for something else. Either, the program is not offering what they need, or they are unable to assimilate the material as offered, or it was helpful for a while but now the pupil has reached a state in their development where something else is required. [J.G.B. *Transformation* p.113-135]

Of course, the pupil may also leave for the wrong reasons. Hopefully, the elders of such a group have the maturity and wisdom to help the pupil make this discrimination ... if the pupil has the respect and sincerity to seek their advice before departing. People sometimes leave because they are finally approaching more difficult confrontations in their psychological world, and they do not have sufficient desire, capacity, motivation, or stamina to appropriately assimilate and digest their own material. In this case they “run-away” and may then bad-mouth the group to cover their own weakness. Or, the exiting student may exalt the group, but put themselves down as unworthy or inadequate and leave in a diminished state. This is tragic. It is the leader’s responsibility to try to facilitate the departure so the pupil leaves in a healthy state and able to continue their travels in the “valley of search” for an approach more appropriate to their nature

and destiny. Unfortunately, when some people leave, they often just stop coming without explanation. This is a lost opportunity to clarify ones' aim and summarize the learning up until that time. Some group leaders will reach out to a departed student to understand the reason for their leaving. Other's do not make this effort.

Sometimes, the leader may lose interest in the pupil for a number of reasons. This is a regrettable situation. A leader is obliged to expend the effort and time to find a suitable replacement or guide for the student, as well as a safe environment.

Many people believe that the journey to 'enlightenment' is only filled with beauty and peace. The reality is often is very different. The inner work requires a clear-eyed objective exploration and acceptance of one's weaknesses and failures on the way to purification of the emotional detritus picked up along the rocky path of life. Students have to be prepared for this difficulty

Pitfalls for Groups on the way to Deterioration

Deifying the Teacher or Founder

It is not uncommon that as time goes by, the special significance of the founder of a movement, or the disciples, can become the focus of a community, gradually replacing the development and transformation of the individual. Instead of the challenging and often uncomfortable work of self-confrontation required for growth of understanding and Being, instead increasing focus on the history, qualities and stories of the master and disciples can replace the challenge of the actual practice brought by the founder. This phenomenon is characteristic of *exoteric* expressions of the teaching but can come to pre-occupy what should be the focus of a *mesoteric* community hoping to go deeper. When this happens, the group can devolve into an exoteric expression without the members realizing the change.

The manifestations of these special, inspirational people may very well be useful models for followers to attempt emulation and often become part of the teaching. However, direction may begin to drift towards deifying these individuals to the point of distracting from the challenge of individual confrontation. Then, a teaching becomes a religion. It is more useful for adherents to focus on what the founder's message and methods can show them about themselves, than for followers to believe they are changing themselves by turning their attention towards their imaginings about the teachers motivations, personal life, contradictions, short-comings or unusual strengths. I suspect true teachers would be saddened to see their students become more focused on hero worship and hagiography than freeing themselves from dependency and illusion.

Eating the Map

Years ago, I was told the following story. Once upon a time there was a colony of ants. Every day, scouts would venture out to look for sources of food and return with news of their find and its location. The colony would then decide how best to exploit this information. One day, a small scouting party came across a picnic area. The amount and variety of foods were astounding. With great excitement, they returned to the colony with the news and suggested the entire colony should follow them in order to bring back the enormous supply. As they tried to describe such abundance, they were met with skepticism by the colony elders. They were accused of exaggerating or outright falsehood. "Bring us proof of this 'discovery' of yours" demanded the elders. "Prove to us the justification for us all to make effort in this direction."

The scouts returned to the picnic site and taking a piece of paper (that humans would call a napkin) they sketched the layout of the picnic table and dragged the drawing home to the colony where again they were met with disbelief. “You said the amount of food was so large that we should all go”, exclaimed the elders. “A dozen of us can fit on this entire picture. We see nothing here to justify moving the entire colony to this site.”

