As Above, So Below
A Conversation with G. I. Gurdjieff *

"You are acquainted with occult literature," began Mr. Gurdjieff, "and so I will refer to the formula you know from the *Emerald Tablets:* 'As above, so below.' It is easy to start to build the foundation of our discussion from this. At the same time I must say that there is no need to use occultism as the base from which to approach the understanding of truth. Truth speaks for itself in whatever form it is manifested. You will understand this fully only in the course of time, but I wish to give you today at least a grain of understanding. So, I repeat, I begin with the occult formula because I am speaking to *you*. I know you have tried to decipher this formula. I know that you 'understand' it. But the understanding you have now is only a dim and distant reflection of the divine brilliance.

"It is not about the formula itself that I shall speak to you—I am not going to analyze or decipher it. Our conversation will not be about the literal meaning; we shall take it only as a starting point for our discussion. And to give you an idea of our subject, I may say that I wish to speak about the overall unity of all that exists—about unity in multiplicity. I wish to show you two or three facets of a precious crystal, and to draw your attention to the pale images faintly reflected in them.

"I know you understand about the unity of the laws governing the universe, but this understanding is speculative—or rather, theoretical. It is not enough to understand with the mind, it is necessary to feel with your being the absolute truth and immutability of this fact; only then will you be able, consciously and with conviction, to say 'I know.'"

Such was the sense of the words with which Mr. Gurdjieff began the conversation. He then proceeded to describe vividly the sphere in which the life of all mankind moves, with a thought which illustrated the Hermetic formula he had quoted. By analogies he passed from the little ordinary happenings in the life of an individual to the great cycles in the life of the whole of mankind. By means of such parallels he underscored the cyclic action of the law of analogy within the diminutive sphere of terrestrial life. Then, in the same way, he passed from mankind to what I would call the life of the earth, representing it as an enormous organism like that of man, and in terms of physics, mechanics, biology and so on. I watched the illumination of his thought come increasingly into focus on one point. The inevitable conclusion of all that he said was the great law of tri-unity: the law of the three principles of action, resistance and equipoise: the active, passive and neutral principles. Now resting upon the solid foundation of the earth, and armed with this law, he applied it, with a bold flight of thought, to the whole solar system. Now his thought no longer moved toward this law of tri-unity, but already out from it, emphasizing it more and more, and manifesting it in the step nearest to man, that of Earth and Sun. Then, with a brief phrase, he passed beyond the limits of the solar system. Astronomical data first flashed forth, then appeared to dwindle and disappear before the infinity of space. There remained only one great thought, issuing from the same great law. His words sounded slow and solemn, and at the very same moment seemed to diminish and lose their significance. Behind them could be sensed the pulse of a tremendous thought.

"We have come to the brink of the abyss which can never be bridged by ordinary human reason. Do you feel how superfluous and useless words have become? Do

you feel how powerless reason by itself is here? We have approached the principle behind all principles." Having said this, he became silent, his gaze thoughtful.

Spellbound by the beauty and grandeur of this thought, I had gradually ceased to listen to the words. I could say that I felt them, that I grasped his thought not with my reason but by intuition. Man far below was reduced to nothingness, and disappeared leaving no trace. I was filled with a sense of closeness to the Great Inscrutable, and with the deep consciousness of my personal nothingness.

As though divining my thoughts, Mr. Gurdjieff asked: "We started with man, and where is he? But great, all-embracing is the law of unity. Everything in the Universe is one, the difference is only of scale; in the infinitely small we shall find the same laws as in the infinitely great. As above, so below.

"The sun has risen over the mountaintops above; the valley is still in darkness. So reason, transcending the human condition, regards the divine light, while for those dwelling below all is darkness. Again I repeat, all in the world is one; and since reason is also one, human reason forms a powerful instrument for investigation.

"Now, having come to the beginning, let us descend to the earth from which we came, we shall find its place in the order of the structure of the Universe. Look!"

He made a single sketch and, with a passing reference to the laws of mechanics, delineated the scheme of the construction of the Universe. With numbers and figures in harmonious, systematic columns, multiplicity within unity began to appear. The figures began to be clothed with meaning, the ideas which had been dead began to come to life. One and the same law ruled all; with delighted understanding I pursued the harmonious development of the Universe. His scheme took its rise from a Great Beginning and ended with the earth.

While he made this exposition, Mr. Gurdjieff noted the necessity of what he called a "shock" reaching a given place from outside and connecting the two opposite principles into one balanced unity. This corresponded to the point of application of force in a balanced system of forces in mechanics.

