

Lipsey, Roger. Gurdjieff Reconsidered (pp. xi-xviii). Shambhala. Kindle Edition.

Foreword by Cynthia Bourgeault

The name G. I. Gurdjieff first showed up on my radar screen in the spring of 1982. I was doing a year's sabbatical fellowship at the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Minnesota when a colleague casually flipped onto my desk a copy of P. D. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*, the classic gateway into the Gurdjieffian universe. "I saw the word 'miraculous' in the title and immediately thought of you," she said coyly. She has yet to this day to own up to any ulterior motives.

Like many who find themselves drawn to this teaching, I devoured the book in great gulps, finding my own heretofore stable Christian universe gently rocking on its foundations. As Gurdjieff himself makes clear, the wormhole into receptivity often opens through deep disappointment--"Blessed are the troubled, for they have seized hold of life," in the words of the Gospel of Thomas. In my case, this disappointment constellated around a growing frustration as to why a religion that boasted at its epicenter one of the most compassionate and inclusive masters to have ever walked the planet should habitually express itself in ways that are rigid, judgmental, and exclusive. In the teaching being laid out before me, I could see exactly why, and the seeing kept right on opening. It opened outwardly, allowing me to understand why the whole institutional process kept running off the track. (As Jacob Needleman, an astute contemporary Gurdjieffian commentator, dryly observes, "To ask Christians in their usual state of consciousness to follow the teachings of Christ is like asking stones to sprout wings and fly to the sea.") But it opened inwardly as well. Or perhaps I should say it closed inwardly--drawing the noose more and more tightly around those same qualities of inconsistency and lack of conscious presence in myself. I found myself resonating with the experience of a participant in one of those early Gurdjieff meetings (quoted by Roger Lipsey later in this book); I was "aware that I had been brought to the very brink of a conscious possibility in which there was a strange combination of both suffering and rejoicing."

In due course I found my way to the Work--the name familiarly given to the formal network of groups, spread across several continents, who devote themselves to the practical study of Gurdjieff's teaching. It took some doing, for even more so then than now, the Work preferred to keep itself slightly below the radar and followed the protocol of traditional esoteric groups in making the entry gate a bit of a test of mettle. But after a couple of false starts, I eventually found myself sitting in an apartment in upper Manhattan, face-to-face with the formidable Dr. William Welch, one of the towering patriarchs of the earliest era of the Work. You will make his fuller acquaintance toward the end of the present book. He listened to my story with grave, measured attention, as if weighing me in the balance, then assigned me to a Canadian hub working closely under his supervision. To my teachers and fellow seekers there I owe an enduring debt of gratitude for opening the eyes and heart of this formerly charmingly oblivious "talking head" to the wider world of presence and conscious attention. I came back from those seven years of active participation with my Christianity totally reinfused and transformed, set to a far vaster scale and transposed to a road map that finally pulled the whole picture together.

I had been discreetly warned, of course--another venerable tradition of esoteric schools--to be circumspect in how I shared these ideas. Not secretive, exactly, but since the core premise of all inner work is that the capacity to receive a teaching is directly linked to one's state of being, it could be counted a virtual certainty that these ideas would be misheard and subtly distorted on both ends of the transmission chain. Even so, as I found my own life horizons being blown wide open by some of the real, unique, and demonstrably practical ideas and frames accessible through the Work, it seemed that they merited wider circulation. It seemed that their true home was directly within the greater intellectual and spiritual lineage of the West, where in our own increasingly troubled planetary times they were more urgently needed than ever.

Of course, if one believes in the kind of providential causality that attends such transmissions, this would be obviously the case, for if Gurdjieff is indeed who he claimed to be--whom he was also recognized to be by some of the most acute and sensitive minds of our time--he was no free agent but "one under authority," clearly on a cosmic assignment. Born in Armenia in 1866, raised in a spiritual and cultural melting pot where Orthodox Christian, Sufi, Yezidi, and shamanic influences actively intermingled, he early on became convinced that there had once been a level of being and an understanding of cosmic accountability--"What are we here for?"--now lost to contemporary humans. His prophetic mission, so it seems, was to gather those ancient shards of knowledge and assemble them, painstakingly, into thought categories and practices applicable to the modern West. And that is exactly what he did. After a twenty-year search conducted principally in the Near East, Central Asia, and Tibet, he arrived in St. Petersburg on the eve of World War I and set up storefront as a teacher, not least of sacred dancing. He soon collected a circle of highly accomplished disciples, P. D. Ouspensky numbered among them. Again as if on providential cue, the group was displaced steadily westward by the political upheavals of the early twentieth century and finally came to rest in the environs of Paris, where Gurdjieff experimented for over three decades with a variety of teaching formats including his celebrated "Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man." From this Parisian command post the teaching was transmitted worldwide by streams of faithful students.

