

Gurdjieff: Making a New World by J. G. Bennett – November 22, 1973.

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Very young children, two or three years old, often ask the question, "Why?" and sometimes "Why am I here?" Or, if they get the idea of life, they will say, "Why am I alive?" And because people don't know how to answer these questions, they put them off with foolish answers and soon children stop asking the question. Probably children don't grasp the depth and difficulty of the question "Why?," but that they ask it is an indication that somewhere deep down in us this question is there even before we begin to think, even before we are taught anything about ourselves and the world. But this question "Why?" gets covered up and very few people continue to pursue it.

The man, about whom I am going to speak tonight, George Gurdjieff, never gave up seeking the answer to the question "Why?" and it is this that gives him a peculiar significance for our present time. As time went on, the simple question "Why am I alive?" took the form for him of "Why is there life on the Earth, and in particular what is our human life, what is its purpose, what is it for?" Now this question, "What is life for?" is much more unusual than you might at first notice. Generally we have already been put off this question, either by being told that God made it and it is God's business and God alone knows and it is not our business to enquire, or we are told that there is no other meaning and purpose to life except what we people bring to it - that if there are purposes, they are all man-made purposes. Therefore the answer to the question "Why do we exist?" is that we exist to satisfy our own purposes as they arise in us. This second answer has come to be preferred in recent centuries, and is preferred at the present time - so that any answer to the question "What is the sense and aim of life?" must be taken as a man-made one which will have a man-made answer and we can virtually make whatever answer we choose. But if we are not satisfied with that, if we can see that there is something that cannot be right in the belief that the purpose of life on the Earth is something man-made, then we come up against a new way of looking at the world and life. It is that new way of looking that makes Gurdjieff's contribution distinctive. If there is a sense and purpose in human life that can be understood - that we have a part to play in fulfilling and that applies also to human life - then this purpose must have something to do with this Earth, perhaps with this solar system, and this world in which we live. We should search for this answer not by going beyond the world altogether, but by looking at the world in a different way; instead of looking at the world as having arisen

either through the action of blind causes or by a divine decree coming from outside the world altogether, we must look at it as having come into being, having been designed and organized, for purposes that correspond to the size and significance of this solar system within the whole universe. So long as we could think that this Earth was the center of the universe and that this solar system of ours was the central and most important mode of existence in the universe, we could think that all purposes were the same as the purposes of this Earth and this existence of life on the Earth. One of the most important changes in our view of the world has been due to the discovery that this solar system is an insignificant part of the whole universe. It would be quite absurd to think that the purposes within the solar system can be the same as the purposes within the universe as a whole. But then we have to face something, and that is that this purpose must be limited, that this solar system is a limited, minute part of the whole universe. And that brings us in front of the idea that there can be purposes which are greater than human purposes and yet are very much less, infinitesimal, compared with universal purposes.

It was that kind of reasoning that led Gurdjieff to ask this question "What is the sense and purpose of life on the Earth?," looking at it in the context of the solar system, not in terms of absolute reality or in terms of the universe as a whole. This calls for a radical change in the way of looking at things from either of the two which are current. The change here requires that we should accept that there may be purposes connected with life, with the development of the solar system, that are very much greater than human, and that therefore we have to adapt ourselves to, whether we like it or not. This is the first answer that Gurdjieff gives to this question, "What is the sense and purpose of life on the Earth and, in particular, human life?" Whenever we see something being made, we expect to be given an answer to the question "What is this made for?" When we see human beings taking great care of vast herds of cattle, flocks of sheep, and other animals we ask, "What are you doing this for? Is it because you are so fond of cows and sheep that you feel you should expend so much energy in feeding them and preventing them from being destroyed by predators?" The answer is, "No, we are taking care of them because we want their meat, their wool, we want leather from them." If we speak in the same way about mankind and ask, "Why is so much being carefully prepared for mankind over hundreds of millions of years - the soil which enables this vegetation to maintain life, these various minerals that have been concentrated in the Earth's surface to enable man to construct all the articles that he uses. Is it because some higher power is so fond of man that this state of existence has been prepared?" Supposing one gives a different answer to that; it is because something is required from man, something is required from this human race, which is analogous to the requirements that we have for meat, wool, and leather. That is

