

with his revolver, the prognosis was much better.

So there we were. Within six months of joining, Beverley and Gabriel and I had become a conventional little family living upstairs in the coach house, and participating in every aspect of the community. During the day, Beverley looked after the baby and helped in the Institute's office, while I worked at local building sites, wheeling barrows of wet concrete. I got tired of that when the snow started to fall, so I drew some sample designs and illustrations as specimens, and took a job at a local advertising agency. It did not surprise us that I so easily made the switch from laborer to graphic designer. We both knew that we were now 'on the path' and that invisible forces were aiding us. We were faithful students, practicing the Gurdjieff movements at home, as well as with the dance groups in the Jami; assiduously studying the written material; religiously performing the morning meditation exercise, and working hard in the garden on weekends.

My mother and father came to visit, and I introduced them to Mister B, who towered over them like a fairy tale giant. They were most impressed by the lovely gardens, and walked about rather self-consciously. It was very odd seeing them there – like visitors from the old world to our new planet. I had previously taken Beverley down to Kent to meet them, and my mother had welcomed her warmly. But then she had liked Anne, too. My dear parents did not think much about philosophy or spirituality, but at heart they were stoics. The war had taught them how to do that.

But the most important thing was that The Work started to work! The daily discipline and new fatherhood combined to alter my consciousness. I felt I was becoming more real, and the more concentration I channelled into my meditations, movements and studies, the more real I became. The following series of anecdotes may serve as snapshots of our two years at Coombe Springs. I must be forgiven for focusing on my own experiences, because I did not know how events were affecting anyone else. The tacit rule was that no one spoke about their own responses and thoughts regarding the curriculum. As Mister B put it, “Your inner life is yours alone, and not to be chattered about.” Even Beverley never discussed hers with me.

‘Special Exercises’ were sometimes posted on the notice board outside the kitchen in the Big House. One day, a notice advised all residents that next Thursday would be a ‘Fast Day’. On Thursday morning, before dawn, I abstained from breakfast, and trudged through the deep snow down to the Jami to do my usual morning meditation exercise. Then I set off for the building site, where I spent all morning in a snow storm, wheeling barrows of wet concrete up an icy ramp and tipping them into a large steel skip, which was then hoisted forty feet up to the open mouth of the giant steel pile driver tube. At lunchtime, all the workers assembled in a tin hut to eat their sausage sandwiches and drink their thermos’s of hot tea, while I stoically studied Gurdjieff’s book ‘Meetings With Remarkable Men’.

Observing my grim solitude, one of the specialist pile driver team (who came from Liverpool) decided to

make game of me. He said he needed my help at the top of the tube. After my foodless lunch, he took me to the bottom of the twin steel ladders flanking the tube, and we both looked up through the whirling snowflakes. He looked me in the eye and said, half mockingly, “Are you okay with this?” Not to be outdone by this scouser git, I started the upward climb, and he followed up the other ladder. At the top, the ground was forty feet below, and we sat either side of the tube, astride wooden planks – seemingly suspended in one of those snowball paperweights. The scouser then gave a great shout, and looked across at me. I could tell he was worried I might fall and die. I was worried, too, but determined to employ my concentration training to remain calm. I think the expression this created on my face made him even more worried. He thought I might be a right nutter, glaring at him. In response to his shout, a further element was added to the terrifying scene. Out of the whirling snow, the giant steel skip swung towards us, suspended on the crane cable operated from below. Our job was to grab the skip and tip its contents, a ton of wet concrete, into the yawning mouth of the tube. This we did several times. It was a scene from Dante’s *Inferno*. My scouser mate was just doing his job, but I was doing my concentration and sensing exercise. What with the fasting, the cold and the perilous situation, I achieved an enhanced state of consciousness: something similar to that which mountain climbers mean when they say, “I’ve never felt so alive.” The enhancement stayed with me when I descended from the tube. It was very similar to the state I had ex-

perienced earlier when I and some other male residents had enjoyed a sauna one night, and then walked naked through the deep snow down to the Spring House. Inside the elegant building was a 3-metre wide circular pool covered with ice, and we all jumped through the ice into the pool together. After these and similar adventures, I felt I understood better why all religions advocated physical austerities as a path to ‘revelation’. At the end of the pile-driving day, however, I returned to Coombe Springs to learn that a mistake had been made regarding the fasting notice. Whoever had written it had left out the instruction that a bowl of yoghurt and oatmeal was allowed. The notice had been corrected, but not before I had trudged off to my rendezvous with the pile driver. That evening, while I wolfed down my bowl of yoghurt, Beverley told me about the day’s scandal: a middle-aged male resident called Ronald had also missed the yogurt amendment and had been caught cheating! That afternoon, Mister B’s wife, Elizabeth, had been walking through the snow in the garden with her young daughter, Hero, when she had noticed this man sitting in a tree. In true Gurdjieff style she had asked him what he was doing sitting in the tree, and he had confessed that he had hidden a hamburger there – in preparation for the fast day. Why he chose to hide the hamburger in the tree, and not somewhere less public, will never be known.

