

Without Benefit of Clergy: Some Personal Footnotes to the Gurdjieff Teaching
Frank R. Sinclair (2005)
277 pgs. Available at
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**Of the Work for Presence
by Anthony De Marinis**

Frank R. Sinclair's *Without Benefit of Clergy* (2005) provides a recent assessment of the Gurdjieff (1866?–1949) teaching as it exists in its institutional setting today, written by someone who is in a position to speak of it. Sinclair is the president of the Gurdjieff Foundation of New York, one of the four “founding” foundations that comprise the International Association of Gurdjieff Foundations, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. As indicated in the book’s subtitle, *Some Personal Footnotes to the Gurdjieff Teaching*, Sinclair provides commentary on what practitioners call “the Work” as it exists today, as well as offering an engaging memoir of the life of a seeker—a “seeker of truth.”

Apparently quietly self-published, the book has a genuine, “this is how I see it” tone. It gives a down-to-earth portrayal of the search to go past the merely conceptual aspects of the teaching and describes the unfolding of an authentic practice among a community of seekers. Sinclair mentions that Jeanne de Salzmann—the primary person with whom G. I. Gurdjieff entrusted his Work in 1949 when he died—“tirelessly conveyed to the early leaders . . . the central necessities of the work with others, that is, *the work together*” (241). Or, as he puts it in another passage, “It might seem hugely paradoxical to some that when Gurdjieff and his fellow Seekers of Truth sought a hidden teaching, it must have been shielded, sometimes even for many generations . . . and sustained . . . and once again rediscovered, alive and intact—in an *institutional setting*” (225). One could perhaps say that this mostly autobiographical work is in fact a meditation on the place of an individual in a community of seekers who are discovering the fragments of something behind appearances, a living whole, an invisible core or current.

As such, this is also a valuable report on the conditions of an oral teaching, including “the non-verbal communication as much as the verbal, the right and timely gesture, a respect for the intangibles, and the work for Presence” (244). Indeed, it is such “intangibles” that seem to inform the book and give it its robust character. It is in this sense a memoir, an “odd endeavor” (19) as Sinclair describes it, the recording of inner situations and states in the light of a search for the real Self. Sinclair is not loathe to include “objective inner events” (117) or sacred experiences that were simply “lodged, or ‘incorporated,’ into [him]” with the “profane, or everyday, problems of living” (83)—from South Africa, to the old Ouspensky estate in Mendham, New Jersey, and finally to the Gurdjieff Foundation of New York both at Armonk and in Manhattan. He writes: “If it is not too immodest a claim, my experiences illustrate in a microcosmic way the

struggle to understand the Gurdjieffian invitation to live, as it were, in two worlds at once.” But he is quick to point out that “from another perspective, there are *three* worlds: there is a middle ground where the sacred and the profane have their interplay and where the ‘struggle’ for being takes place” (31).

Sinclair explains that his initial intent had been to “acknowledge the help, both direct and indirect, that [he] received from a few people whose paths had crossed [his].” But what may have begun “as a simple letter to a relative on a far continent” (7) in an attempt to explain something of what drew him to leave his family and his country, turned into a fascinating commentary on the condition of a living teaching, as well.

Apart from an evident, hard-won authority, Sinclair seems to draw discernment from a principle of Gurdjieff’s old teacher, Dean Borsh, that he invokes throughout his narrative: “Love of God—but indifference to the saints” (14). He brings to task “the whole pantheon of latter-day expositors ([himself] included) promoting their proprietary visions of Gurdjieff’s intent” (14). Or, as he puts it in another passage in another way, there is a “necessary inner preparation that is so evidently absent in much of the steady outpourings about Gurdjieff’s teaching” (12). And while Sinclair points out that he never met Gurdjieff, he raises a question concerning the perhaps overly rational path followed by some “old line-practitioners” (228), or the tendency on the part of some “to set themselves apart *on any score*” (10).

Sinclair recalls some of the “special and occasionally remarkable people” whose paths crossed his along the way—those “a rung or two up the ladder” at the time he met them. Chapters are devoted to Benjamin Fairfax Hall, Martin Benson, Thomas Forman, John Pentland, and Bill Segal. But the center of gravity of the book is clearly Jeanne de Salzmänn. Coming as a young man from his home in Cape Town to the United States to spend a few months at Madame Ouspensky’s estate in Mendham, New Jersey, Sinclair stayed on in order to meet her. As he tells us, this event barely three months after his arrival in the United States was “without question the single most significant encounter of [his] life” (24).

It is a central argument of the book that the special Work attributed to Madame de Salzmänn was faithful to Gurdjieff’s teaching, a “seamless lineage.” As one of those who over time was fortunate “to be around her on her months-long visits to New York over several decades” (23), Sinclair indeed has a unique and often privileged perspective. “There was never any question in my mind,” he writes, “and there is none now—that the Work that Madame brought was Gurdjieff’s Work” (239). This conviction sounds throughout the book, and the author goes to some length to show that there is no “old” or “new” Work, but simply “one Work” to which Madame de Salzmänn “clearly was faithful” (246). He writes:

It took me many years, as it did for so many others, to catch the drift of Madame de Salzmänn’s most compelling call—her invitation

to us to follow the movement of an energy coming from “a higher part of the mind” . . . slowly it had become clear to me that this opening to a new inner circulation of energy to which she was so resolutely pointing us, to the very end, was the “next step,” the real “inner work” to which all other efforts led. (224, 227)

Along with the self-imposed vigilance with which he approaches his task, and his somewhat down-home manner of calling things as he sees them—a “seeming irreverence and occasional iconoclasm” (20)—the most touching aspect of this book lies in its simple call to the best in the reader and the best in the teaching. Addressing, one may suppose, those who actually Work, he asks: “Will these beggarly recollections and comments of mine help the furtherance of Gurdjieff’s Work?” And he surmises, “I doubt it. But they may provide a little encouragement to the simple troops in the trenches, the anonymous practitioners of the Work, the true searchers, quietly (and invisibly) struggling to relate their subjectivity to a more objective life” (15). Sinclair acknowledges, “This ‘search’ for meaning and purpose was second-nature to me from the earliest. Perhaps it was my real nature . . . I would say that the search and the need to know were there before I was” (42). It is this kind of awareness, perhaps wordless, of a double nature—or inherent contradiction—that makes the whole book ring true.

Without Benefit of Clergy tells the story of a Work for self-knowledge and self-development in front of the unknown, the mystery of oneself. Sinclair writes, “Gurdjieff’s Work is, at its heart, a way to approach—and occasionally to penetrate—this mystery” (14). When a master passes away, a question sooner or later arises about the authenticity of his or her teaching as it is discovered and rediscovered in the present. So too with Gurdjieff. What Sinclair makes clear in this engaging and gently powerful narrative is that the Work is a living current, kept alive in an institutional setting by a core of seekers in all its authenticity.

Anthony de Marinis, M.A.
Washington University
St. Louis, Missouri