the answer to which Gurdjieff came. It is an answer that has not been in men's minds for a very long time. Probably the last of the great teachers who taught this view of man was Zoroaster, and that is two-thousand five hundred or more years ago. Are we to go back to this ancient view - that man exists here to serve a purpose that is not his own, that he is here only to be used for something?

When these ideas were first re-introduced by Gurdjieff fifty or sixty years ago, they seemed very strange - so strange and so shocking that we regarded them only as intended to shock us, to make us sit up and ask ourselves the question, "What is my life and what am I doing with it?" and, having received this salutary shock, then to go on living our lives, making use of what we had been taught but, to tell the truth, not seriously facing this question, "Are our lives for our own benefit or do we exist to serve some purpose greater than ourselves?"

Now, at this present time - this short fifty or sixty years since Gurdjieff introduced these notions to the West - it looks very different. The thought that man is making sense of his own life is no longer plausible. We are recklessly destroying life on the Earth. In the last sixty years we have destroyed a great deal of human life unnecessarily, and we are preparing considerable destruction of human life for the future. People are widely beginning to question human purposes, and therefore perhaps people are more ready to look at things in some new way.

So let us now try to follow the answer to the question that Gurdjieff himself has proposed. It is that human life is required to produce something that is needed for the harmony of the solar system and particularly for the harmony of this planet; that is, something is produced by the way we live our lives and the way we die our deaths. There is the obligation upon us to produce this something, which is analogous to the meat and wool and leather that we get from the sheep and cows. In the past, people have had the purpose of life presented to them in different ways, but generally speaking, the way of living that has been presented has been the same. Apart from certain artificial social customs that have differed from time to time, there has been a general understanding that man is not intended just to live for his own egoistic purposes, that he has obligations to fulfill and this is still as true as ever. What has changed over the ages is the way in which this has been presented - the motives that have been put forward for living a disciplined, self-restrained, non-egoistic life.

Gautama Buddha appealed to reason. He said, "You see that this life is not satisfying. As it stands it is meaningless. There is only one way out and that is to awaken to the truth, to awaken to reality." Another approach is the appeal to faith, which is evident particularly in the Judaic tradition, from Abraham to

Moses: "This is God's command and you will believe this and you will act according to God's command because you believe it." The Jewish scriptures are largely concerned with strengthening this belief, that it is indeed God's command that one should live in such a way. The Christian message is that we should base our life upon love, upon belief in the love of God and man's love for his fellow men, and that we should live accordingly. Mohammed essentially put forward the doctrine of hope. There is little in the Koran or in the Islamic tradition that menaces or threatens; it is much more the holding out of hope, the mercy and goodness of God towards man, the hope of paradise for a life that is lived reasonably well.

So it can be said that - just to take those four examples - these great founders of the religions of the world have appealed to reason, to faith, to love, to hope - and all of these have failed. The appeal to reason does not work - people do not, except for a small minority, live reasonably. Faith has also largely disappeared in the world. It has been replaced by a kind of blind acceptance of what we are told, a kind of conditioning which is totally different from faith. The Christian religion has been the most tragic failure of all, because in the name of love, more wickedness and more cruelty have been perpetrated than by the followers of any religion. Islam, because it is the newest religion, was the last one to begin to evaporate; but this religion of hope is also being replaced by something totally different.

Modern man has invented a new reason: that is, self-interest, and this "religion" is the one that has collapsed the most rapidly, because we have already seen the tragic consequences of it. All of this is a paraphrase of Gurdjieff's presentation of the situation in his own books. What does he put forward as an alternative to these ways, which he asserts have failed? He says that it is necessary now for man to begin to see things as they really are. He says that we have in us an instrument that enables us to see this, not indirectly through what other people have taught us, not through teachings and creeds and traditions, but by direct perception. He calls the instrument of this direct perception by the ancient name of "Conscience."