On Work Sundays, exterior members of the Coombe Springs community joined with the residents to work in the garden and among the buildings. Sometimes Mister

B would devise an exercise in which all could participate, such as a memory exercise involving touching your ear when anyone gave you something, or perhaps maintaining a continuously repeated prayer in your thoughts as you were working. I still remember one of these after all these years. It was in Arabic: *Ishkinaa siraat al mustakeem*, or ‘Show me the true path’. Another one was the ‘Stop Exercise’ when Mister B would walk around the grounds and yell ‘Stop!’ at a group of workers, causing them to freeze in their tracks, and empty their minds to receive any available illumination, or perhaps Mister B’s projection of ‘baraka’ or blessing. On one such ‘stop exercise’ Sunday, I was working with a group trimming and weeding the drive, when a Telegram delivery man wheeled his bike through the gates and headed passed us towards the Big House. Just then, we heard Mister B call “Stop!” and we all froze – like a group of human statues, holding hedge clippers, brooms, wheel barrows and armfuls of leaves. The Telegram man froze, too, looking around at us in bewilderment for a very long 30 seconds, until Mister B called “Continue!” We all resumed our work, and the Telegram man resumed his delivery. Heaven knows what he told his Post Office mates. That was funny, but on another Sunday ‘stop exercise’ I did stop, and I did feel the descent of a delicate sweet infusion into my mind.

Since early childhood I had suffered from a severe speech impediment. It was known in the family that my stutter had begun when I was three years of age in the summer of 1944, when one of Hitler’s last V2 rocket bombs had gone astray and exploded near our home in

Welling, Kent. I have no memory of it, and for many years into adulthood I thought that the explosion had buried me under a falling wall or fence, but then my mother told me that it was just the sound of the bang that had shocked me. She said that I had been playing in the garden when the bomb landed, and that I could not speak when she ran outside to get me. She said that I continued to be unable to speak for about six weeks thereafter, and when I did speak again, it was with an extreme stutter. Unlike the earlier ‘doodlebugs’, which announced their slow approach with a dreadful droning sound, the V2 was the ancestor of NASA spacecraft. It arrived from the stratosphere travelling faster than sound, so instead of going whoosh–bang, it went bang–whoosh. That is, you heard it arriving after the explosion. I don’t remember the event, but my current theory is that it was the unearthly strangeness of this sound that shocked me into a PTSD silence, and later into the lifelong stutter that filled my schooldays with fear and shame. Whatever, during the 22 years between the bomb and Coombe Springs, the stutter had improved – but my speech remained nowhere near good enough for public speaking. So I was surprised and rather filled with dread one Saturday when Helena, Mister B’s secretary, asked me to do the lunchtime reading on Sunday. These readings were a semi-monastic Work Sunday tradition, when visitors and residents sat down to a silent meal while listening to a reading from a book selected by Mister B. Helena gave me the chosen book, with the selected chapter marked, to practice before the performance. The Gurdjieff ethos was to boldly accept

any challenge or task, but nothing at Coombe Springs had frightened me so much (not even the pile driver) as the prospect of reading aloud to over a hundred silent people. An hour before lunchtime, I returned to our flat from the garden to clean up and prepare, and found one of Mister B's research fellows, Ken Pledge, waiting for me. Beverley was on cooking duty, and Ken had seldom visited us before, so I wondered why he was there. He awkwardly explained that he had heard I was due to do the reading, and he rather felt like doing it himself, so perhaps he could do it instead of me. I thought this was obviously a set up designed either to let me off the hook, or to spare the lunchtime crowd from an hour's painfully stuttered reading, so I politely declined.

