

Preface

In writing about the ideas of conscious evolution, I have mainly spoken about the struggle or what might be called ‘the work,’ not about the higher states that are both the result and the motivation of my work. There are good reasons for this. For one thing, the struggle is more or less the same for everybody. We all have to fight against imagination and identification; we all have to learn to transform our suffering and our negative emotions; and the tools we use to evolve and connect to higher centers—self-remembering, divided attention, being present, and external consideration—need to be employed by all of us in one form or another. On the other hand, what we gather from the experience of higher centers is more subject to certain predispositions in essence and life experiences. Higher centers are immense worlds, and what we choose to bring back from them and share with others reflects our interests and the needs of the people we chose to teach.

For instance, I am intellectually centered. (In Gurdjieff’s designation of different men I was born a man number three.) This is part of my essence. I have a disposition for words and ideas, and despite my efforts to balance myself—to become more emotional and physically grounded—I will always be intellectually centered. This is a part of my makeup that cannot be changed. What this means is that when I venture into higher states, I translate my understandings and experiences into words. And quite frankly, there is no big effort here. The words are a natural result of my wish to clarify and communicate experiences that are important to me. When I sit down to write, I don’t feel that *I* am writing, it’s more that I’m listening and then typing out what I hear. Of course I have trained myself as a writer and, like any artist, have certain tools and experience, or being, at my disposal.

I have also suffered a good amount of physical trauma in my life. What this means is that I have been drawn toward what is commonly called an out-of-body experience. This was especially true in my youth. When I was nineteen, that is, at the very beginning of my adult life, I was almost killed twice. These two accidents fixed in my mind the realization that I was not prepared to die, and from this realization many of the important questions in my life were raised. It seemed to me, even at nineteen, that life was short and uncertain; it also seemed to me foolish to not spend all my best faculties and all my resources to find out what comes after life. And so naturally I was drawn to experiences that could demonstrate, at least to me, that life outside the body was a feasible proposition. For others this is not such an important question.

We all have our obsessions and talents. Ouspensky was curious about telepathy and so attracted a series of telepathic experiences with Gurdjieff. And Gurdjieff, if we are to believe the stories, was drawn to developing an ability to use his energy to control other people. And so he became a hypnotist and developed that power to such an extent that he had to eventually give it up because it had, in his own words, ‘spoiled and depraved [him] to the core.’ Gurdjieff studied ritualistic dance, and Ouspensky studied eternal recurrence. These two interests have little in common, but what we can imagine is that both men brought the working of higher centers to their pursuit of an objective picture of their respective interests.

For the most part the work of conscious evolution is focused on helping us get to a higher state; it is not about what happens when higher centers function. This is one of the reasons the spiritual ways are sometimes compared to a journey. The emphasis is on traversing the path, on the effort of being here; it is not about considering how you will act once you arrive. The idea is that when you arrive you will know what to do. Higher centers give us a perception of ourselves and of the world that is not available without the working of higher centers. They don't give specific information; instead, they give us a larger and deeper and more energetic frame of reference, which means that we can use that perception to study and communicate whatever we understand to be important.

The struggle isn't for the sake of the struggle: the perception and powers of higher centers are the reward.

Some people seem to play the part of one who has to walk a long difficult way home. They plod, plod, put one foot in front of the other, until at last the sense of muscular effort, of making themselves go on, seems the only thing in the world. Finally they come opposite their house. They have only to turn in and enter. But they do not notice, because the effort of plodding has become so inevitable that they can't imagine anything else. So they keep right on going, on, on, on to nowhere. ~ Rodney Collin

All of us who are convinced of the necessity of the work of conscious evolution have, so to speak, had an initiation, which is nothing more than a series of experiences that demonstrate to us that higher centers exist.

It's difficult to talk to people who have not yet had their own experience of higher states. They take perception to be fixed and can't understand why people who attempt a life dedicated to conscious evolution are willing to make sacrifices, in some cases life-altering sacrifices. They don't understand the motivation to make efforts because they don't believe that their inner world can be radically altered by what must seem to them to be pointless exercises.

In my life I have traveled widely. I have met many remarkable men and women and have heard their stories. Many of these friends have connected to higher centers and know the power of the perception that exists in each of us. But these people are not the people you have heard about, they are not famous or powerful. They are living ordinary lives and are quietly changing themselves from the inside. Enlightenment is an organic process. It takes time and it follows definite laws and principles of growth, which is an unwelcome message in a world that thrives on instant gratification.

It is one of the great ironies of inner work that the people who go the furthest are the most misunderstood. (Who was more misunderstood than Gurdjieff or Ouspensky?) But it cannot be any other way. Higher centers usher us into another world, and the further you go into world, the more likely it is that what you describe will seem strange, even outlandish, to the people who don't have the courage and focus to follow you there.

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When I was five years old, my family moved to a new house, and so I know that all the memories I have of the old house happened before the age of five. There are many. I remember my father's cheerfulness as he teased and played with me and brother while we all sat at our kitchen table and how my mother stood over us with her arms crossed and smiled ironically. I remember being made to dress up and then to sit quietly with my brother and sister while we waited for a newspaper reporter. He interviewed my mother because she had survived polio and was raising three (later it would be seven) children. I have memories of our basement, where we sometimes played. There was a wooden table, which we knocked over one afternoon, that held my mother's laundry soaps and bleach. To this day, when I walk down an aisle in a supermarket that displays cleaning products, the smell of the bleach and the perfume of the soaps sometimes call up memories of that basement that I haunted as a child.

I remember how on one summer morning my brother and I ran down to the street to watch two delivery men who had come to install an electric dryer. We were very impressed that they had such a large truck. I remember my mother's voice, how she patiently and ironically explained things. I remember how she became angry and frustrated with me, and how she could never catch me when I ran away from her because the nerve damage from the polio virus caused the muscles in one of her legs to atrophy. She limped all of her adult life. I remember how my brother and I terrorized the family cat and how we used to lie on our bellies in the living room with our heads propped on the palms of our hands to watch television in the evening after supper.

As a child I knew things that I shouldn't have known. I knew that I had lived before. I didn't know anything about who I had been or how many times I had lived, and I didn't have memories of past lives. But I knew that I had been part of other families and that I had looked at the world through different eyes. The idea that I had come from nothing, and brought nothing to this life, was abhorrent to me.

When I was six I was sent to a Catholic school, and on the first day, we weren't allowed to enter the room all at once. We were called by name by our teacher and led, one by one, to a desk with a hinged lid and a place underneath for books and papers. The teacher was a young woman. It was a warm day and the sun streamed into the room from tall, narrow windows that had long yellow shades. Our teacher stood at the blackboard and wrote her name in white chalk. "This is my name," she said. "This is who I am." Then she smiled as if she had said something clever, and directed us look down at our desks. On my desk in front of me was a slip of paper, and on that paper someone had written *William Page* in large neatly printed letters. "This is who you are," she explained. I must have looked at her with some suspicion, because out of the whole class she chose me to drive her point home. She picked up my paper, held it up for all the class to see, and then said to me: "This is who you are. You are William Page."

I said nothing, but I knew she was wrong. I knew that identity was more fluid; I knew that being me was just a temporary arrangement. I knew I'd been someone else before being William Page. I knew that I had lived in other times and in other countries. But I was just a little boy. I was too shy to say anything. And where was the rest of me? And why couldn't I remember? And this woman, who knew only the outside of me, was she going to be my teacher? Being only one

person seemed so limiting, like standing at a window for a long time. I would have preferred to be someone today and then someone else tomorrow. That would have been more exciting.