

# Can the World Be Improved?

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As a second-wave Baby Boomer born in 1949, I spent my childhood in the 1950s growing up in a second-tier suburb outside a once-major but deteriorating American city (St. Louis, Missouri). The planned subdivision development of modest, California-ranch-style homes on quarter-acre lots where I lived was effectively identical to ten thousand other such new suburban enclaves built all across America after World War II to house the burgeoning middle class. Like so many others, mine was fueled by racial animus — white flight from the cities.

My family was non-intellectual, not artsy, and apolitical (with the caveat that, as a small businessman, my father was a staunch Republican). My mother was a devout Methodist, while my dad was an atheist. His experiences as an army combat veteran in World War II who was wounded at the Battle of Peleliu in the Pacific may have had something to do with that. Whatever he saw and did in the war had left him an alcoholic whose main ambition was financial security.

My parents argued about my “religious training” and — oddly enough — decided to let me choose. One visit to Methodist Sunday School, where I was exposed to the story of Jonah and the Whale, was sufficient to convince me that Christianity was a crock and not my cup of tea. So, that was the end of that.

I did get a very good education, all things considered. The Baby Boom and burgeoning tax base of those new suburbs back then meant that they couldn’t build schools fast enough. In twelve years of primary and secondary education, I inaugurated eight brand-new schools. As a smart kid, I was placed in the top 10% of my class throughout my tenure in school and received pretty much the best that American public education could offer at the time.

In his youth, my father had a mentor — a family doctor who helped my dad get started in accounting. That well-off physician’s daughter had been a wild flapper in the 1920s, but she had then travelled to India in the 1930s and unexpectedly “found her guru,” a Hindu swami. She brought him back to St. Louis, set him up in a temple, gave up her wild ways (although not her exotic personality), and spent the rest of her life as a totally committed spiritual devotee.

On his deathbed, the doctor extracted a promise from my father to protect and look after his daughter, who — whether as the wild party girl she was early on or the passionate, completely committed spiritual devotee she became later — was quite incapable of living in the “regular” world. My father dutifully did so for

the next 40 years until her eventual death. I grew up with this woman as an odd extension of my family, a seminal weirdo with whom I identified strongly. I even called her "Aunt Virginia," though she was not a blood relation.

As a result, despite my having no formal Christian training, I was exposed early on to both Hindu and Buddhist teachings. One time after college in my mid-20s on a visit to my parents' home, I found a foot locker in the basement filled with toys and books from my childhood. Among the mementos were various kids' books my "aunt" had given me — books about Hindu beliefs in reincarnation and such. These were not tracts of religious philosophy, but rather books written for children in a story-telling mode, full of entertaining myths and fables. By the time I rediscovered those books from my childhood, I was already a young but full-time astrologer who had left the fold of "regular" American life. Still, I marveled to realize suddenly that — without even being aware of it — I had been groomed for eastern mysticism from an early age. Public education gave me the world of reason and science. Aunt Virginia bequeathed me a very different world. Despite their differences, the two were never in conflict for me. Each world illuminated the other.

When I was 14, my "aunt" gave me *The Fourth Way* by P.D. Ouspensky. That led me to G.I. Gurdjieff, the Russian Sufi teacher and general bad boy of various post-World War I spiritual movements of the 1920s and '30s. I began reading everything I could find about Gurdjieff, including the books he authored himself — *Meetings with Remarkable Men* and his massive, almost incomprehensible opus, *All and Everything: Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*.

An anecdote I read back then that's worth relating concerned a rich American woman who was a follower and pupil of Gurdjieff at his institute south of Paris in the 1920s (the Prieuré at Avon). One day she encountered the Master and excitedly told him that his spiritual training had enabled her to finally kick her longstanding addiction to cigarettes. Rather than praising or congratulating the woman, Gurdjieff took out a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket, offered her one, and said, "*Anyone can not smoke.*" Rim shot.

Another memory I have from those early studies is directly relevant to this commentary. Gurdjieff told his students to avoid social movements that purported to improve society and civilization. As I recall, he said that humans were mostly crazy, and that modern civilization was built on our collective madness. The immediate and urgent task at hand for each of us was to diligently pursue the inner disciplines of becoming conscious, and that work was a full-time job. Trying to make civilization better as a direct social activity was, in essence, a fool's errand, doomed to fail. What mattered — and the only real hope for humanity — was to develop one's own consciousness. If enough people did that, then the world, meaning human civilization, might change.