It was customary for the reader at such lunches to eat before everyone else, but I was too nervous to do that. I carried the book into the dining hall, where the seated guests were quietly conversing, and saw that an empty chair had been reserved for me at Mister B's table. The book was a translation of some discourses by the Sufi sage Jalaladin Rumi, and when I opened it the dining hall became silent. While lunch was quietly served and quietly eaten, I read aloud for about half an hour, without a single stutter – even putting some emotional expressiveness into Rumi's robust statements, such as, "Anyone asking a question must first come to the awareness that their knowledge is incomplete, and secondly that there is wisdom they know nothing about. Hence, the saying, 'Asking is half of knowing.'" I didn't know what to ask after the reading, or who to ask. I just knew that I had

never before been able to read aloud without stuttering, and that I had somehow been helped to do it.

One of the Gurdjieff techniques for enhancing consciousness was called 'super effort'. The theory was that humans had access to three 'accumulators' or reservoirs of energy: the first was what we used in normal life, the second could be accessed when the first ran out (referred to by athletes as 'the second wind'), and the third was the Great Accumulator, which provided the energy of the other two, and which could be accessed directly by performing a super effort which drained the other two. The point of accessing the big accumulator was that the blast of source energy would transform your consciousness. Again on a Work Sunday, I was helping to dig and fill a new stream channel across the grounds, when I decided to go for the super effort. Again, barrow loads of wet concrete featured heavily, and my effort was further enhanced by my feverish cold, an infection that had been lurking about for a few days. So there I was with the feverish cold and the wet concrete: I decided to go for it. As the afternoon wore on, the Estate Manager, Gilbert Edwards, became anxious about my manic activity, shovelling, tipping, wheeling, bashing and smoothing like a man possessed. He said, "Take it easy, Alan, Rome wasn't built in a day." But I had the bit between my teeth, and kept at it until the fading light stopped work. I went back to our flat in a rarified state, and Beverley reminded me that it was the night of Gurdjieff's birthday dinner, for which we all had to change into evening dress. So

I had a shower and changed into my improvised black tie outfit, and walked over to the Big House for the scheduled cocktails. Beverley was, as usual, supervising the kitchen, so I walked into the reception room alone. A recording of Gurdjieff's harmonium music was playing, and there were all the residents in formal dress, standing about in island groups: rings of four or six people facing inwards, holding glasses, eating canapés, and conversing discreetly. When trying to describe it later, I said that I felt there should have been electric wires leading out from their trouser legs and skirts to wall plugs in the skirting boards, but I now think that was a bad metaphor. They were not machines, it was just that I could not see where their energy was coming from. It seemed too strange to be true that it came from the material they were putting into their mouths, and they were clearly unaware of how bizarre it was to fuel themselves in this outrageously crude way. Nor could I see or imagine how they could stand there making inane small talk when they and the whole damned place was a miracle. I sat down in a quiet spot against the wall and just continued to look at the miracle. In his book 'Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson' Gurdjieff wrote about "the organ Kundabuffer". I came to associate this putative human attribute with the concept of a cushion; an inbuilt psychological mechanism which acted as a layer of padding or protection between our perceptive faculties and reality. I also associated it with Jesus's comment about 'seeing through a glass darkly', and other descriptions of our blinkered normal state by a variety of religions from Zen to Zoroaster. In fact the

whole idea of the need for transcendence, The Work, revelation, enlightenment, etc. could be encompassed by the assertion that humans are conditioned or programmed by normal life to not see things as they really are, but to view the world through a screen or cushion of assumptions, prejudices, fears, delusions, beliefs, desires, etc. My wet concrete super effort, apparently, had removed the cushion, ripped the veil, lifted the curtain – or to put it in more contemporary terms, had altered my brain chemistry to override conditioned responses to the environment.

Gilbert Edwards saw me and came over and squatted down by my chair and looked at me. I saw a crouched human animal looking at me, with a wise twinkle in its eye. I could tell he knew what I was seeing, even though he could not see it himself. He knew because he was an old Gurdjieff hand who had done super efforts himself. He asked how I was feeling, and I said I was okay. He didn't expect any further response.

A few years later, I read Mister B's book 'Witness', in which he described how he had a feverish cold when he performed a super effort while working in the grounds of Gurdjieff's community in Fontainebleau, France. Mister B had reported that he had indeed tapped into the Great Accumulator and had enjoyed a period of higher consciousness before Gurdjieff had popped out of the shrubbery to tell him it was not such a big deal.

At the time of writing this memoir, I have seen a newspaper article covering the movie, 'Saving Mr Banks', made about Walt Disney's relationship with the