Earlier, I spoke about the something that man has to provide by his way of life, and now we have come to this - that man should see this for himself and that Gurdjieff's message in effect is: It is time to see for yourself why you should live in a certain way, what your life is for, what is the sense and purpose of your existence. It is possible to say that we have come to a moment of maturing in human life, when we have to pass out of a childish dependence upon what others tell us and be able to see for ourselves. This is a very difficult moment for us as individuals, and it is very much more difficult as applied to the human race as a whole. It may be that it will take centuries before we can

come to it, but we are at this moment of transition now when we have to learn to look at life differently, not in terms of what has been taught and believed in the past, but in terms of what we ourselves are able to see, to experience by our own direct perception.

In order to see, one must know what one is looking at, and therefore some indication has to be given. One of the most extraordinary steps in Gurdjieff's presentation of this is what I am now about to say. I am not aware of its having been taught or being currently taught in any other tradition. There are indications, as I have said before, that it was taught by Zoroaster, and probably by Pythagoras, who, according to tradition, was taught this by Zoroaster - but what matters is that it should be known now and that we should be able to see it for ourselves. Gurdjieff calls it "The Doctrine of Reciprocal Maintenance." This Doctrine of Reciprocal Maintenance states that everything that exists in this world depends on other things for its maintenance and must in turn maintain the existence of others, and that this also applies to us. It is easy to see that we depend upon other forms of existence; we depend upon the materials of this Earth's surface; we depend upon the heat and light that come from the Sun; we depend upon other things that we do not know about; but most of all we depend upon life. We are an integral part of the life of this Earth. We cannot isolate ourselves from it. We could not eat and in truth we could not breathe without life on the Earth, because it is the life on the Earth that supplies the oxygen which makes it possible for us to breathe.

And then the question comes: if we depend upon so much for our existence, what must we give in return, what is required of us? It is not enough to say that our bodies will return to the Earth, because we are a great deal more than just living organisms. We cannot say that our debt to life has been paid simply by returning our carcass to the Earth from which it came.

We share sensitivity with all life. This sensitivity is most highly organized in us, more highly than in any other form of life. We are capable of more varied experiences; these experiences cannot be for nothing, they are not just for our own pleasure and suffering. Human experience releases energies which could not be produced in any other way. To explain this in detail would take much more time than is available tonight, but let us assume that we do recognize that human experience is different from other forms of experience on this Earth. If all experience is associated with some kind of energy, some kind of sensitive energy, then all our experiences produce energy. And according to the kind of experience we have - which in turn depends upon the way in which our lives are lived - we shall produce energies of different qualities.

What Gurdjieff asserts is that these energies are the very energies that are required for the purposes of the evolution of this solar system, and that

there is a great process of sensitization, or as he calls it, of spiritualization that is proceeding on this Earth and throughout the solar system, and that we have a contribution to make to it. We make this contribution by the way in which we live our lives. We know that we take a great deal from this Earth. Now we see that we are taking more than we are entitled to - we are running heavily into debt towards the Earth and towards life. This makes it even more important for us that we should know how to repay, how to square our account with the Earth and life. It is the recognition that we are running into bankruptcy as a human race that is felt by people all over the world.

We can interpret all this in ordinary terms of exhaustion of resources and pollution and all the other things that we know about, and deeper down there is something that we call by the words "rape of the Earth" that makes us deeply uneasy. But we do not really understand the full significance of this; we do not understand that there are higher intelligences who are surveying this, who know that it is possible for man to live otherwise, who are concerned that man should live otherwise, but are dependent upon human understanding for this "otherwise" to come about.