That seemingly illiberal notion — that our corrupted civilization can't be improved — isn't rare in religious realms. It usually takes the form of categorizing the material world as "low" and the spiritual realm as "high." That judgmental divide between gratifying the senses and feeding the spirit is longstanding and often

quite crude. Asceticism seems to hold the flesh in contempt. Gurdjieff's take on this was fundamentally different. He didn't believe that the material world was simply an illusion or something to be "transcended." Nor did he suggest that the wish to reduce suffering and improve the world was pointless or not worthwhile. Instead, his focus was entirely pragmatic, more about strategy and tactics. Encountering the idea of limiting one's involvement in the "ordinary" world not as puritanical dogma, but rather as a practical necessity, made a huge impression on my adolescent self, but not in a particularly easy or pleasing way.

On the one hand, that perspective made a certain resonant sense to me. Something about it struck me as correct. Much of what society pursues, values, lobbies for, and manipulates people to want, is clearly horseshit. It was true in the 1950s, and it's even more true now. Advertising, consumerism, and the greed that drives our culture are clearly wrong-headed. The endless lust to acquire more — more money, more power, more comfort and convenience — are obviously ego-based, adolescent fantasies that involve little if any thoughtful appreciation of life's sacredness. Getting caught up in all that seems risky at best and dangerous at worst.

On the other hand, the world that humans have made — built as it has been on the suffering of those who are enslaved (one way or another) for the benefit of the powerful or privileged few — is so perverse, so violent and cruel, so uncaring that surely something must be done to change it. Especially now, our power has grown so immense and misdirected that the very future of humanity is in doubt. Inner work on oneself is all well and good, but we're running out of time, and individual maturity is a very slow road. Something about letting the world go to hell in a hand basket rubs me the wrong way.

So, I'm conflicted. When I first encountered this dilemma in full force, I was about 15. Now I'm 72. For nearly six decades, I've struggled with the inherent clash of ideals contained in that paradoxical sentiment. What is the point of all our efforts to achieve individual sanity if collective humanity remains insane? I'm well aware of many intellectual responses to that dilemma, both pro and con — the rational arguments in either direction. But none of those arguments resolves the conflict for me.

I have days when I think I've made some progress toward the consciousness of real maturity, greater understanding and acceptance, and even compassion. But I have days where I doubt that I've made any progress at all. And even on the "good" days where I feel that my journey has been meaningful and productive, there's a downside. I feel less connected to collective humanity than ever. The thoughts, feelings, concerns, ambitions, and pleasures that seem to motivate vast percentages of humans are very often not particularly interesting to me. If there's anything to authentic spiritual development, shouldn't it make us feel *more* kinship with our fellow human beings, not *less*? What's the point of becoming conscious if not to share that goodness with others, reduce suffering, and make the human world better?

This brings up the nagging question of superiority, whether considered as an innate predisposition or a nasty side effect. I don't care what qualities in life one strives for — wealth, happiness, love, status, power, creativity, or even a goal as ill-defined as "consciousness." If achieving (and enjoying) any of those qualities results in our feeling superior to others, than something is really goddamn wrong. And yet, everywhere I turn — sometimes in myself, sometimes in others, and all too often in the world — I see uncomfortable evidence of that weird Us-versus-Them superiority bullshit. You know, "*We're Number One!!!*" — implying that everyone else, everyone who is "Them," *isn't*. Damn.

Especially these days, when the "civilized" world seems to be (yet again, for the umpteenth time) careening ever more deeply, dangerously, violently, and painfully into the realm of utter bat-shit craziness, I drift back to what I read in mid-adolescence that Gurdjieff had said about improving the world. Jesus H. Christ, is it possible that he was right? That trying to improve the world is a waste of time, since it cannot be achieved from where we are?

If he was correct, then there's a certain ineffable loneliness that will inevitably result from doing one's inner work. You get a little more conscious, a little more mature, a little kinder, and a little more compassionate, and yet you discover to your horror that you're also becoming less and less a member of your species. All the pursuits of "regular" people in the "real" world begin to appear irrelevant, decidedly not compelling, and far from attractive.

The jury is still out on all this for me. Belief in the goodness of reducing needless suffering in the collective and somehow making society and civilization, if not truly sane, at least a little less insane, runs very deep in me. I know many people for whom personal family is the most important thing (and sometimes the only thing) that truly matters, but I never felt that sense of small-group biological kinship. I didn't marry or have children, so my "family" is less immediate and personal. Family for me means social friendship, but in the ideal it goes far beyond that and extends to every creature that lives and breathes, human or otherwise. Giving up the idea of making life a little better for everyone is not only difficult for me, it's downright disturbing.

And yet, as I move through the last chapter of my elderhood here in a failing American empire that is clearly coming apart at the seams, I begin to lean more toward Gurdjieff's view.

If I reach the point where that perspective no longer causes me sorrow, then I'll know that the issue has been resolved once and for all. I'm not there now, but I wonder about the coming years. I suppose it's possible that the pain of chronic illness, increasing disability, and the inevitable personal losses of old age are simply overriding, forcing out, or numbing the concern I've felt throughout my life about our collective suffering, but that's a topic for another essay.