In frustration, the scouts returned to the picnic. Now they gathered all the pieces of paper they could find and, putting them all together, they drew a gigantic outline of the entire table with all the food laid upon it to scale. Carefully folding the huge, life-size map into a long tube, they dragged it back to the colony and unfolded it before the astounded reaction of the elders and all their companions. Now the reaction was respect, admiration, and great excitement. All the ants began to crawl over the enormous drawing.

“This is amazing” they all exclaimed. This must truly be the paradise our legends have told us about. It is miraculous that it actually exists and after all these generations of hearing legends, we now find that it is true and accessible to us.” The scouts were praised and told to return to the picnic site and prepare for the arrival of the colony. This they did. With a sense of accomplishment, they themselves began to enjoy the delights of this paradise.

After some time, they realized the colony should have arrived. What could be detaining them? Several of them left their happy colleagues at the picnic and retraced their steps towards home. On arrival, they found that the colony had never left to follow them to the actual location. Instead, they were all crawling back and forth, back and forth, again and again over the drawing, chewing and tearing and devouring the picture. They had remained where they were to eat the map, mistaking it for the real!

A danger for spiritual groups is the possibility of mistaking the sacred writings, instructions, words of the leader for the actual destination being pointed towards, rather than being a map that one must follow inside themselves. This tendency can manifest as a lifetime search for the way to a deeper reality by reading more and more books in the hope that somewhere, in one of them, will be the answer that makes the way clear ... or ... that participating in the life of a group year after year, that this dedication alone will open up the hidden world being sought.

My experience informs me that the esoteric cores of all traditions point to a way of exploring one’s interior world in such a way that both the search and the searcher are ultimately transformed. It is this transformation that opens the door to the promised kingdom hidden within each of us. The answer ultimately lies inside, not in the outer forms of practices, readings, rituals. When this recognition is not realized, nor actually tasted, there is danger that groups and individuals will become stuck eating the map and not actually finding a way to go on the journey.

Rise of the Technician

Unfortunately, given time, more often than not, leadership of most movements is eventually taken over by *technician-specialists* who may actually exile true initiates whose presence represents opposition to what the ‘new guard’ believes ought to be done. Gurdjieff said of

organized religion that within a generation or two of disciples, the founder would not recognize his own teaching. “But to the common misfortune of all beings, with just a little reason, they (disciples) began gradually to mix into all the counsels and indications of ... Saint Moses ... such mass of what are called ‘spices’ that the saintly author himself could not with all his wish recognize anything of his own in this, as it were, totality collected by them of all he had explained and indicated”. And “... already the first generation of the contemporaries of Saint Moses, evidently found it profitable for their special aims to insert in these religious teachings almost the entire fantastic teaching which I already told you ...” [BT p.700-701]

Seductiveness of Charism

The potential *charisma* that accompanies the role of “spiritual guide” is a real phenomenon. Many people occupying such a role have fallen from grace due to the temptation to misuse this power, (an attribution of spirituality that students *give* and *want* to give to their guide), to manipulate for sex, money, or worshipful devotees. This un-conscience-able (and usually unconscious) misuse of others’ naivete, wishfulness and blind trust can lead to cults using the same organizational name and outward structure as their legitimate roots, but no longer resembling them in practice or aim. More common is the seductiveness of the adoration given to the role which can become addictive. This can develop the desire to maintain and grow the group for the sake of the leader’s ego.

Of course, everyone believes that what they are doing is correct. Errors occur primarily as a result of “waking sleep” in leaders pretending to themselves, as well as others, that they are “awake”. On the other hand, there are always a few truly corrupt leaders who may deliberately alter the program for their own aims. Gurdjieff observed that if an organization is initially successful, it inevitably attracts people interested in inheriting the power positions in such a successful organization. They often displace more sincere members and take over. [BT p.609-612] When these misuses are deliberate, then we can turn to Gurdjieff’s description of narcissists and sociopaths which he called “Hasnamuss.” Such people are dominated by the urge “to become free from the necessity of actualizing the being-efforts” or ... (display) a “calm self-contentment in the use of what is not personally deserved” or a ‘striving to be not what one is’. [BT p. 235]

