

## NOTES FROM: *G. I. Gurdjieff: The War Against Sleep*, by Colin Wilson

**SUMMARY:** George Ivanovich Gurdjieff was one of the most charismatic, enigmatic, powerfully self-possessed mystical teachers of the 20th century, and this book is a short introduction to his life and work. Gurdjieff taught that most humans exist in a state of "waking sleep," where they remain unaware of their infinite potential and ultimate value as human beings.

Colin Wilson believed that most human beings are like great big and powerful jet airplanes attempting to fly on just one engine. That is, we possess vast lakes of "vital reserves," or extra energies that we habitually fail to call upon. So if you feel as though there is something missing in your life, that the world is more gray and bleak than it could be or should be, then you're beginning to wake up.

So this whole book is about getting that process started. It's about the effort to attain self-knowledge, and the *super-effort* that full aliveness may require. It's about abandoning destructive habits and automaticity, and about keeping the mind awake. *It's about firing up all the engines.*

This philosophy is about kicking *everything* about your life into high gear, but nobody is claiming that it's going to be easy. To realize how powerful we are, and how alive we can be, however, is to effect a revolutionary alteration in human consciousness. It really is like waking up.

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"Everyone is familiar with the phenomenon of feeling more or less alive on different days. Everyone knows on any given day that there are energies slumbering in him which the incitements of that day do not call forth, but which he might display if these were greater. Most of us feel as if a sort of cloud weighed upon us, keeping us below our highest notch of clearness in discernment, sureness in reasoning, or firmness in deciding. Compared with what we ought to be, we are only half awake. Our fires are damped, our drafts are checked. We are making use of only a small part of our possible mental and physical resources. In some persons this sense of being cut off from their rightful resources is extreme, and we then get the formidable neurasthenic and psychasthenic conditions, with life grown into one tissue of impossibilities, that so many medical books describe. Stating the thing broadly, the human individual thus lives far within his limits; he possesses powers of various sorts which he habitually fails to use. He energizes below his maximum, and he behaves below his optimum. In elementary faculty, in coordination, in power of inhibition and control, in every conceivable way, his life is contracted like the field of vision of an hysteric subject – but with less excuse, for the poor hysteric is diseased, while in the rest of us, it is only an inveterate habit – the habit of inferiority to our full self – that is bad."

"James cites the well-known phenomenon of 'second wind' as an example of this power to draw upon vital reserves. When we are completing some task, he says, we make a practice of stopping once we feel tired – once we encounter the first layer of fatigue. If we *force ourselves* to press on, a surprising thing happens.

The fatigue gets worse, up to a point, then suddenly vanishes, and we feel better than before. He mentions that one of the standard methods of treating ‘neurasthenic’ patients in the nineteenth century was to bully patients into making a greater effort than usual. ‘First comes the very extremity of distress, then follows unexpected relief.’ And he adds: ‘We live subject to arrest by degrees of fatigue which we have come only from habit to obey.’ In this sentence, James has defined the essence of Gurdjieff’s life-work.”

“At the core of his work lies this notion that we possess greater powers than we realize, and that our apparent limitations are due to a peculiar form of laziness – a laziness that has become so habitual that it has developed into a *mechanism*.”

“Generally speaking, the greater a person’s potentiality for achievement, the greater his or her objection to that feeling of being ‘cut off from one’s rightful resources.’”

“At your age, I looked for hardship, danger, horror and death, that I might feel the life in me more intensely.”

“How is this to be done? According to Gurdjieff, the answer falls into two parts. First of all, a man must commit himself wholly and totally to the task of escaping his normal limitations; it requires the kind of commitment that made saints sit on top of pillars. Secondly, he must understand something of the workings of this complicated computer that houses the human spirit.”

“Like all computers, they are capable of a far wider range of response than we ever demand of them. But wider responses can only be obtained when they are thoroughly understood.”

“This was the basis of Gurdjieff’s method. But it was not simply a matter of developing strength and alertness. Hard work can become a mere habit, like any other. Gurdjieff’s aim was also to persuade his pupils *not* to develop habits. Habits arise from doing something mechanically, with the mind ‘elsewhere.’ Gurdjieff’s pupils were made to work hard; but it was important that they should maintain ‘mindfulness,’ intense awareness.”

“Now I see why God hides Himself from us.”

“Instantly, I was overwhelmed with amazement, not only at my own state, but at everything that I looked at or thought of. Each tree was so uniquely itself that I felt that I could walk in the forest for ever and never cease from wonderment. Then the thought of ‘fear’ came to me. At once I was shaking with terror. Unnamed horrors were menacing me on every side. I thought of ‘joy,’ and I felt that my heart would burst from rapture. The word ‘love’ came to me, and I was pervaded with such fine shades of tenderness and compassion that I saw that I had not the remotest idea of the depth and the range of love. Love was everywhere and in everything. It was infinitely adaptable to every shade of need. After a time, it became too much for me, it seemed that if I plunged any more deeply into the mystery of love, I would cease to exist.”

