

## CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor,

I was quite puzzled by George Dobinson's article, "The Gurdjieff Enigma", in the July issue of the *Journal* (pp. 152-155). I have a long-standing interest in Gurdjieff's ideas on psychological and spiritual transformation, but why was this article appearing in a journal devoted to psychical research? Gurdjieff had some ideas on developing psychic abilities, but they were quite subordinate to the wider transformation intended in his system, primarily that of achieving a new level of consciousness, and he himself claimed to have renounced most of the psychic abilities he had developed as a necessary step to his own higher development. Nor were Gurdjieff's ideas on psychic development touched on in any useful depth in Dobinson's article.

I must presume the article appeared because many readers of this *Journal* have an interest in spiritual ideas rather than just psychic phenomena, as I do. Given this interest, however, I found Dobinson's article a quite biased and one-sided negative exposition, which might discourage some readers from looking at Gurdjieff's teachings and so cut them off from some items of potential value. I do not believe an extended discussion of Gurdjieff's ideas is appropriate for the *Journal*, but since the issue has been broached, let me make a few brief comments.

As Dobinson makes clear, Gurdjieff did not meet our conventional ideas of a 'spiritual teacher' or saint. He lived life intensely, drank heavily, smoked, enjoyed sex, was very hard on his students and made a lot of people very uncomfortable. If he had still been alive when I began looking into his work in my twenties and we had met, I suspect that I would have been shocked, frightened and outraged—as well as fascinated. It's quite possible that I would have rejected him as a charlatan and turned away from him and his work. He certainly did not meet the standards I had for a 'spiritual teacher', so I can readily empathize with Dobinson's exposition.

With the hindsight of thirty years I'm glad I was introduced gradually to Gurdjieff's ideas and practices through books and work groups, and that I learned (at least partially) to separate my own personal and culturally common psychological biases and reactions from his teachings, for I have learned a great deal of value. Let me illustrate the problem with a story.

In the 1970s I was a member of a personal and spiritual growth group led by the internationally-known Chilean psychiatrist, Claudio Naranjo. At one point in the group Dr Naranjo brought in a man named Bob Hoffman, who was, with Naranjo's collaboration, to take us on to the next stage of personal transformation. Hoffman was a local spiritualist medium who claimed to have been working with the spirit of a deceased psychoanalyst, a Dr Fischer, who had now worked out ways to make psychoanalysis far more effective. Dr Naranjo, drawing on his extensive experience as a therapist and group process leader, had worked out a way of using Fischer and Hoffman's methods in a group format, and we would all be doing that for months to come.

I was quite interested in the idea of this work, but when Bob Hoffman walked into our group meeting I was immediately suspicious of him. As he

talked and the evening went on, it became perfectly clear to me that he was the phoniest 'psychic' I had ever met! I was looking for genuine psychological and spiritual growth and didn't want to waste my precious time under this charlatan's direction! Yet I had enormous respect for Dr Naranjo, so decided to go ahead with the arduous process.

That first evening was my only contact with Bob Hoffman until a final group session, following months of intensive psychological work directed at resolving relationships with our parents. I found the therapy (which has since become organized as Fischer-Hoffman therapy in the United States—see Hoffman, 1976) highly revealing and effective, discovering and working through enormous areas of transference and distortion with my parents and achieving a much better, more loving, and far more adult relationship with them. When Bob Hoffman walked in for the final group session, however, I was struck by a tremendous insight: he looked a lot like and acted a lot like my father, and so when I first saw him I had been seized by a very strong transference reaction, projecting the things I disliked about my father and hadn't resolved onto Bob Hoffman!