Stages of Group Life

There is another lawful problem with organized human activity, universal in its manifestation. As mentioned earlier, a group or organization is like a *living organism*. It has a birth, a youth, a mature period, an old age of decline and inevitably, a death. As a living organism it seeks to stay alive, grow and avoid death at all costs, renewing itself through reformations and changing goals. As the initial founders die, and new generations take their place, modifications begin to occur. Some are useful and necessary adaptations to changing circumstances. Some are gratuitous or self-serving or done from ignorance. Some are done to increase the power and influence of the current leadership. Some represent a misunderstanding or disagreement with the original founder’s goal and methods. (There is a very useful exploration of this theme in *Beelzebub’s Tales*, pages 609-612). As with all movements, groups sometimes split apart over personality and political power issues. This is human nature at the level of “waking sleep.” It is naïve to assume that the mantle of spiritual guide, or spiritual school is a guarantee that such a person(s) are “Awake” in Gurdjieff’s sense of the term.

Mission Drift

Ouspensky talks clearly about this tendency of organizations to stray from the founding mission in an exploration of the enneagram Mi-Fa interval. “The same happens in all spheres of human activity. In literature, science, art, philosophy, religion, in individual and above all social and political life, we can observe how the lines of development of forces deviates from its original direction and goes, after a certain time, in a diametrically opposite direction, still preserving its former name. A study of history from this point of view shows the most astonishing facts which mechanical humanity is far from desiring to notice. Perhaps the most interesting example of such a change of direction in the line of development of forces can be found in the history of religion, particularly in the history of Christianity if it is studied dispassionately. Think how many turns the development of the line 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.” [ISM p. 129]

Ben Shimon Halevi discusses the problem of group atrophy in this way. “In most traditions the line of responsibility is handed down from teacher to disciple. The purpose of this is to preserve the teaching and to pass on the spirit. The Sufis call it the “Baraka” which has the same root word as the Hebrew for blessing. However, traditions contain human beings and occasionally when a teacher dies without appointing a successor of high caliber, those remaining try to preserve the form of the Teaching. Alas, this is rarely successful. With time the dead teacher is elevated, more by hero worship than understanding, to sainthood, while caretaker leaders, despite their apparent modesty, take on authority. Slowly the teaching loses its life as its inner content is forgotten. Theory turns into mere words, and practices into empty repetition. The outer form is perfect, and as such, is often mistaken for the real thing. However, the results are the precise reverse of what the original teacher intended, for the work of liberating people gradually turns into one of binding them closer to a mechanical way of life, however spiritual it sets out to be. There are many examples of this in historical and modern times. All the great religions have suffered from such phenomena and so have many small and unknown communities originally dedicated to the development of man.” [Z’ev ben Shimon Halevi, *Adam and the Kabbalistic Tree*, Red Wheel/Weiser, 1989, p. 270]

Poignancy of Inheritance

Another issue that may affect second and perhaps third generation “leaders” is more poignant. This may be seen as similar to the curse of having a famous parent or grandparent. There may arise expectations from oneself, as well as others, that one is to carry the “mantle” forward. A potential underside of the sense of responsibility to “carry on” can be a fearful conservatism that is reluctant to, or refuses to, change anything for fear of doing damage to the teaching. On the one hand, this is laudable, responsible, and appropriate to avoid what Gurdjieff warned about the tendency to “wiseacring”, “an-irresistible-thirst-to-be-considered-as-learned-by-beings-around-them-similar-to-themselves”. [BT p. 842]

On the other hand, Gurdjieff also warns that teachings are initially brought for a particular reason, in a particular form with particular metaphors and practices for certain people under certain conditions at a certain moment in time. Their outer form must change with the times to be digestible by the people of later times and places. “The strangeness of the psyche of your favorites in respect of the religious teachings which arise in this way among them, manifests itself in this: that they already, from the very beginning, understand ‘literally’ all that has been said and explained by these genuine Sacred Individuals actualized from Above and they never take into account in which environment and for which case this or that was said and explained.” [BT pp. 696-697]

The tension of this paradox can be seen in the difference between many Foundation affiliated groups and those drawing on their training from other lineages founded by Gurdjieff’s pupils outside the Foundation umbrella ... or from people with no direct connection with Gurdjieff or his pupils. To share with the world of interested seekers but risk dilution... or... to keep the

teaching restricted to “authorized” groups? That is a challenging question for the groups that see their mission as including preservation from distortion.