“This is certainly our most remarkable human characteristic: imagination.”

“If only we made the effort, we could achieve a degree of control over our feelings that would at present strike us as miraculous.”

“To actually *know* this consciously, to realize that we were not intended to reach breaking point so quickly and easily, would obviously alter a man’s whole approach to his life and its problems. To effect such an alteration in human consciousness was Gurdjieff’s central aim.”

“Back in Tiflis, he had enough money to give up his job on the railway and spend his days reading.”

“When Gurdjieff told Ouspensky that his Moscow pupils paid a thousand rubles a year, Ouspensky said it sounded a lot. At this, Gurdjieff explained that it was important for his pupils to pay for what they received. First of all, people do not value what they receive too easily; second, people who could not find that much money per year would probably be bad at ‘the work’; Gurdjieff emphasized that it is the competent, efficient people, not the neurotic dreamers, who can generate the power to change themselves.”

“Man is in prison, said Gurdjieff. If he is to have a chance to escape, then he must begin by realizing that he is in prison. Until he has reached this point, he cannot even begin. Then arises the question: how to escape? Here, Gurdjieff made a statement that is also central to his work. A group of people stands a better chance of escape than a single person, for they can collaborate on a tunnel. A man on his own stands little chance. For man is basically *asleep*. He thinks that his everyday consciousness is ‘waking consciousness,’ as opposed to the unconscious state he plunges into every night. This is perhaps his greatest mistake. In fact, when we wake up in the morning, we simply enter another form of sleeping consciousness. We merely react to circumstances, doing today what we did yesterday and the day before. Various things can give us flashes of ‘awakening’ – a sudden crisis, the prospect of a need to change one’s whole mode of existence, even setting out on a journey or a holiday. A mother holding her new baby for the first time may ‘wake up’ for a moment, and realize, in a flash, that the consciousness she accepts every day of her life is not *necessary*, that life could be completely different, far more fascinating and complex. In short, that she is *free*. But if, ten minutes later, she asks herself: ‘What is this freedom?’, she has already forgotten.”

“Comfort and security could be far more dangerous than uncertainty – which has the advantage of keeping the mind alert.”

“People can comfortably absorb new ideas and go back to sleep. He had to devise new methods of keeping them awake.”

“Gurdjieff explained that he was introducing them to the principle of super-effort. If a man walks twenty-five miles in bad weather, and gets home cold and hungry – and then decides to walk another two miles before going indoors, that is super-effort. Here, I feel, Gurdjieff was failing to explain something important. It is not the super-effort itself that is important, but the energy we *summon* to meet it. The whole point of Gurdjieff’s ‘system’ – and this is never sufficiently emphasized either in his own books or in those about him – is its basic assumption that man possesses far more energy than he realizes – a vast lake of ‘vital reserves.’

What cuts us off from these reserves is a feeling of laziness, or rather, of *reluctance*. We contemplate some effort, and think: 'What a bore.' And this feeling of boredom instantly lowers our vitality. If I performed a super-effort – like walking the additional two miles – with a groan of self-pity, it would be completely useless. Yet if some sudden crisis – or some sudden piece of good news (i.e. someone I love is waiting for me two miles away) – made me decide to walk the two miles, I would do it with a springy step, prepared, if necessary, to go ten times as far. This, then, is the real aim of the exercise: to summon that state of optimism, of inner purpose, that makes the super-effort easy."

"This, of course, is precisely what Gurdjieff intended. He believed that, through intense efforts, a certain form of energy is created – the energy man needs for self-transformation. Without that energy, he can think about self-transformation, even long for it, but can never achieve it."

"You think you know who you are and what you are; but you do not know either what slaves you now are, or how free you might become."

"And therein lies the problem. For exhaustion makes things ten times as bad. When we are healthy and wide awake we are always experiencing the sudden flash of sheer 'absurd delight' that reawakens our sense of meaning and purpose. But exhaustion makes everything seem dead, so that no effort seems worth making. The world becomes 'stale, flat and unprofitable.' And if we are *taken in* by this apparent meaninglessness, this is a highly dangerous state. It becomes a vicious circle of depression and fatigue."

"Meaning instantly creates energy."

"The 'moments of vision' were telling the truth all along. The moment we really *grasp* this -rationally and logically, as we grasp that the earth is round – we shall begin to see the vision of infinite possibility that Greene experienced as he played Russian roulette; but as a steadily-held insight, not a sudden glimpse."

"The mental 'muscle' I use for this purpose is undeveloped. But all muscles can be developed."

"The problem, then, is clear: to increase the driving force. Man may be more than half mechanical; but he can choose whether to live in a blank, hypnotized state, or whether to live as though some immense unguessed meaning lay on the other side of this curtain of everyday reality, waiting to reveal itself to a sense of purpose. Gurdjieff's 'System' is probably the greatest single-handed attempt in the history of human thought to make us aware of the potential of human consciousness. Whether he realized it or not, his life-work *had* achieved its purpose."