

# Gurdjieff's "The Herald of Coming Good"

## A Journey to Awakening

This document explores Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff's seminal work "The Herald of Coming Good," which serves as both autobiography and introduction to his philosophical system. Written in 1933, this text outlines Gurdjieff's lifelong quest to understand human existence, his critique of modern civilization, and his methodical approach to awakening humanity from what he perceived as a state of sleep. Through his Institute for Man's Harmonious Development and his carefully structured writings, Gurdjieff presented a comprehensive system for self-transformation designed to counteract the fragmentation of modern consciousness and guide individuals toward their full potential.

The Institute's approach was both practical and theoretical, combining physical exercises, emotional work, and intellectual study. Through this integrated methodology, Gurdjieff aimed to help individuals develop what he called "objective consciousness"—a state of being fully present and aware, capable of perceiving reality without the distortions of subjective biases and conditioned responses.

Gurdjieff's Institute aimed to help individuals become aware of these recording mechanisms and develop the capacity to observe them in action. Through this observation, people could begin to distinguish between mechanical reactions and conscious choices, gradually developing the ability to act from a place of genuine awareness rather than automatic programming. This work of self-observation was the first step toward what Gurdjieff called "real being"—a state of integrated consciousness where all three parts of the psyche work harmoniously together.



# Gurdjieff's Personal Quest for Truth

## The Initial Striving

Gurdjieff's journey began with what he termed an "irrepressible striving" to understand the meaning of human life on Earth. This driving force emerged gradually in his youth and crystallized after experiencing the profound spiritual tribulation caused by the death of an intimate friend. This pivotal moment transformed his casual interest into an all-consuming quest that would define the remainder of his life.

## Extensive Travels and Studies

Dissatisfied with conventional explanations and existing spiritual traditions, Gurdjieff embarked on extensive travels and studies across diverse cultures. His explorations led him to ancient wisdom traditions that offered deeper insights than contemporary knowledge systems. During this period, he developed a particular interest in "Mehkeness," an ancient science dealing with human consciousness that he considered far more comprehensive than modern hypnotism. This study allowed him to explore what he called "man's-subconscious-mentation," which he believed held keys to understanding human existence.

Although I, too, at that period of my life, resembled them in my outward manifestations... there began to form in my thoughts, gradually and even in a way imperceptibly to my waking consciousness, the 'something', which assumed definition soon after a strong spiritual tribulation caused by the death of an intimate friend, and this newly formed datum of my mind has begun ever since... to engender in my entirety what I have elsewhere termed an 'irrepressible striving'.

## Transition to Group Work and the Institute

As his understanding deepened, Gurdjieff transitioned from individual research to working with groups. Finding existing "occult" circles inadequate for his purposes, he formed his own study groups composed of diverse personality types. These experimental communities eventually evolved into his formal Institute For Man's Harmonious Development, established as a platform for both studying human behavior and facilitating genuine self-development. The Institute represented the culmination of his personal quest and the beginning of his systematic effort to share his insights with others who sought similar understanding.

# The Institute For Man's Harmonious Development

The establishment of Gurdjieff's Institute represented his practical response to what he perceived as the fundamental imbalance in modern human development. Unlike conventional educational institutions that focused on specialized knowledge, Gurdjieff's Institute aimed to cultivate the harmonious development of all aspects of the human being—physical, emotional, and intellectual. This comprehensive approach was designed to counteract what he saw as the fragmented nature of modern consciousness.

At the Institute, Gurdjieff implemented a unique system for observing human psychological mechanisms. His methods revealed that "the modern man never acts of his own accord, but only manifests actions stimulated by external irritations." This insight formed the foundation of his teaching: that humans exist in a state of "waking sleep," mechanically reacting to external stimuli rather than consciously directing their lives. The Institute's practices were designed to interrupt these automatic patterns and foster genuine self-awareness.



## Physical Development

Specialized movements and exercises designed to develop bodily awareness and control, breaking habitual patterns of movement and creating new neural pathways.



## Emotional Development

Practices for observing and transforming emotional reactions, developing finer feelings, and cultivating emotional intelligence beyond conditioned responses.



## Intellectual Development

Study of cosmological principles and psychological laws that govern human existence, challenging habitual thinking patterns and expanding intellectual horizons.