If it is true that we people do not exist on the Earth just for ourselves or just by accident, but because we are needed for a purpose that is greater than ourselves, then it must be faced that if we totally fail to fulfill this purpose, we shall be removed and replaced by some other form of life. This kind of thing that I am saying now may not be so explicit as this in your minds, but I think that most of you have some feeling that there is something wrong with our present attitude towards life on the Earth and towards human life in particular - that there is something seriously missing in our understanding of it all. Therefore, we should look seriously at this answer that Gurdjieff gives. Yes, there is something missing - we are not seeing that our life is required for something and that if we provide that something our life will have fulfilled its purpose and we ourselves will become free - free from this obligation, free from our debt, and our own individual fulfillment will then be made possible. But not in isolation and separate from the rest, as people have sometimes thought in the past. There is something here in which the whole of the human race is involved. We not only need one another, but have an underlying connection by the very fact that the whole of the human race is needed for a certain purpose; if it fulfills this purpose, then this human race of ours has the possibility of moving to a different level of fulfillment. If we understand this, then a very different and new significance can enter life. It is this that represents the attraction of the new world - that there is a possibility for man to come to a differently satisfying life, providing only that people can see that this obligation of ours to provide that certain something is fulfilled.

Then comes the question: "How is this to be done? What is it that Gurdjieff has to say about this?" In general, there is always a difference between knowing "what" and knowing "how." The truth is that at this moment, people neither know what nor know how; they only know to a certain extent that there is a way in which they should live. They see - if they are at all sensible and impartial and honest with themselves - that they are not living as they should, that there is something wrong with our behavior - with your behavior and my behavior - and not something that we can unload onto other people, but something that we need to know about how to live our lives differently. But the first thing is to know what is this "differently," what is this "other way." It is not just to live a moral, well-ordered life-it is quite consciously and intentionally to fulfill this obligation of producing this that is required from man, and this Gurdjieff calls "Conscious Labor and Intentional Suffering"- a phrase that appears again and again in all his writings, in all his teachings, and it is necessary to understand just what he means by this. Conscious Labor is nearly the same as what we should call service; that is, serving the purpose of existence. And this is very much directed towards the future of mankind. Throughout his own life and in every picture that he drew in his own books is the way in which life should be lived. He always emphasized the obligation we have to serve the future, to prepare a better future for mankind, to make present sacrifices for the sake of the future. As parents, everyone sees and recognizes the necessity to make present sacrifices for their own children, but this is too limited and, at the present time it is being neglected. But apart from this family recognition of our obligations as parents, how little remains that we are prepared to do and to sacrifice for the future. How little are we ready to do without things now, to place restraints on our desires and impulses of the present, in order that new things should be possible, that a better future should be possible? How little do we recognize that power is not to be exercised in order to get what we want but in order to serve? It is around such things as these that changes of attitude implied in the meaning of Conscious Labor are to be understood. He called this Conscious Labor because it is necessary to know what has to be done. It is an exceedingly difficult thing to serve the future; many people want to do good for the future but they don't know how, they don't know what is needed, they don't know how to sow the seeds which will make a better future. A change of perception is required-something needs to be understood that is not understood now.

One of the things that has to be understood is that this will always involve payment, it will always involve sacrifice. It is not fashionable nowadays to accept the necessity to suffer in order to serve. We like to give of our abundance, not to give what hurts us. Even from our abundance we are reluctant to give-how much more when it actually hurts us. There are people I

know-some of them friends who are here in this room-who live their lives prepared to put themselves in situations where they will have to suffer in order to be of service to other people, knowing that this will be inevitable. This is really all round this question of Conscious Labor and Intentional Suffering, but it is not enough to have the good will to do it-it is also necessary to have new kinds of perception, new understandings of other people; otherwise we are liable to blunder and with the best of intentions do harm and not good. Therefore we have also the obligation to understand life better, and this understanding of human life does start with understanding what human life is for and how this something is to be produced through the way we live our lives.