"We have reached the point to which our terrestrial life is linked," Mr. Gurdjieff said, "and for the present will not go further. In order to examine more closely what has just been said, and to emphasize once more the unity of the laws, we will take a simple scale and apply it, increased proportionately to the measurement of the microcosmos." And he asked me to choose something familiar of regular structure, such as the spectrum of white light, musical scale, and so on. After having thought, I chose the musical scale.

"You have made a good choice," said Mr. Gurdjieff. "As a matter of fact the musical scale, in the form in which it now exists, was constructed in ancient times by those possessed of great knowledge, and you will realize how much it can contribute to the understanding of the principal laws."

He said a few words about the laws of the scale's structure, and particularly stressed the gaps, as he called them, which exist in every octave between the notes mi and fa and also between si of one octave and do of the next. Between these notes there are missing half-tones, in both the ascending and descending scales. While in the ascending development of the octave, the notes do, re, fa, sol and la can pass into

the next higher tones, the notes mi and si are deprived of this possibility. He explained how these two gaps, according to certain laws depending on the law of tri-unity, were filled in by new octaves of other orders, these octaves within the gaps playing a part similar to that of the half-tones in the evolutionary or involutionary process of the octave. The principal octave was similar to a tree trunk, sending out branches of subordinate octaves. The seven principal notes of the octave and the two gaps, "bearers of new directions," gave a total of nine links of a chain, or three groups of three links each.

After this he turned to the structural scheme of the Universe, and from it singled out that "ray" whose course led through the earth.
The original powerful octave, whose notes of apparently ever-lessening force included the sun, the earth and the moon, had inevitably fallen, according to the law of tri-unity, into three subordinate octaves. Here the role of the gaps in the octave and the differences in their nature were defined and made clear to me. Of the two intervals, mi-fa and si-do, one was more active—more of the nature of will—while the other played the passive part. The "shocks" of the original scheme, which was not altogether clear to me, were also the rule here, and appeared in a new light.

In the division of this "ray," the place, the role and the destiny of mankind became clear. Moreover the possibilities of the individual man were more apparent.

"It may seem to you," said Mr. Gurdjieff, "that in following the aim of unity, we have deviated from it somewhat in the direction of learning about multiplicity. What I am going to explain now you will no doubt understand. At the same time I am certain that this understanding will chiefly refer to the structural part of what is set forth. Try to fix your interest and attention not on its beauty, its harmony and its ingenuity—and even this side you will not understand entirely—but on the spirit, on what lies hidden behind the words, on the inner content. Otherwise you will see only form, deprived of life. Now you will see one of the facets of the crystal and, if your eye could perceive the reflection in it, you would draw nearer to the truth itself."

Then Mr. Gurdjieff began to explain the way in which fundamental octaves are combined with secondary octaves subordinate to them; how these, in their turn, send forth new octaves of the next order, and so on. I could compare it to the process of growth or, more aptly, to the formation of a tree. Out of a straight vigorous trunk boughs branch out, producing in their turn small branches and twigs, and then leaves appear on them. One could already sense the process of formation of veins.

I must admit that, in fact, my attention was chiefly attracted to the harmony and beauty of the system. In addition to the octaves growing, like branches from a trunk, Mr. Gurdjieff pointed out that each note of every octave appears, from another point of view, as a whole octave: the same was true everywhere. These "inner" octaves I should compare to the concentric layers of a tree trunk which fit one within the other.

All these explanations were given in very general terms. They emphasized the lawful character of the structure. But for the examples which accompanied it, it might have been found rather theoretical. The examples gave it life, and sometimes it seemed that I really began to guess what was hidden behind the words. I saw that in this consistency in the structure of the universe, all the possibilities, all the combinations without exception, had been foreseen; the infinity of infinities was foreshadowed.

And yet, at the same time, I could not see it, because my reason faltered before the immensity of the concept. Again I was filled with a dual sensation—the nearness of the possibility of all-knowing and the consciousness of its inaccessibility.

Once more I heard Mr. Gurdjieff's words echoing my feelings: "No ordinary reason is enough to enable a man to take the Great Knowledge to himself, and make it his inalienable possession. Nevertheless it *is* possible for him. But first he must shake the dust from his feet. Vast efforts, tremendous labors, are needed to come into possession of the wings on which it is possible to rise. It is many times easier to drift with the current, to pass with it from one octave to another; but that takes immeasurably longer than, alone, to wish and to do. The way is hard, the ascent becomes increasingly steeper as it goes on, but one's strength also increases. A man becomes tempered and with each ascending step his view grows wider. Yes, there *is* the possibility."