Exclusivity

A common problem for many groups can arise with a sense of exclusivity, superiority, specialness. Whether a nation state, a political organization, special interest clubs, and especially with spiritual or religious communities which come to believe that their way is the true way, this kind of precious attitude, often accompanied by secretiveness and exclusiveness can develop, rationalized by a belief that the dogma and rituals are too dangerous or private to share with outsiders. This attitude can bestow on the members a belief in their specialness and, tragically, strengthen, instead of weakening, their egoism.

This can result in shunning, not only of outsiders, but also of any group member who is critical of the power structure or expresses interests outside the official “curriculum”. It can manifest as a refusal to recognize individuals and groups with similar interests and training. It can devolve into something like a guild or private club which guards its secrets and restricts its members from associating with other groups, even from the same root tradition. This can create tension between communities with shared interests, lineage, and practices. It is a razor’s edge between the appropriate responsibility to guard a tradition from dilution by the uninitiated, and the creation of unnecessary schism between members of the same larger community. The latter is a problem that has dogged all movements and is likely not what the founder of the tradition would have advised. Gurdjieff warned about this repeatedly, knowing full well that some of his followers would fall into this trap.

Shocks

One aspect of Gurdjieff’s methods that can be problematic when imitated by his followers, was his approach to introducing “shocks”, individually or collectively, what he called “stepping on corns”, i.e. making statements or setting up situations by which students could suddenly see their contradictions and the falsity of their self-image. He also did not want people to become dependent on him and therefore sometimes made life more difficult for them when he felt it appropriate to do so. Sometimes he did this to guests who were not enrolled in his training in order to study the reactions of different “types” to his provocations or demonstrate something to his attendant pupils. He did not spare himself either. He confided that, to intensify the energy of his own inner state, he would deliberately make his own life more difficult by intentionally pushing away help.

Unfortunately, many people who copy this as a “technique” are unlikely to have had the same reasons or the same permission, or the same level of spiritual maturation.

This approach is one that cannot be taught ... but it can be imitated. Mistakes are easily made by constructing artificial circumstances to “shock” another person into “awakening” from their mechanicalness. Too much force, inappropriate timing, mistaken understanding of what the pupil “needs” are frequent errors. Without referring to this specifically, Gurdjieff makes it clear that after his near fatal accident, he came to the conclusion that he was not seeing in his pupils the results he wished for and needed to change his approach.

The structure and challenge of his method is sufficient for any sincere student to frequently have shocking encounters with parts of him/herself that violate conditioned self-image. Some people taking leadership of “Fourth Way” groups can fall victim to the temptation of using artificial shocks without sufficient understanding of their danger, or to use them to enhance their power over others. As both a psychologist and long-time practitioner in Gurdjieff groups, I can say that unless one knows another very deeply, knows the location of hidden triggers, all the emotional scars and conditioned reactions hiding within them, artificial shocks can be dangerous.

The reason I raise it here in this discussion is my observation as a psychologist and member of a number of groups, that the temptation for a group leader to decide what is best for a group member, is fraught with danger. Gurdjieff is reported to have extraordinary insight into people. This is not true of the ordinary group leader. And I’ve learned it often is not true for me either. I have seen, and heard, the damage done to a sensitive or fragile individual from an off-target response or assumption made by a group leader. My own conclusion after many years of dealing with people, is to try, always, to err on the side of gentleness. Gentleness does not preclude directness. Firmness is sometimes appropriate, but it is dangerous if the person who is to receive it is not at a stage of development where it can effectively be received