Of course I had no idea that this was happening at the time and took conscious pride in being a knowledgeable and sophisticated psychologist and psychic researcher who saw instantly what a 'phony psychic' Hoffman was. (And how superior I was!) In point of fact, I had not been perceiving Bob Hoffman at all; I had been deluded by my projections. As a result of the therapy process and the resolutions of many un- and semi-conscious attitudes I held towards my father, I could now separate the actual, immediate reality of Hoffman from my mind's tendency to project. I realized I knew essentially nothing about Bob Hoffman as a real person—he may have numerous faults for all I know—but I was very grateful for the results of the therapeutic and growth process he and Dr Naranjo had worked out.

This anecdote about my transference problems is not intended necessarily to imply anything about Mr Dobinson's psychological make-up, for I know nothing about him personally other than assuming that he, like me, is a product of modern culture. The point is rather that what we want and expect in a psychological or spiritual teacher may not necessarily be what we need or be an accurate way to judge whether someone is a 'genuine' spiritual teacher. Indeed, there is a recognized category of 'crazy wisdom' teacher in many spiritual traditions in which some of the most evolved teachers may deliberately flout conventional morality and expectations and insult their students and their conditioned world-view in order to cut through their students' obstacles more effectively than conventional sweetness-and-light approaches would. I have certainly learned as much or more from those who pushed hard on me as from those who made me feel good about myself. On the other hand, both personally and professionally as a transpersonal psychologist, I am quite uncomfortable with this idea of crazy wisdom teachers, as it can so easily be used by charlatans and deluded pseudo-teachers (and by students) to justify immoral actions. Dobinson's warnings on this are quite appropriate and apply to all spiritual paths. Nevertheless, my own experience given above and that of the wisdom traditions suggests that it is not always too easy to judge the genuineness of a teacher and whether his or her teachings may be useful for us.

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Again speaking both personally and as a transpersonal psychologist, I have found many of Gurdjieff's ideas and practices to be very useful. Of course many are in a category that I cannot comprehend (although whether that says the ideas are wrong or my understanding is too limited is often unclear to me), some certainly seem wrong to me, and some I put in the category of remarks Gurdjieff deliberately made to shock students but not intended to be written down (as students tend to do) as 'eternal truths'. But if we want to grow, it is not our job to adopt or reject anyone else's ideas wholesale, but to come to our own best understanding of important truths. I suggest that interested readers get some more direct and accurate acquaintance with Gurdjieff's ideas than Dobinson's article. Two of my own books, *Waking Up* (Tart, 1986) and *Living the Mindful Life* (Tart, 1994) are readable expositions of some of Gurdjieff's psychological and spiritual ideas, phrased in modern psychological terms, and Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous* (Ouspensky, 1949) is the classic reference work that I often refer back to, although Ouspensky's presentation is rather over-intellectualized.

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#### REFERENCES

- Hoffman, R. (1976) *Getting Divorced from Mother and Dad: The Discoveries of the Fischer-Hoffman Process*. New York: Dutton.
- Ouspensky, P. D. (1949) *In Search of the Miraculous*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Tart, C. (1986) *Waking Up: Overcoming the Obstacles to Human Potential*. Boston: New Science Library.
- Tart, C. (1994) *Living the Mindful Life*. Boston: Shambhala.

To the Editor,

With regard to the exchange of letters between M. H. Coleman and the late Gordon Stein on the subject of Home's self-playing accordions and mouth-organs (April 1996 issue), I would like to offer the following contribution.

As many readers will remember, the discussion centred on a story that the late writer William Lindsay Gresham told James Randi about the medium D. D. Home. Gresham was doing research for a book he was going to write on Home and told Randi that he had discovered "a small harmonica among Home's effects held at the Society for Psychical Research in London". Since such a harmonica can be played when put inside one's mouth, without the use of the hands, Gresham suggested that Home could have used it to simulate the sound of the accordion being played by the spirit.

This is how Gardner (1988), Stein (1993) and Randi (1995) had reported the story so far.

However, as M. H. Coleman (1996) has pointed out, the story of finding the mouth-organ seems lacking in "corroborative detail": it is not stated "where or from whom, and in what terms, the story was first received". Remembering