A great part of Gurdjieff's teaching was concerned with the study and understanding of man-not just as a being to live satisfactorily on this Earth, but essentially as a being who has obligations to fulfill and who, through fulfilling these obligations, can fulfill himself. This is the notion of the transformation of man; through this people come together and in the absence of this people are separated. Our present life suffers terribly from isolation and loneliness; there is the disintegration of family life which is one of the symptoms, but in general it is one of the sad things of our great cities that there is so little understanding and connection between people-our great organizations have become so impersonal that the very core of human existence is dropping away-that is, the sense of the unity of mankind. We have to come towards this, not as it was in the past, but in new ways. There will be changes, something will emerge and is beginning to emerge now in the form of new perceptions, new abilities of people to communicate without words and without outward signs through a deeper understanding and perception of one another. There is a phrase that is commonly used that it is important to use rightly and respect the significance of, and that is the phrase "group consciousness." It is used now because people are aware that in some way we have to get beyond our isolated and separate individualities to an awareness of the connection between us. But just as I said before, life by reason, life by faith, by love and by hope, have all failed and something else, a new kind of perception, must come that will restore these things to their real significance in life. So we must be careful that we don't, in the same way, spoil and lose the real significance of the emerging group consciousness. There is a great risk that, as the ideas that belong to the new world begin to emerge, people will take them in old ways and not see that we have to move to something quite new and different.

There is such a thing as group consciousness. I have experienced it with many people, we have experienced what this really is, and we know that this is one of the new modes that will enter the new world. Through this, transformations of energy that are required from man will be much more effective; the fulfillment of our obligations for the reciprocal maintenance of

everything in this solar system will be made more effective. But the most important thing of all is that we should be able to perceive ourselves directly—not by what other people have told us, but through the development of a new consciousness within us which will enable us to see directly what the purpose of our life is, how everything is connected, how life is not separated from life, how it must be served and how the fulfillment of our own destiny comes in doing that.

All these things have been taught to us before as moral rules, ways that we ought to behave. Those are the ways children are taught. "This is what you ought to do; this is what your father tells you to do." Now we have to come further than that and see for ourselves. Here again, Gurdjieff made an enormous contribution by his many years of search through different countries of the world, where he was able to come in contact with groups, some ancient groups that had found and preserved the secrets of this transformation of consciousness, of a development of a different kind of group awareness, of the overcoming of the defects in our human nature. And these techniques he left behind, so that his contribution was not only to tell us what the new world will have to be like, but also how it can be brought about.

I have spoken until now only in terms of what Gurdjieff taught, because this lecture is about him, and you may feel that I have exaggerated his importance. It is not in terms of importance that I speak, but in terms of the uniqueness and unexpectedness of his message. If you do set yourself to understand this message more closely, you will see that it is strange that this should be so different from so much that is being said at the present time. There are so many people preaching the new world, saying what man should be. They are talking, and quite justly and rightly, about new forms of consciousness, new perceptions; but not about this particular thing—that our life is governed by the obligation to produce something needed for the world and that this is connected with the way we experience, and therefore with the need to transform and change our own experiencing, our own perceptions. This is something that I do not see elsewhere. There are many other valuable things being said and done, and they are all necessary, because we are now coming to the point where we have to understand our life, not merely do what we are told, nor live by the promise of something wonderful for ourselves if we do what we are told. We have to be more mature than that.

As far as my own reading of the times goes, twenty-five years after Gurdjieff's death, it is possible now to put much more effectively into practice what he taught. That is one reason I am speaking as I am now. I have myself been making an experiment along these lines with a number of people at a place outside Oxford, at Sherborne House. It is an experiment following the

lines of what Gurdjieff indicated in organizing his own Institute some fifty-odd years ago, and it is for training people in these very things-in the development of their powers of perception, external and internal, and in showing them how it is possible to come to group consciousness. I am looking for people who have the potential for developing this, because it is important that people should be prepared as soon as possible, and that is the task that I have set myself. I regard it as my duty to share with people what I have learnt about that, as far as possible.

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