Shunning

Another questionable practice that may still prevail in some Gurdjieff groups comes from Gurdjieff’s early remarks to Ouspensky about people leaving the group or being asked to leave. “All members of group are friends and brothers, but if one of them leaves, especially if he is sent away by the teacher, he ceases to be a friend and a brother and at once becomes a stranger, as one who is cut off. It often becomes a very hard rule, but nevertheless it is necessary. People may be life-long friends and may enter a group together. Afterwards one of them leaves. The other then has *no right to speak to him about the work of the group*. The man who has left feels hurt, he does not understand this, and they quarrel. In order to avoid this where relations, such as husband and wife, mother and daughter, and so on, are concerned, we count them as one. That is husband and wife are counted as one member of the group. Thus, if one of them cannot go on with the work and leaves, the other is considered guilty and must also leave.” [ISM pp. 222-232]

Did Gurdjieff follow this rule in later years after the break with Ouspensky? Madame Ouspensky stayed with Gurdjieff after that break. Madame De Hartmann stayed with Gurdjieff for a time after her husband Thomas was sent away. Later, Gurdjieff did force a choice on her, and she left him to be with her husband. I am not personally privy to any other stories about the application of this rule, although others closer to Gurdjieff and his primary pupils may very well be able to fill in the blanks.

Gurdjieff’s proscription to Ouspensky on remaining members was that they should not speak to the departed member *about the work of the group*. This application is clearly reasonable and necessary to preserve the privacy and safety of a group that encourages members to be totally honest about what they see in themselves.

But the interpretation of the recommendation to ostracize and even shun old friends and spouses, does seem more than harsh. The reason I raise it here in this discussion is my awareness that some groups still practice a form of this. Unfortunately, when groups split over issues of practice or politics or personality, they often stay apart for years. Some cities have two or sometimes three separate Gurdjieff groups. Sometimes they cooperate and sometimes not. Some lineages are more open to working together. Others prefer to remain closed even to other

Gurdjieff practitioners. As the Work expands out into the world and more and more groups form around an interest in these ideas, this secrecy and exclusivity raises a question about how best to offer help into the future.

Help into the Future?

If the essence of the teaching is understood practically, then one understands how to generalize the principles to different situations without losing the essential core. Gurdjieff himself gives us this model. The initial presentation of his ideas and methods given to Ouspensky were modified as he tried different approaches to helping his students ‘wake up’. After recovering from his automobile accident, he closed the Prieuré and dedicated years to writing. Although he still had a few pupils, i.e., the “Women of the Rope,” he does not seem to have had large groups around him again until after the war and shortly before his death. I have heard it said that he commented that he preferred his rendition of the creation story as written in the “Purgatory” chapter of *Beelzebub’s Tales* to the version he initially gave to Ouspensky as the “Ray of Creation”. Both carried the same essence, but very different form. In his controversial book, *The Herald of Coming Good*, he appears to explain to his initial pupils that he was experimenting with them in the early years of his teaching to learn how to effectively transmit his understanding and invited them to return to him if they wished to do so. He changed his approach over time but retained the essence.

To Share or Not to Share

Understandably, to spread the teaching indiscriminately would dilute and weaken its impact as more and more people without appropriate training would be claiming its mantle with insufficient understanding and personal capacity. On the other hand, it is a fact that Gurdjieff’s “Work” has expanded into the public domain. People around the planet are interested. Where will they go, to whom will they turn for instruction if the best of the trained people are restricting their guidance to their own small group of initiates?

Today, out of necessity, much of this instruction is sought on the internet. Some of the material is good. Much of it is distorted. All of this is, of necessity, less impactful compared with face-to-face interaction. But interested students will not be able to sift the wheat from the chaff without a source of comparison. If seasoned students are unwilling to demonstrate what they have been given, if useful archival material is kept hidden, who will fill the gap but less trained people, both those who are sincere but ill trained and those with desire for power and influence.

This situation is most acute with the Gurdjieff Movements and Sacred Dances. There are people and groups using variations of this material without training from those who have been prepared by Gurdjieff’s students. What is shown on the internet is often incorrect, sometimes significantly so. I have personal confirmation that many people participating in public Movements workshops have no idea that the Sacred Dances are only part of a much more comprehensive training program. Separating out this one feature from the whole, cannot offer the help that would come with immersion in the entirety of Gurdjieff’s “Work.” And yet, this activity will continue and expand in its fragmented form due to public interest and availability of people offering a taste of the experience.