I saw indeed that this possibility existed. Although not yet knowing what it was, I saw that it was there. I find it hard to put into words what became more and more understandable. I saw that the reign of law, now becoming apparent to me, was really all-inclusive; that what appeared at first sight to be a violation of a law, on closer examination only confirmed it. One could say without exaggeration that while "exceptions prove the rule," at the same time they were not exceptions. For those who can understand I would say that, in Pythagorean terms, I recognized and felt how Will and Fate—spheres of action of Providence—coexist, while mutually competing; how, without blending or separating, they intermingle. I do not nurture any hope that such contradictory words can convey or make clear what I understand; at the same time I can find nothing that is better.

"You see," Mr. Gurdjieff went on, "that he who possesses a full and complete understanding of the system of octaves, as it might be called, possesses the key to the understanding of Unity, since he understands all that is seen—all happenings, all things in their essence—for he knows their place, cause and effect.

"At the same time you see clearly that this consists of a more detailed development of the original scheme, a more precise representation of the law of unity, and that all we have said and are going to say is nothing but a development of the principal idea of unity. That a full, distinct, clear consciousness of this law is precisely the Great Knowledge to which I referred.

"Speculations, suppositions and hypotheses do not exist for him who possesses such a knowledge. Expressed more definitely, he knows everything by 'measure, number and weight.' Everything in the universe is material: *therefore the Great Knowledge is more materialistic than materialism*.

"A look at chemistry will make this more intelligible." He demonstrated how chemistry, in studying matter of various densities without a knowledge of the law of octaves, contains an error which affects the end results. Knowing this, and making certain corrections, based on the law of octaves, brings these results into full accord with those reached by calculation. In addition he pointed out that the idea of simple substances and elements in contemporary chemistry cannot be accepted from the point of view of the chemistry of octaves, which is "objective chemistry." Matter is the same everywhere; its various qualities depend only on the place it occupies in a certain octave, and on the order of the octave itself.

From this point of view, the hypothetical notion of the atom as an indivisible part of a simple substance or element cannot serve as a model. An atom of a given density, a really existing individuum, must be taken as the smallest quantity of the substance examined which retains all those qualities—chemical, physical and cosmic—which characterize it as a certain note of a definite octave. For instance, in contemporary chemistry there is no atom of water, as water is not a simple substance but a chemical compound of hydrogen and oxygen. Yet from the point of view of "objective chemistry" an "atom" of water is an ultimate and definitive volume of it, even visible to the naked eye. Mr. Gurdjieff added: "Certainly you have to accept this on trust for the present. But those who seek for the Great Knowledge under the guidance of one already in possession of it, must personally work to prove, and verify by investigation, what these atoms of matter of different densities are."

I saw it all in mathematical terms. I became clearly convinced that everything in the Universe is material and that everything can be measured numerically in accordance with the law of octaves. The essential material descends in a series of separate notes of various densities. These were expressed in numbers combined according to certain laws, and that which had seemed immeasurable was measured. What had been referred to as cosmic qualities of matter was made clear. To my great surprise, the atomic weights of certain chemical elements were given as examples, with an explanation showing the error of contemporary chemistry.

In addition, the law of the construction of "atoms" in matter of various densities was shown. As this presentation progressed we passed, almost without my being aware of it, to what might be called "the Earth octave" and so arrived at the place from which we had started—on earth.

"In all that I have told you," Mr. Gurdjieff continued, "my aim was not to communicate any new knowledge. On the contrary I only wished to demonstrate that the knowledge of certain laws makes it possible for a man, without moving from where he is, to count, weigh and measure all that exists—both the infinitely great and the infinitely small. I repeat: everything in the universe is material. Ponder those words and you will understand, at least to some degree, why I used the expression '*more materialistic than materialism*.' … Now we have become acquainted with the laws ruling the life of the Microcosmos—and have returned to earth. Remember once more, 'As above, so below.'

"I think even now and without further explanation you would not dispute the fact that the life of individual man—the Microcosmos—is ruled by this same law. But let us demonstrate this further, by taking a single example in which certain details will become clearer. Let us take a particular question, the plan of work of the human organism, and examine it."

Mr. Gurdjieff next drew a scheme of the human body and compared it to a three-storied factory, the stories being represented by the head, chest and abdomen. Taken together the factory forms a complete whole. This is an octave of the first order, similar to that with which the examination of the Macrocosmos began. Each of the stories also represents an entire octave of the second order, subordinate to the first. Thus we have three subordinate octaves which are again similar to those in the scheme of the construction of the universe. Each of the three stories receives "food" of a suitable nature from outside, assimilates it and combines it with the materials which have already been processed, and in this way the factory functions to produce a certain kind of material.