For those unfamiliar with this teaching, I might describe it as an early run-up on what we would now call "mindfulness training," combined with an intricate cosmology and an even more intricate metaphysics that has continued to intrigue the more nerdishly inclined. Many people who know the teaching only through its ideas find it overly intellectual and off-putting. But the Work also has extraordinary heart, carried largely in the aforementioned sacred dances (or "Movements," as they're more widely known), which provide not only a powerful integrative counterbalance to the intellectual content but also a de facto liturgical expression of searing emotional intensity. Over the roughly hundred years now that the teaching has been in existence, it has attracted an impressive array of artists and intellectuals, including Frank Lloyd Wright (through his wife, Olgivanna), Jean Toomer, Katherine Mansfield, A. R. Orage, Jane Heap, Kathryn Hulme, René Daumal, P. L. Travers, and in our own time, Peter Brook, Andrei Serban, and Jacob Needleman. In a quiet and indirect way, it has been in active dialogue with some of the most acute and discerning minds of our century and has cast its subtle influence over the Western intellectual tradition in ways still largely unappreciated.

But it is just here that the irony enters, upon which Lipsey is about to call the question so forcefully. For while these Gurdjieffian ideas have clearly attracted more than their fair share of the intellectual cream of the crop, the ideas themselves have yet to be assimilated--or even seriously considered--by the greater intellectual tradition itself. Not as philosophy, not as metaphysics, not as literature or the arts, not as spiritual practice. In all these quadrants, the shorthand appraisal is and remains that Gurdjieff was a "crank" and his legacy a "cult." Once these stereotypes first began to circulate in the 1920s, the branding stuck, and it has yet to be disarmed.

In part, of course, this is due to the Work's own aforementioned preference to stay slightly below the radar. But this reticence is more than met from the other side by recycled prejudice and no doubt an overly gerrymandered intellectual terrain that allows this teaching to fall between the cracks. The old clichés are simply passed on, keeping the Gurdjieff material effectively cordoned off from the greater Western tradition with which it stands in such powerful and potentially game-changing dialogue.

Gurdjieff himself had his doubts about what he contemptuously dubbed "the bon-ton literary establishment." He did not make it easy on those who were unable to examine their own prejudices or discern a more subtle level of teaching at work behind a presenting surface that could be deliberately provocative or even outrageous. What has long been needed is a good translator, someone who can bridge these gaps with more patience than Gurdjieff himself and more subtlety than those who meet his teaching only from the usual intellectual and cultural reference points.

In both of these respects Roger Lipsey is supremely the man for the job. With all the forbearance and subtlety so clearly visible in his earlier masterpiece on Thomas Merton, *Make Peace Before the Sun Goes Down*, he demonstrates his remarkable capacity to re-open clogged channels of communication. Tremendously literate, with a sweeping breadth of knowledge of the Western intellectual tradition, he is also a longtime student of the Work--now one of its respected elders--and his long years of laboring in this vineyard will be immediately apparent, to those who know the Work, through the signature fragrance of his presentation.

A reconsideration can be two things, he writes in his opening chapter: either a refinement of an existing reputation or a radical break from received opinion. In *Gurdjieff Reconsidered* he sets out to do both--"because two unlike views of Gurdjieff and his teaching have never mingled; they have glared at each other." While these two tasks may initially appear contradictory, in Lipsey's hands they become complementary and form the seamlessly interwoven tapestry of his investigation.

The first two-thirds of the book consists of a careful reconstruction of the whole Gurdjieffian teaching, decade by decade, through its various iterations. With a deeply nuanced comprehension, he lets the whole evolution unfold before our eyes, appreciated at its own

depth, in its own light. Drawing on his panoramic knowledge of the Western cultural tradition, he notes surprising similarities with thinkers as diverse as Rabelais, Pythagoras, and Diogenes, and skillfully contextualizes the teaching squarely within the venerable philosophic lineage of skeptical inquiry.