Is there a responsibility for those who can right this situation to attempt to help? Not all believe so. What does this mean for the inevitable future deterioration towards the *exoteric* level of manifestation? Could its expansion towards concretization or dissolution be slowed down or corrected (at least for a while), with the appropriate help from the initiated *esoteric* level? If the higher does not blend with the lower, the lower cannot develop. What reconciling force could blend these two levels into a practical and helpful response to the situation?

The difficulty of finding a balance on this question is apparent in the issue of teaching Movements to people who are not part of an ongoing Gurdjieff group. There are individuals offering retreats, classes, workshops in Movements and Sacred dances to the general public. Some accept a contribution for expenses. Some use this activity as their way of making a living. Traditionalists are critical of both activities but particularly the latter. Opinions are expressed as to who has the correct version of the movement, who is teaching it correctly, who has received the right quality of training, who has been “authorized” by whom and so forth.

On the other side, those “out there helping in the world” disagree with what they see as rigidity and politics. There seems to be considerable interest in the Movements judging from activity on the internet and the ongoing success of publicly offered programs. Regardless of how precisely they are taught, participating in them does offer a taste of a different possibility for being. However, since they were designed to be part of a larger, more complex, and integrated program, if people are exposed to only a fraction of a larger whole, how is that helpful? Are participants in the public presentations told this fact? Are they directed to established groups for deeper training? Do these public programs offer doorways into the larger teaching or just an interesting experience in the crowded “spiritual” marketplace of workshops and retreats? Could established groups re-new and enlarge their memberships by offering public Movements classes as points of entry for interested potential students? What would be the objection? Some groups see this as anathema because, in their particular training, movements had to be earned by a year or two or more in groups first, while others view it as a reasonable and practical way to educate and provide a taste of the special quality and experiences that lie within the Gurdjieff tradition.

Challenge of Innovation

To be able to creatively innovate without losing the essence, is a sign of mastery, a sign that the Work has blended with the individual, that they now carry it as their primary guiding principle. They are no longer “in the Work” but rather, the “Work is now in them”. Prior to this blending, the fear of bringing the Work wrongly can easily result in a type of conformity that may discourage innovation and experimentation. It may be this phenomenon that manifests in tension between different lineages and groups over who has the “right” version of the teaching.

This is an important question ... *if* there is only one “right” version. My own experience tells me that, over time, the *exoteric* manifestations of different teachings begin to vary widely and the greater their apparent differences the more rigidly they are defended. Yet, I find that the *esoteric core* of all spiritual teaching shares a focus on waking the sleeping potential inside us all and connecting that to its Source. Understanding this principle allows connection across approaches

at the esoteric level. From this level, all teachings are variations of a larger Whole. Differences that once appeared significant, simply disappear.

A Suggestion

At the time of this writing, the world is slowly emerging from the grip of the Covid19 pandemic. Fortunately, this disruptive global disaster appeared at the same time that internet telecommunication has connected the planet's population through videoconferencing.

Several years ago, I was asked to participate in a teleconference program on Gurdjieff's ideas, sponsored by the Theosophical Society. Initially, I was reluctant. For years I had heard the mantra that one must meet face-to-face as the Work is an oral tradition and "something" could be "transmitted" when in personal contact. In particular, often cited was the tradition of Baraka or direct transmission through the Being emanations of the teacher. Of course, there are very few actual teachers, but rather many advanced students who can help those "younger" in "The Work" than themselves. Nevertheless, after consideration, I chose to try the experiment.

My first impression was that there are people with a genuine interest, but who do not have access to a group in their area. As there is no directory of Gurdjieff groups other than those of the Gurdjieff Foundation, interested newcomers would have to search the Web for chat rooms or discussions groups. Having briefly looked at some of these, the range of quality is large.

I discovered with my initial on-line experiment that some useful aspects of the system could be shared, particularly the ideas and exploration of impressions about assigned experiments, or "tasks", one can use to begin to learn the experiential aspects of the system. Of course, large components of the method are obviously unavailable in such a setting.

