

## Existential Crisis

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Gurdjieff's teaching has it that "intentional suffering" is the force that is necessary in order to transform the inner world of man from its ordinary disordered condition to one becoming the being of a "real man": one with a non-illusory non-fragmented "I", indefatigable will, self-consciousness, understanding. What is this "intentional suffering"? One meaning is suggested by its link to "conscious labor": consciously to take on a project that entails difficulty, even the likelihood of failure.

The difficulties are mostly emotional. The key moments are those that are experienced as existential crisis: self-doubt, loss of motivation, alienation from others who do not support the project. People often use psychological coping mechanisms to shy away from such a crisis: they may give up the project, justify the failure, blame others, question the very idea of real man as described. "Intentional suffering" means to value the crisis, accept it, face it, not attempt to mitigate it.

In *Life is Real, Only Then When "I Am"* Gurdjieff tells, in the chapter "Prologue" around p. 28, the story of a crisis he underwent. It is a bit difficult to divine from the tale as told in the book exactly where and when and under what conditions this took place: seemingly around 1904 near the Central Asian city of Yangi Hissar in far western China. The text tells us that this was located on the "southwestern edge of the Gobi desert." However Yangi Hissar is many hundreds of miles from the Gobi proper. The romantic image is portrayed of a place at the boundary between a "cornucopia" of "flora, fauna and phoscalia," and an extreme desert, in which everything living is quickly destroyed. I have been to the Gobi, and there are oasis towns within it, often historical entrepôts of branches of Silk Road caravan tracks, which could be sensed in such a dualistic way.

There are other hints in the text that lead us to regard it as fictional: allegorical, perhaps. One is the story that one of the factors leading him to be at that moment "weak physically, but very well refreshed mentally" was the result of a bullet wound, one of three he claims to have received during his *wanderjahre*. But a physician who attended him decades later when he was dying reported that on his whole body there was no sign of a bullet wound, and even one from so long ago would have left visible traces. Another is his claims of having "attained to such a degree of power as not one man...had ever attained." He mentions specifically the "development of the power of my thoughts had been brought to such a level that by only a few hours of self-preparation I could from a distance of tens of miles kill a yak." One wonders about the usefulness, morality, and validity of this claimed power—unless the "self-preparation" simply consisted in walking the distance to the yak and then killing it by more ordinary means. Perhaps a wry chuckle is the best response.

But the point he is making is deeper: it is that, despite these attainments, he was not able to hinder automatic associations in him which prevented him from "remembering himself." His "I" was fragmented, his will non-indefatigable, his consciousness not his own. He mentions being the constant victim of anticipation of sex, or a good meal, or gratification of self-love, vanity, and other passions. No doubt this is a picture from life. Most people could probably attest to such

thoughts though they might not regard them with the same horror he seems to: they do not sense them or wish to face them as signs of a potentially valuable “existential crisis.”

The young Gurdjieff’s response to the crisis also leaves a strange taste. After comparing himself to God, he conceives that what he must do is to make a vow to stop using his “power based upon strength in the field of ‘hanbledzoin,’ or, as it would be called by others, the power of telepathy and hypnotism.” Since the use of such a power had by this time rendered him “spoiled and depraved to the core” its absence would eternally remind him to “remember himself.” Judging by stories told of his relationships with others in years to come, especially after he gathered a group of students around himself, it is difficult to imagine that he did not continue to use such powers. Also he discusses them in detail and gives methods to acquire them, particularly in the chapter “Hypnotism” in *Beelzebub’s Tales*, and in *Life is Real*.

Gurdjieff even recommends in the summary chapter of *Beelzebub* “From the Author” (p. 1236) that people set “as the chief aim of their existence, to acquire in their presences all the corresponding data to become masters among those around them.” Isn’t he telling his would-be adept student to try for the very power of using “hanbledzoin” to compel others to do whatever the adept desires? Presumably the adept would be sufficiently enlightened for this to accrue to the other’s benefit, and that of the whole world. But my own experience includes a number of instances in which various sorcerers-apprentice tried to hanbledzoin-ize me, and sometimes succeeded—and the results were not to my benefit except in terms of needed disillusionment of a naïve “seeker” (I will say no more out of concern to protect myself and some of the not-so-innocent apprentices). One wonders, again, about the morality as well as the feasibility of such an aim. Is that what The Work is about?

If I were to offer my own hard-earned experience, I would advise facing and valuing one’s own existential crises from within oneself, almost joyously, without complaining, and without attempting to enlist the help of others, including advices given in thousands of books. If you want to be a “real man” (or woman) that is the only way.