January 9, 2020 – The Way of Work
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**Welcome/Gratitude**

I too wish to welcome you and honor all of you for saying *yes* to this new beginning. It takes courage to be willing to push the limits of our understanding. Gurdjieff taught that esoteric teaching has always been preserved and transmitted in groups of individuals dedicated to transformation, and that part of the alchemy happens from the combined intention and energy of such groups.

*When two or more are gathered in my name, there I am.*

- Matthew 18:20

We need each other. So I know we're all grateful for the presence of those of you here tonight and those of you watching remotely. I can see that we represent a spectrum of experience – from those who are just beginning and have a fervent hope for a new way of being to those who have been on this particular path for a long time and have a profound wish to go even deeper. And this is good. We all have seekers' hearts. My prayer is that there is food here for all of us.

As you probably know, at The Church of Conscious Harmony, our particular flavor of the Way is the blending and synergy of two ancient wisdom streams, contemplative Christianity — as expressed through the practice of Centering Prayer and the teachings of Thomas Keating and others — and the Work of Inner Christianity — an expression of the ancient practice of the esoteric Christian Fourth Way, as presented by G.I. Gurdjieff, Maurice Nicoll and others.

As many of us have discovered, this Way is really not two paths tacked onto one another; this Way is all of a piece – one transformational blend of what the Benedictines called *ora et labora,* prayer and work. One Work.

Nevertheless, *tonight* our focus is the Work, as brought to the West by Gurdjieff and as practiced here at The Church of Conscious Harmony. So my aim is to give an overview of the Work of Inner Christianity. What is the origin of the Work? What is the Work and what is its objective? Why do we need the Work? And perhaps most immediately relevant and practical: What is our part in the Work?

**What is the origin of the Work?**

Gurdjieff taught that The Fourth Way is not a man-made system; it originates from above or beyond our ordinary level of consciousness and has been brought to humanity as gift for those who are seeking. It is objective knowledge of the principles that govern the universe. It is Universal Truth, which is why we can so clearly sense its principles resonating within us when we prayerfully take in the words of the Gospels and ponder the trajectory of Jesus' life.

As you know, our over-arching theme this year is "The Way Draws Us Deeper." And if you haven't had the opportunity to hear Peter's talk this past Sunday (January 5, 2020), I highly recommend that you listen. It's a beautiful exploration of that theme. He starts to unpack the idea that the Way is both our path, our part, our *yes* to transformation *and* Ultimate Mystery Itself – God, Holy Spirit, Universal Consciousness, the Divine Indwelling – which is drawing each of us ever deeper into relationship with this Mystery. This also can be said of the Work.

**What is the Work and what is its objective?**

The Work is not concerned with improving our finances, our love lives, our health or any other life concern – not that there is anything *wrong* with that.

I think one of the best ways of describing the Work comes in the title of a book by P.D. Ouspensky, *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution.* The Work is a system of transformational psychology that teaches that **Man is a Self-developing organism** – that all women and men are unfinished creations with the potential of being evolved into something far greater.

Simply stated: the aim of the Work is to provide a container, a community and a practical set of tools to help us reach our highest, God-given potential as human beings.

"All religion, all esoteric teaching, is about the fact that we are born as self-developing organisms … in order, by a certain kind of work on ourselves, to reach something inherent in us (as a new being is inherent in an egg) which is called Real I … the object is to have what is called 'Christ' born in us. … the Kingdom of Heaven lies within you and that means the realization of Real I. … Now the application of the Work to yourself is all about making it possible to go on a journey, spiritual or psychological, towards what is really you, Real I in you."

- Maurice Nicoll, *Commentaries*, "On Practical Work," Dec 18, 1949, Vol. 4, p. 1348

Most people on this path eventually understand that the spiritual journey entails what the Christian tradition calls *kenosis* – or self-emptying – allowing the movement of the Spirit of God within to heal, open, awaken us, and – ultimately – live us.