In recent years, I have been involved with several colleagues in "tutoring", from North America, a group in Russia which asked for help. The frequent regular on-line meetings have been augmented by one or two visits a year with the "seniors" guiding the project. The Russian group engages in the full-compliment of activities including "work periods" (retreats) and Gurdjieff's Movements and Sacred Dances, having been trained and supervised all under the direction of trans-continental movements teachers. The results of these efforts, made discernable by changes in the manifestations of group participants, are no different than I have seen in regular groups that can meet in person with the "leaders". What is available to this particular group that is not available to the vast majority of people searching for help on the internet, is direct on-going help from traditionally trained people from direct Gurdjieff lineages.

I am aware that, as a result of the pandemic-forced constriction on in-person group activity, many established groups experimented with meeting "on-line". The reports I am hearing coincide with my own impressions, that it is possible to have meaningful exchanges and significant subjective experiences through this medium. Our local group held our meetings on-line and, although less satisfying than in person, was surprisingly useful. A number of groups have been sponsoring concerts of the Gurdjieff-De Hartmann music while others are participating in on-line guided "sittings" (specialized meditation practices) and reporting the experience favorably.

Necessity is the mother of invention. As the pandemic abates, and people can once again meet in person, what will be learned from this forced experiment in on-line communication? My impression is that this experiment suggests the possibility of an on-line resource structure for people seeking to learn about Gurdjieff's system, but are unable to work in a qualified group. It could work in a couple of ways.

As the most organized, networked and resource-rich of all Gurdjieff communities, the Foundation groups have the greatest ability, and highest public profile, to become a referral source for individuals seeking contact with a group studying Gurdjieff's ideas.

Foundation groups could offer on-line help to individuals unable to access a local group, either directly themselves, or through referral to groups descended from other disciple lines. If the Foundation wished to catalogue current groups connected to other Gurdjieff disciples, as well as those within their own network, this would widen the supply of seasoned practitioners, who could take referrals for individual or group tutoring. These internet "students" could be connected with others in their area and actual groups could form and receive occasional visits from their "tutors" to bring more experiential aspects such as retreats, Sacred Dance, and personal contact. Although not ideal, the alternative is to allow interest in Gurdjieff to rapidly devolve into the "wild-west" of amateur, self-appointed gurus and sincere, but unsupported novices.

As paradigms resist change, particularly from members inside their circle, and given the momentum of tradition, this suggestion will be a stretch for members of the current established formal traditional approach. I make it, nevertheless. Gurdjieff stated that the form of a teaching must change with the times to reflect changes in the psychology of the population. Telecommunication opens the possibility of people from around the planet working "directly" together in a way unimaginable only a few years ago.

Conclusion

We have been exploring the interaction of three basic factors: The Work, the group leader, and the pupil. At any given moment, each may carry any of the three fundamental forces in relationship to each other.

The Work may appear first in the sequence of events carrying the initiating, active force, as it did in my case when a friend unexpectedly handed me a book. My degree of receptiveness was the carrier of the second, passive-receptive force. My wish to fathom this material took me on a search to find a teacher who could embody the third force and reconcile the need to understand this startling new information.

At another moment, the leader plays the active role to the pupil's passive role and the experiences and impressions from Work practice provide the reconciliation in terms of verification of the elder's words and the pupil's wish. Or the pupil may take the initiative with the teacher carrying the receptive role and the Work reconciling.

Unfortunately, it may sometimes be that the group leader resists or discourages the pupil from developing their own initiative, either from a lack of the leader's understanding, or a rigid adherence to the *form* of the teaching as given initially to the current leader by their teacher, or from a sense of threat to the leader's authority. This latter may be a warning sign that the group is at risk of become a cult.

