

One of my first experiences in “the Way of Gurdjieff” was when I, a raw newbie in The Work, was invited to a talk by Lawrence Morris. It was 1968, the height of the decade of LSD and rock and roll and free love and resistance to Vietnam. I drove the longish way to the given address in Sacramento California. But there was no venue at the address! No matter, I would look around and see what adventures might be possible for my 23-year-old callow self. Soon I spied a crowd of people who seemed to be looking for something but didn’t know exactly where it was. Ah, this must be it after all! It was.

Had the error been intentional, a “test”? I suspect that it was just common carelessness.

Inside the hall there was a hush—the famous “atmosphere” of Gurdjieff gatherings, with which I was yet not very familiar. The talk has been published in a book *A Way in Life: The Teaching of G. I. Gurdjieff*.

Morris, an esteemed elder of the Gurdjieff Foundation, who had been at the Prieuré, and with Orage, was impressive. I don’t remember much but he seemed to be saying that there is a “Way in life” which does not require seclusion in a monastery. He meant of course the Way of Gurdjieff. At the time I was slightly familiar with other so-called Ways, mainly Tibetan Buddhism and Zen. I had the impression that though they do have a monastic instantiation, they also, Zen in particular, emphasize the importance of practicing the Way in life itself, outside the monastery.

Here is an extract from Morris’ talk:

A real civilization—which surely ours is not—draws its nourishment from some central view of the nature of man and his place in the universe. When that is in a people’s blood, not just in the philosophers’ minds, every vital function will be organically related to every other. It is from such a central view that, in older civilizations, even the simplest people, often illiterate, drew a wiser understanding of life than our urban cleverness can give.

In our day we have also suffered a great barbarian invasion, this time from within. For what, after all, is barbarism if not the absence of any such understanding of life as a whole, and in consequence, the inevitable resort to violence? It was said long ago in China that when Tao is lost there is kindness, and when kindness is lost there is justice, but that when justice is lost there is the beginning of chaos. We usually blame this on anyone except ourselves. But what if violence is the very condition of our present consciousness?

The truth is that the outer world is merely our inner world thrown on a large screen. This crucial fact is almost always overlooked by those who draw up plans for a new and better society. The outer changes they dream of presuppose an inner change in us. So, the real question is not, “What kind of society should we organize?” but, “Is an inner change possible?”

There was a bit of a kerfluffle. Some hecklers demanded to know why Morris had not mentioned Subud. I had never heard of Subud. Some library searching revealed that it was an Indonesian “spiritual teaching” that had been promoted by J G Bennett; but after some scandal and internal dissension in Subud (Joyce Collin-Smith writes tellingly about the scandal in *Call No Man Master*) he left and returned to Gurdjieff. Morris handled it gracefully.

Morris, it turns out, soon “left the Work.” In 1970 he left Gurdjieff and went to a mystical Sufi practice. He remained somewhat sympathetic with Gurdjieff. I was briefly tempted by Sufism, and years later studied it

rather deeply, mostly from books and also a bit experientially. But I came to realize that it was too confining, and too alien to my Western atheistic orientation.

I wondered then, and still do, about the whole idea of a “Way.” The first two lines of the ancient Chinese wisdom text *Tao Te Ching* 道德經 *Way Power Book* say:

道可道
非常道

The Way that is told is not the real Way

I simplified this to

道 非 道

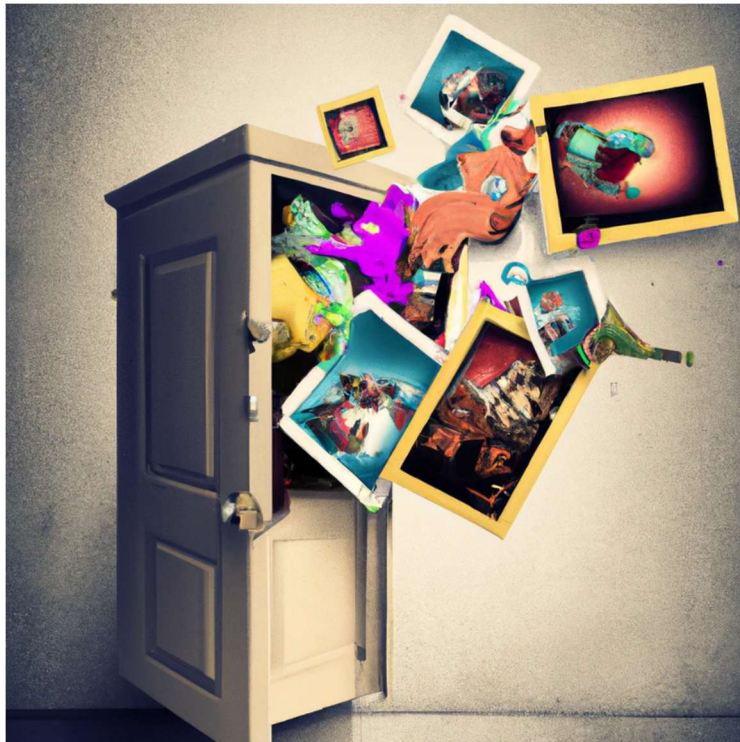
Way no way.

which means the same thing. It could also mean

The Way that is followed is not the real Way

This makes sense. To be truly human means to be original, to forge a way for oneself. This is rare. Most people are content with following. They usually follow habits and views and attitudes inculcated largely in childhood, and in some cases also by the conditions of a “Way,” perhaps a religion, or a cult. Some wise men have pointed this out: Krishnamurti, for example, always points his “followers” back to themselves, answering all questions with “look within yourself.” Easier said than done.