Even more moving is the "refinement" of our portrait of Gurdjieff that emerges from these pages--substantially in Gurdjieff's own words, and in those of his closest and most perceptive students. It is an insider's portrait, to be sure: the account given here is intimate and honest, both light and shadow unflinchingly revealed. Moving beyond the images that have figured so large in the media--Gurdjieff as the crank, the charlatan, and the cultist--Lipsey allows us to see this titan of a man and teacher as he slowly emerges through three decades of conscious labor and intentional suffering. We watch at close range as "The Tiger of Turkestan" who took the world by storm in the 1920s slowly gives way to the "lion in winter" of the 1930s, followed in the wartime years by the emergence of a sublime quality of love in this by-now old man who stood his ground in Paris during the depths of the Nazi occupation, feeding the hungry not only in soul but in body as well, and transmitting into the world a beam of radiant energy that can be felt to this day by those so attuned.

In the reappraisal mode, Lipsey traces the gradual and then rapid demonization of the Work, beginning first in the sensationalist journalism of the 1920s and then erupting more aggressively, in attacks by the literary intelligentsia, after Gurdjieff's death in 1949. These were spearheaded by the disenchanted former Gurdjieffian Louis Pauwels and then continued by the Traditionalists in a frontal assault launched by Whitall Perry on behalf of his circle. Lipsey analyzes the Pauwels controversy in some detail, and with good reason, for it is here that you will find the origins of the continuing stigmatization of the Work. He looks just as closely at Perry; absent Perry's rather frantic accusations, many who align themselves with the tradition of Sophia Perennis (perennial wisdom) would recognize a natural congruity with the Gurdjieff teaching. It is a thoughtful and much needed chapter, not only for clearing away some of the roadblocks to a better assimilation of the Gurdjieffian tradition but also in helping us to understand why those roadblocks came to be there in the first place.

As I said before, Roger Lipsey is subtle. To me, at least, his long years of dedication in the Work shine through in the way he constructs this book, particularly in the short afterword, which is in all respects a masterpiece. No diatribes, rhetorical fireworks, or sweeping grand finales, just an allusive invitation, carried in a few carefully placed words. Contextualizing this teaching within its rightful spiritual lineage one final time, Lipsey draws at last upon the great prophets of our own era--Martin Luther King Jr., Andrei Sakharov, Nelson Mandela, Václav Havel, Dag Hammarskjöld, Mahatma Gandhi--to distill the essence of the Gurdjieff teaching in its simplest and most universal import: "However great their personal sacrifice, each understood the need to call men and women back to themselves, to simple decency, mutual respect, and at least the minimum of policies and attitudes needed for survival as a species among other species on a generous planet."

Yes, oh yes! And here perhaps you will hear the real heart of the matter as to why this rapprochement is so long overdue. Not just for the repatriation of an unjustly marginalized spiritual master, but because the vision Gurdjieff illuminated is more urgently needed than ever. In this body of teaching resides angles of approach and practical tools to be found nowhere else. To name just a few: the Law of Three and Law of Seven, the enneagram, universal materiality, reciprocal feeding, the Five Being-Strivings, non-identification, "conscious labor and intentional suffering." These are all key concepts residing in the Work that, when applied as a single integrated vision, have the strength to break the deadly gridlock that Neoplatonic, binary metaphysics still imposes on perennial wisdom. They have the power to catapult us into a new era that Gurdjieff heralds with gusto and tough love.

I have watched this teaching come alive in people's hearts. As it now moves in spite of itself more into the mainstream, carried forward by popular initiatives such as the Enneagram of Personality, "Movements intensives," and perhaps my own Wisdom Schools, I watch it growing, re-energizing, re-imaging not only the cultural institutions it touches, but the Work itself: "new wineskins" and "seed fallen into the ground" rolled into one. And so in the end, I am enormously hopeful that the rapprochement is already underway, and that what this book will do will be to bring ownership, legitimacy, and a firmer sense of connection to the Western cultural heritage, with which the Work stands so necessarily and so fruitfully in dialogue. It is time for that voice to be heard, and for Gurdjieff's still astonishing vision to enter fully into conversation with a postmodern intellectual tradition grown nearly moribund for lack of real presence and real hope.

Let the grand dialogue begin!