In the end, all human group activity is susceptible to the above problems, because the participants are typically in a state of "waking sleep", Gurdjieff's second stage of consciousness.⁴ In Fourth Way groups, participants and leaders are intimately aware of the phenomenon of waking sleep, as the idea and its study are foundational to the system of awakening which Gurdjieff brought. However, even though aware, and practicing to avoid this state, its pernicious effects require constant vigilance, and its results are often manifested despite all these efforts. Therefore, such groups are not immune from its effects even while trying to avoid them.

It is the responsibility of those who offer to act as spiritual guides, to have the ableness to be "awake" more often than their pupils, particularly at moments requiring decision or confrontation. To successfully transmit, one has to consistently "walk the walk", manifest the principles of the teaching in real time.

Can the Work actually produce people of higher development? Whoever proposes to transmit the teaching should be a living example, a proof of the proposition. Can they demonstrate their practice in the moment? Are their efforts to not identify, to be Present, to work on themselves, to demonstrate conscience and compassion, tangible for others? Do they conform to Gurdjieff's description of "remarkable men"? Otherwise, how can students put their faith in the teaching? This, in my opinion, is the most critical variable in any group aspiring to spiritual development.

The group leader need not be a saint or a great spiritual being but does need to be a competent and honest guide. Saints are awe-inspiring, but this rarified archetype is out of reach to most students ... and not necessary or even appropriate as an aim. I am not aware of any story of saints where that status was sought by the individual who eventually rose to this level of development. What is needed is the reassurance and inspiration that the Work is possible and can actually yield results for "ordinary" people not anointed by Grace to an elevated station. The group leader is responsible for establishing conditions that allow students to learn how to open to something higher than themselves. If the leader has found this opening and if its influence can be demonstrated through the leader's consistent manifestation, then the students can have a realistic hope that transformation may also be possible for them. The demonstration of this reality through consistent manifestation, is critical for those who would offer to lead others.

With a group leader who manifests as a remarkable person, who admits when he or she has been asleep, made an error of judgment, became identified, or even been unfair, students can have a model of Being-ness to follow and have a justifiable hope that there actually is a possibility of transformation and growth of Being for them as well.

As Meister Eckhart asked, "What good is it that Christ was born in a stable in Bethlehem over 1300 years ago *if* He is *not* also *born* in *me*?"

And we may ask today, “What good is it that the Work transformed Gurdjieff if the Work cannot transform me?”

Footnotes

[1] Buzzell, Keith; Fifth Press, Salt Lake City. Utah

[2] For readers not familiar with Gurdjieff's terminology: Law of Three is a way of looking at the creative process. Something of a higher quality blends with something of a lower quality, thus raising the quality of the latter. This newly improved factor can now serve as a higher quality for those still lower down, but also can now receive a new impulse, higher than the one that originally raised it, and thus be lifted again to the level of that original quality. It is a way of representing a ladder of upward or downward evolution or involution.

The Law of Seven is a way of looking at process in time, suggesting seven steps in any evolutionary or involitional process. Every process needs an impetus and a sense of direction. It has a beginning, a middle and an ending. There are specific places in any process where outside influences enter and can facilitate or distract the process. The clarity of inner planning and constant attention at each point in the process can help avoid being derailed by inevitable outside factors.

[3] Gurdjieff observed that people live most of their lives in a state of distracted, semi-sleep, daydreaming, assuming, reacting in a way that is mechanically determined by the conditioning influences of life. Because of this fractured and weak attention, we are rarely aware, simultaneously, of the interaction between outside influences and internal world of reaction. This simultaneous awareness is necessary to begin to study one's conditioned personality in its natural habitat, as it responds to the stimulation around it. This provides a surge of “psychic” energy which momentarily intensifies the effort of “observing oneself”. This can occasionally occur spontaneously ... often under stress or sudden surprise. But, to cultivate it requires that the effort be made intentionally, what he calls the “First Conscious Shock”. The beginning of deeper initiation begins at the location in the developmental process he called, “The Second Conscious Shock”. Successful progress in the preliminary First Conscious Shock is necessary before entering the region where the Second Shock becomes possible. Without sufficient foundation leading up to this point, the Second Shock cannot be located, or worse, may be entered in the wrong way resulting in a potential catastrophe for the student as well as for those around them.

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