

*Without Benefit of Clergy: Some Personal Footnotes to the Gurdjieff Teaching*  
Frank R. Sinclair (2005)  
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**More than a Piece of the Furniture**  
**by Müge Galin**

In this largely autobiographical account of his several decades in the Gurdjieff Work, or what he calls his “personal indulgence” (226), Frank R. Sinclair shares some moving reflections on his inner and outer experiences in that pursuit. When he was in his twenties, his search took him from Cape Town, South Africa where he was born and raised, to Franklin Farms, the Ouspensky estate in Mendham, New Jersey. He later found his home in the Work in New York, where he lives today and attends to the affairs of the New York Foundation as its president. While recounting his search for meaning and his struggle to live in two worlds—the sacred and the profane—Sinclair courageously tells on himself, so to speak, as well as on others. In the end, he exposes the same human being full of contradictions, strengths and weaknesses, within us all—that being who would wish to be *more* than “just a piece of the furniture” (86), as he recalls he was once devastated and crushed to overhear Madame Olga de Hartman call him, “with pitiless contempt” (86), nearly fifty years ago. What marks this book is the author’s humility and his ability to allow his vulnerability to be revealed to his readers. It is open, honest, and direct, a fine contemporary testimony to the creativity and energy generated through “the Work.”

Sinclair “did not drink Armagnac with Gurdjieff” (17). However, despite his modest self-portrayal, he did have the good fortune of having had direct relationships with such unusual individuals as Benjamin Fairfax Hall, Martin Benson, Lord Pentland, William Segal, Dr. Michel de Salzman, and others, and he could regard Madame Jeanne de Salzman, G. I. Gurdjieff’s (1866?-1949) principal pupil and associate, as his teacher. While Sinclair acknowledges his sense of indebtedness to these and other elders who guided him on his Way, he also stresses that “one is ultimately on one’s own, standing one on one before the higher—or the unknown” (14). In support of this, he quotes from the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (d. 1328), whose intermittent references enrich the book: “Every kind of mediation is alien to God” and “If we are to know God, it must be without mediation” (13). Or, in the words of the Sufi poet and mystic Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi (d. 1273), “One cannot transmit a kiss through a messenger.” Hence, Sinclair’s title for his book, *Without Benefit of Clergy*, which very words are reasserted throughout the text.

In addition to telling of his life, one evident purpose in writing this book is to address some misconceptions about the Work that have gone unchallenged, and, ultimately, to bear witness to what Sinclair regards as Madame de Salzman’s “extraordinary influence” (29) in the preservation and transmission of

G. I. Gurdjieff's teaching. Overall, the book is an expression of the author's gratitude towards her, not the least for having helped "to ensure that a healthy nucleus had taken root around her" (34), so that succeeding generations could receive the authentic teaching. It seems clear that Sinclair bases his insightful comments on a Work that helps him stay true to what is essential: "to understand the lifelong intimations of 'another current' of life that have touched [his] consciousness" (31).

Sinclair carefully braces himself for inevitable criticism and misunderstanding as he comments on the effects of the old Ouspenskyan authoritarianism and "impulse to expound," or points out the "downright ignorance, appalling self-conceit, unexamined arrogance, and presumptuous elitism" (15) displayed by some in the Work. He writes: "I will give my own recollections of some events in and around New York without feeling compelled to gloss over the indelicate or the unsavory, since they were real enough, and stubborn facts of the first order" (23). His only apology for recording these "stubborn facts" is that that's how things looked and sounded "from where [he] was sitting" (19).

Perhaps an even more precise understanding of some of these facts as he relates them can be found later in the book:

And so the overriding, exacting, and *practical* necessity in Gurdjieff's teaching is the *work* for attention. Moments of attention are, in fact, proof that the Work is a movement between levels. But *talk* as we may about attention (and the practice of remorse, and the growth of consciousness) we do not truly see our extraordinary predicament. If we who profess to be "in the Work" find ourselves living in a state of almost unrelieved – and unperceived – identification, can there be any wonder that there are endless misunderstandings about the nature of Gurdjieff's message itself, not to speak of struggles for turf at the worldly level, and other tasteless presumptions? (253)

We come to this kind of fine and thoughtful analysis again and again. We also hear in these pages the voice of a sincere seeker who describes the minutest details of what he calls "objective inner events" or "evidence of the miraculous" (117), which appeared at unexpected points in his search. When Sinclair recounts the experiences of his inner world, he also shows how we may respect and encompass such events so that what we learn remains embedded within us. In describing this process, he not only transmits a pearl or ten, but also ultimately models Gurdjieff's famous recommendation to verify everything for oneself.

While Sinclair knows that, as he says, "one's very motives for speaking [about one's intense experiences] tend to arouse suspicion" (38), he presses on, as it were, to authenticate the miraculous, risking to put words to the ineffable. He explores the subtle interplay of the sacred and the profane (31) as he brings readers courageously close to the inner situations in which he found himself. He

further ventures parallels between his own experience of moments of real being and Gurdjieff's or Madame de Salzmänn's written or spoken words: first to try to understand and open to what they may have meant; and second, to bolster his argument that Madame de Salzmänn was not in some way inventing a "New Work" by stressing the "descending movement of energy," but was being faithful to Gurdjieff's Work. Sinclair asserts that what she taught "was never a departure from what Gurdjieff had brought, but was '*all of a piece*' with indications given down the years by Gurdjieff himself" (234-35). In short, he illustrates that there is one Gurdjieff Work, and not two.

Among the sobering conclusions with which one walks away from this book is that in responding to the call to undertake "the work for being," there are "no shortcuts, no overnight sensations" (93); on the contrary, "inner freedom must be bought and paid for" (65). That is, "real self-consciousness has to be earned" (88). As Madame de Salzmänn once shared with Sinclair, even Mr. Gurdjieff admitted "gnashing [his] teeth and weeping bitter tears on [his] pillow" (88).

Sinclair points out that "'the demands for unremitting struggle and effort' are never absent" (243). But he also brings to our attention that "it is the nature of *effort* that needs to be more clearly understood as it becomes more refined and purified, as well as the transition (never guaranteed or predictable) from effort to non-effort" (244). He writes, "But there needs to be a next step. One has to be 'available' to be drawn beyond the apparent threshold of the moment—beyond the limits of the known, beyond even the here and the now" (261).

On the final page of the book Sinclair concludes, ". . . we are called to fathom a very great mystery" (273). And what is this very great mystery? The clues were there from the beginning in what Gurdjieff, and later Madame de Salzmänn, had pointed to for those who could hear. He reports having found this "simple entry" when browsing through one of his old notebooks: "Madame de Salzmänn said to us that 'Beyond our contradictions is a life which has no beginning or end.' The teaching was all in that. And how was one to open to this?" (246). It is perhaps this perennial question that Sinclair raises, and that stays with us long after we have put this remarkable book down.

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