Gurdjieff categorized those who entered his Institute into three distinct groups: those genuinely seeking self-development, those interested in studying specific subjects or seeking treatment for various ailments, and those attending general lectures focused on designated subjects. This classification allowed him to tailor his teaching methods to the readiness and capacity of each individual, ensuring that his knowledge was transmitted effectively and appropriately according to each person's level of understanding and commitment.

# The Human Psyche as a Recording Mechanism

Central to Gurdjieff's understanding of human psychology was his analogy of the human psyche as a system of "blank gramophone rolls." According to this model, from birth, humans begin recording external impressions and internal interpretations on these metaphorical rolls. These recordings then become the foundation for all future thoughts, feelings, and actions. This mechanistic view of human psychology challenged conventional notions of free will and individual agency, suggesting instead that most human behavior is predetermined by previously recorded impressions.

In a newly-born child these three diverse parts of the general human psyche may be compared to a system of blank gramophone rolls upon which begin to be recorded, from the day of its appearance into the world, the external significance of objects and the subjective understanding of their inner significance...

Gurdjieff identified three distinct parts of the human psyche—physical, astral, and mental—each with its own set of recording mechanisms. In the typical modern person, these three aspects operate independently and often at cross-purposes, creating internal conflict and fragmentation. This disharmony prevents individuals from functioning as integrated wholes and leads to erroneous judgments about themselves and the world around them.

The implications of this model are profound: if humans are merely replaying previously recorded impressions, then genuine freedom requires interrupting this automatic process. Gurdjieff argued that what most people call "reason" is merely the mechanical association of previously recorded impressions, not true understanding. This explains why people can hold contradictory beliefs without noticing the inconsistency—different "rolls" are playing in different situations.

## Physical Recordings

Sensory impressions and bodily habits that form the basis of instinctive and motor functions. These recordings determine our physical reactions and movements, often operating below conscious awareness.

## Emotional Recordings

Feelings, desires, and emotional reactions recorded from early experiences and cultural conditioning. These shape our likes, dislikes, and emotional responses to situations.

## Mental Recordings

Concepts, beliefs, and thought patterns acquired through education and life experiences. These determine our intellectual framework and how we process information.

# The Pernicious Influence of Vanity

Gurdjieff considered vanity and self-conceit major obstacles to human development, describing them as destructive forces pervasive in modern society that hinder happiness and self-awareness. He attributed these traits to flawed upbringing and education that neglect moral development and reinforce egoistic tendencies.

Happiness and self-consciousness depend on the absence of 'Vanity'.

Gurdjieff saw vanity as an excessive concern with external appearances and a craving for approval, diverting attention from inner self-development. Self-conceit, a related trait, involves a distorted self-image that obstructs objective self-assessment. Together, they imprison individuals in superficiality and mechanical behaviors.

Vanity's effects extend to relationships and social dynamics. Conflicts often arise from wounded vanity, triggering defensive reactions and hindering genuine connections.

## Manifestations of Vanity

- Excessive concern with others' opinions
- Constant comparison with others
- Defensive reactions to criticism
- Need for recognition and praise

## Consequences of Vanity

- Inability to see oneself objectively
- Distorted perception of reality
- Interpersonal conflicts and misunderstandings
- Wasted energy on maintaining false self-image

## Overcoming Vanity

- Developing self-observation
- Cultivating "organic shame"
- Practicing "objective justice"
- Acknowledging one's mortality

Gurdjieff proposed cultivating "organic shame," "religiousness," and "the-awareness-of-one's-mortality" to counter vanity's negative impact. He believed these qualities could foster a balanced, objective self-perception, freeing individuals from vanity and promoting self-consciousness and harmonious coexistence.

# Gurdjieff's Literary Legacy and Publication Strategy

As Gurdjieff's Institute evolved, he recognized the limitations of direct teaching and turned to writing as a means of disseminating his ideas more broadly. This decision marked a significant shift in his approach, allowing him to systematically articulate his complex philosophy for future generations. His literary work began with experiments in writing scenarios and eventually culminated in a comprehensive plan for three series of books, each addressing different aspects of his teaching and intended for different levels of readership.

Gurdjieff's literary corpus was carefully structured to guide readers through progressively deeper levels of understanding. The first series, centered around "Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson," presented an allegorical critique of human civilization through the eyes of cosmic beings. The second series, including "Meetings with Remarkable Men," offered autobiographical accounts of his search for truth. The third series, "Life is Real Only Then, When 'I Am'," contained his most esoteric teachings, intended only for those who had thoroughly assimilated the earlier material.