"I must point out," Mr. Gurdjieff said, "that, although the design of the factory is good and suitable for production of this material, because of the ignorance of its top administration, it manages the business very uneconomically. What would be the situation of an undertaking if, with a vast and continuous consumption of material, the greater part of the production were to go merely to the maintenance of the factory and the consumption and processing of the material? The remainder of the production is spent uselessly and its purpose unknown. It is necessary to organize the business in accordance with exact knowledge; and it will then bring in a large net income which may be spent at one's discretion. Let us, however, come back to our scheme" … and he explained that while the food of the lower story was man's meat and drink, air was the food of the middle story, and that of the upper story was what could be called "impressions."

All these three kinds of food, representing matter of certain densities and qualities, belong to octaves of different orders.
I could not refrain from asking here, "What about thought?" "Thought is material as well as everything else," answered Mr. Gurdjieff. "Methods exist by means of which one can prove not only this but that thought, like all other things, can be weighed and measured. Its density can be determined, and thus the thoughts of an individual may be compared with those of the same man on other occasions. One can define all the qualities of thought. I have already told you that everything in the Universe is material."

After that he showed how these three kinds of food, received in different parts of the human organism, enter at the starting points of the corresponding octaves, interconnected by a certain process of law; each of them therefore represents do of the octave of its own order. The laws of the development of octaves are the same everywhere.
For instance, do of the food octave coming into the stomach, the third do, passes through the corresponding half-tone into re, and by way of the next passage through a half-tone is further converted into mi. mi, lacking this half-tone, cannot, by way of a natural development, pass independently into fa. It is assisted by the air octave, which enters the chest. As already shown, this is an octave of a higher order, and its do (the second do), having the necessary half-tone for the transition into re, appears to connect up with the mi of the former octave and transmute into fa. That is, it plays the part of the missing half-tone and serves as a shock for the further development of the former octave.

"We will not stop now," said Mr. Gurdjieff, "to examine the octave beginning with the second do, nor that of the first do, which enters a definite place. This would only complicate the present situation. We have now made sure of the possibility of a further development of the octave under discussion, thanks to the presence of the half-tone. fa passes through a half-tone into sol and in fact the material received here appears to be the salt of the human organism—the Russian word for salt is *sol*. This is the highest that can be produced by it." Reverting to numbers, he again made his thought clear in terms of their combinations.

"The further development of the octave transfers sol through a half-tone into la, and the latter through a half-tone into si. Here the octave again stops. A new 'shock' is required for the passage of si into the do of a new octave of the human organism.
"With what I have now said," Mr. Gurdjieff went on, "and our conversation about chemistry, you will be able to draw some valuable conclusions."

At this point, without waiting to clarify a thought which came into my head, I asked something about the usefulness of fasting.
Mr. Gurdjieff stopped speaking. A. gave me a reproachful look and I immediately realized clearly how inappropriate my question was. I wished to correct my mistake, but had not time to do so, before Mr. Gurdjieff said: "I wish to show you one experiment, which will make it clear to you," but after exchanging glances with A. and asking him something, he said: "No, better later," and after a short silence continued: "I see that your attention is tired, but I am already almost at the end of what I wanted to tell you today. I had intended to touch in a very general way upon the course of the development of man, but it is not so important now. Let us postpone conversation about that until a more favorable occasion."

"May I conclude from what you say," I asked, "that you will sometimes permit me to see you, and converse on the questions which interest me?"

"Now that we have begun these conversations," he said, "I have no objection to continuing them. Much depends on you. What I mean by this, A. will explain to you in detail." Then, noticing that I was going to turn to A. for the explanation, "But not now, some other time," he added. "Now I want to tell you this. As everything in the Universe is one, so, consequently, everything has equal rights, therefore from this point of view knowledge can be acquired by a suitable and complete study, no matter what the starting point is. Only one must know how to 'learn.' What is nearest to us is man; and you are the nearest of all men to yourself. Begin with the study of yourself; remember the saying 'Know thyself.' It is possible that now it will acquire a more intelligible meaning for you. To begin with, A. will help you in the measure of his own force and yours. I advise you to remember well the scheme of the human organism which I gave you. We shall sometimes return to it in the future, adding to its depth every time. Now A. and I will leave you alone for a short time, as we have a small matter to attend to. I recommend that you not puzzle your brains over what we have spoken about, but give them a short rest. Even if you happen to forget something, A. will remind you of it afterwards. Of course it would be better if you did not need to be reminded. Accustom yourself to forget nothing.

"Now, have a cup of coffee; it will do you good."

* *This excerpt is taken from "Glimpses of Truth,"* Views from the Real World: Early Talks of Gurdjieff as Recollected by his Pupils, *New York: Dutton, 1973, pp. 10–26.*

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