What is “original” is usually a product of the mind, which tends to be disconnected from the reality of humanness, actually “crazy,” not at all what is thought of as “rational.” The mind, the self, is more like “a box filled with crazy images that are escaping through a door”:



This image was generated by the AI art assistant DALL-E in response to my prompting just quoted. In truth everybody's mind is like this, but most people keep the door shut and push the images back into the box when they threaten to pop out, as they sometimes do in dreams and daydreams. And art. And with drugs, though the results are unpredictable and can be dangerous. Art too. Especially people do so who are infected with some preconceived notion of what kind of things should go on in their mind. Often the infectious agent is what is called a *Way*—Gurdjieff, Zen, Christianity, Tantric meditation, whatever. To me, this is a disease, the cause of much unnecessary suffering in the world.

Helpful images can be irreverent ones. Here is what DALL-E generated for the suggestion “irreverence for higher beings”:



Note the sexualized hermaphroditic imagery. DALL-E sometimes seems to read the collective mind.

Irreverence can be medicine for the disease. People tend to hate irreverence. Irreverence itself is a form of hate. But Conscious Hate is objective and should not be objected to. Hate is one of those emotions that people usually hate, mostly when it is hate of something they are identified with. Objective hate hates what is not free, what limits inner freedom. *Faith of consciousness is freedom*, so saith Gurdjieff's literary alter ego Ashiata Shiemash (*Beelzebub's Tales* p. 361).

Gurdjieff says his way is a way of *conscience*. He describes an “ancient sculpture” image of conscience (*Beelzebub's Tales* p. 310) explaining that one meaning it bears is that “it is necessary to meditate continually on questions not related to the direct manifestations required for ordinary being-existence” and that “Love should predominate always”—a love that is “strictly impartial, that is to say, completely separated from all the other

functions.” A love not rooted in egoism, as human love often tends to be. It would not be too great a stretch to regard this Love as one expression of Objective hate. Conscience *bites*—“re-morse” etymologically means “to bite back.” It has a sting. Like a bee, an iconic representation of Gurdjieff’s way.

Gurdjieff was often stung by remorse. He writes (in *Life is Real, Only Then When ‘I Am’*) about using remorse to increase his ability to work. Here is a DALL-E image of “higher beeingings attacking Gurdjieff with the sting of conscience”:



That reminds me of a vision I had when I was being put under ether as a child, for a medically unnecessary tonsillectomy. I nearly died, from a hemorrhage. I don’t forgive this, it was child abuse. A lot of what children and then adults are put under by parents and authorities such as doctors and teachers and bosses and politicians and celebrities is abuse.

My way is *No Way, via negativa*—to not resist, to even invite such images. But to say “No” to being sucked in by them. This is the root of Art. It helps if there is some skill, which usually has to be the result of training and practice. Even DALL-E takes practice to get good results. As anyone who has undertaken serious practice knows, while practice itself entails discipline, a temporary shutting of the door to everything else, there come moments when the shut door is flung open and what comes out is *Art*, art-ificial revelation of something beautiful and meaningful that did not previously exist. Eventually there can be not just moments but continuing flow. This is what I long for and love, whether in myself or in another. For example in music, one hears such freely flowing beauty in the works of the “great” composers, and less continuous but real moments of it in almost all music, low as well as high.

As an atheist, what is my Divinity? What is my entelechy? It is the grin of the Cheshire cat, which hangs in the air after the body has disappeared. Like the soul does, supposedly. The Cheshire Cat is a Trickster avatar. So was Mullah Nasr Eddin. The Mullah turns out to have been an actual person, a political/religious satirist who

lived in 13th century Turkey. Luckily he avoided a common fate of satirists and kept his head connected with his body. But now all that remains of him is a style of snarky stories. I made a small contribution to the genre: The Mullah joined a Dervish order in which it was the practice when two dervishes met they would say to each other “Thou art I”. One day on meeting a fellow, the other dervish forgot himself and said “I am thou.” The Mullah responded “By what you say I can tell that you are me; but then in God’s name who am I?”

Another trickster is Legba, the semi-divine higher being of West African religion such as Vodou. Legba “opens the Way.” And then gets out of the way. Legba himself is usually not very welcome because he leaves chaos in his wake, but he must be invoked first, for example in the dance ritual of Vodou, else the other divinities cannot come down. He is close to Ogun, god of iron and swords and cars and (strangely) computers. Now we can understand better why computers are included: Artificial Intelligence. Legba and Ogun are like an old married couple: Legba makes a mess of things, and Ogun hacks through the mess, cuts away what needs to be cut away. I feel very close to both of them. I was told once by Paul Reynard, who must have had a vision, passing me on the stairs, “You need to have a sword.” Now I have sword of word, and of mind. And a high priestess of Candomble (an Afro-Brazilian religion) told me—she too seemed to have had a vision—that I was under the protection of Ogun because I had just driven over 2000 miles of truly treacherous road, without a scratch. It was no doubt my Legba who made me undertake such a foolhardy road trip.

Here is DALL-E “Cheshire cat with higher beings”:



Where do the higher beings come from? Cheshire is imagining them. All higher beings are imaginal. Legba lets them in.

There was a lot of Legba and Ogun in Gurdjieff. Not so much, his followers.