## First Series: "An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man"

Accessible to all readers, this series aimed to destroy preconceived views and prepare the mind for receiving new concepts. It included "Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson," a sweeping allegorical narrative.



## Second Series: "Meetings with Remarkable Men"

Available to anyone who had read the first series, this autobiographical work detailed Gurdjieff's search for truth and the individuals who influenced his development.



## Third Series: "Life is Real Only Then, When 'I Am'"

Restricted to those who had demonstrated understanding of the previous material, this series contained Gurdjieff's most advanced teachings on achieving "real being."

Crucially, Gurdjieff insisted on a controlled approach to publishing his works. Unlike conventional authors who seek the widest possible readership, he deliberately limited access to his writings, particularly the second and third series. This unusual strategy reflected his concern that premature exposure to advanced concepts could lead to misunderstanding and potentially cause psychological harm. He believed that certain ideas could only be properly understood after sufficient preparation and under appropriate guidance.

# The Three-Stage Reading Approach

Gurdjieff was not only concerned with what his readers would read but also how they would read it. He developed a specific three-stage approach to reading his works, designed to ensure that readers engaged with his ideas at progressively deeper levels of understanding. This methodical approach reflected his belief that genuine comprehension requires more than casual reading—it demands active engagement and repeated exposure from different perspectives.



## First Reading: Superficial Familiarization

The initial reading should be done in the ordinary way, allowing the reader to become familiar with the content without straining to understand everything. This creates a foundation for deeper engagement in subsequent readings.



## Second Reading: As If Reading Aloud

The second reading should be approached as if reading aloud to another person, paying careful attention to rhythm, emphasis, and the flow of ideas. This activates different cognitive processes and reveals aspects missed in the first reading.



## Third Reading: Contemplative Understanding

The final reading requires concentrated attention to discern the essence of the material. The reader should actively work to grasp the deeper meaning beyond the words, relating the content to personal experience and observation.

This three-stage approach was not merely a reading technique but a practical application of Gurdjieff's broader philosophy of human development. It engaged all three centers of the human being—moving, emotional, and intellectual—creating a more integrated understanding than would be possible through conventional reading. The process mirrored his Institute's emphasis on balanced development and demonstrated his commitment to transforming passive knowledge into active understanding.

Gurdjieff warned against the common tendency to read superficially, skimming for information without deep engagement. He observed that modern education had conditioned people to read quickly and mechanically, absorbing facts without processing their significance. His three-stage approach was designed to counteract this tendency, slowing down the reading process and creating space for genuine contemplation and integration.

The effectiveness of this approach depended on the reader's willingness to invest time and effort in the process. Gurdjieff acknowledged that his writings were intentionally challenging, containing multiple layers of meaning that could not be grasped in a single reading. By requiring repeated engagement with the text, he ensured that only those genuinely committed to understanding would persevere. This filtering mechanism helped maintain the integrity of his teaching, preventing casual readers from forming premature judgments based on incomplete understanding.

# The Future Vision

## Expanding the Institute

Gurdjieff envisioned expanding his Institute for Man's Harmonious Development to create a comprehensive infrastructure supporting his work on a larger scale. This expansion represented the culmination of his life's mission, ensuring the continuation of his teachings.

Central to Gurdjieff's vision was establishing a new "Gymnasium" or "Study House," with advanced labs and an observatory. This would be the heart of his expanded Institute, providing space for integrated human development study. Unlike conventional institutions, Gurdjieff's Gymnasium would facilitate a holistic approach to learning, addressing the physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects simultaneously.



Self-  
Actualization

Full potential



Harmonious  
Development

Balanced growth



Self-  
Observation

Awareness of  
mechanisms



Recognizing  
Mechanical  
Existence

"Waking sleep"

Gurdjieff's expansion plans also included a renewed call to former followers who had drifted away. In a circular letter, he offered them a way to reconnect, understanding that self-development isn't linear.

Gurdjieff planned to mortgage his estates to finance this expansion, ensuring autonomy and maintaining the integrity of his teaching, free from potential distortions arising from dependence on external funding.

Ultimately, Gurdjieff's vision for his Institute's future embodied his hope for humanity's evolution. By creating a sustainable structure, he aimed to contribute to a new human type, capable of harmonious development and self-awareness. This vision inspires those engaging with his work, offering a relevant approach to human development.