**Why do we need the Work?**

One of the most profound teachings of the Work is that we have our origin in the stars. Each of us is born with **essence**, a divine eternal center that Fr. Thomas Keating calls "our basic core of goodness." As small children, due to deprivations, unconsciousness around us or trauma, our healthy instinctual needs for security, affection and a sense of autonomy become distorted and crystallized into outsized demands or programs for emotional happiness. As we learned to navigate life on this planet – what Fr. Richard Rohr calls our first education – we forgot our true identity and become fragmented into competing small identities that take turns running the show. (In the Work, this is called **multiplicity or the** **doctrine of 'I's**.) And though we may feel the call of our essence and long to live according to the values of the Gospels, we habitually find ourselves in mechanical reactivity, pushed and pulled by the events of life and these compensatory patterns. We are, for the most part, asleep.

"Our thoughts, feelings, and deeds are little more than mechanical reactions to external and internal stimuli. In Gurdjieff's terms, we cannot *do* anything. In and around us, everything 'happens' without the participation of an authentic consciousness. But human beings are ignorant of this state of affairs because of the pervasive and deeply internalized influence of culture and education, which engrave in us the illusion of autonomous conscious selves. In short, [we are] asleep."

- Jacob Needleman, *Introduction to the Gurdjieff Work*

That may sound pretty stark, but I ask you to take a moment to ponder these questions. Try to feel your feet on the ground and take them in cleanly and objectively, without self-criticism.

- Am I able to respond to everyone in a kind fashion? Even in my thoughts?

- Am I able to forgive everyone who has done me harm?

- Are my thoughts about myself, others or situations free from anxiety, judgment or resentment?

- Am I free from worry about the future or anguish about the past?

- Am I peaceful when driving my car?

If you answered "no" to any or all of these questions, welcome to the human race! You're in the right place. "Fear not," as the Gospel says, "I bring you tidings of great joy."

Here we learn that, though humanity is hypnotized by inherited forces of negativity, duality and violence – what Fr. Thomas calls "the human condition" – each of us, by applying the Work to ourselves, has the possibility of freedom from these forces. Simply put, we have the extraordinary opportunity to participate in our own expansion and evolution.

One of the Work aphorisms that unfolds its meaning for us over time is, **"Man cannot do."** We learn that asleep in the human condition, we cannot by our own volition free ourselves. More good news: it is not *us* who are evolving us; it is God. We are junior partners in our transformation, but necessary partners. God is immanently respectful of our free will.

**What *is* our part in the Work? What *can* we do?**

Though God does the healing and transformation, we do have a part to play. We consent, we say *yes,* we show up, we do our practices. It is often said that, though we cannot do, we can Work.

**We practice daily.**

We study and practice the Work. We grow in **understanding** by the combination of **Work on the side of knowledge** and **Work on the side of being.** We gain knowledge by reading from the *Commentaries* or other Work authors each day and making effort to learn Work terminology, which often has its own meaning for common words. We also gain knowledge by attending class and asking questions of our friends in the Work. We work on the side of being by beginning to apply the ideas we're learning in our daily lives.

We pray. As monks in the world, we are encouraged to incorporate two periods of Centering Prayer into each day. Without the prayer – our consent to the healing and action of the Divine Therapist in the silence – the Work can become just another self-improvement project, doomed to failure.

**We strive to think in a new way.**

"Now let us speak first of what is said about the key to self-change in that extraordinary production called the Gospels. Notice how the whole idea of self-change, inner self-evolution, begins with one magical word. This word in the Greek is *metanoia*. … The introductory word to the Gospels and all their inner psychological teaching is *metanoia* which is wrongly translated as 'Repent' and which really means 'change your mind.' In other words, it means 'Think in a new way.' *Meta* = beyond; and *noia* = mind. So the word *metanoia* means 'think beyond your mind' and that is equivalent to what this Work, which is Esoteric Christianity, indicates when it teaches that in order to change we must think in a new way."

- Maurice Nicoll, *Commentaries,* "Commentary on Habits," February 14, 1948, Vol. 3, p. 1124

**We seek consciousness.**

We recognize that, despite our longing to live as love, we have often been far from that ideal. In the Work, we seek first consciousness – awareness – light.

This is the reason for the foundational, three-part transforming process of the Work. The process consists of **self-observation** (an unstinting, yet non-critical examination of our thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations), **non-identification** (separation from these reactions – the realization that "This is not I.") and **Self-remembering** (the summoning – by whatever means – into the mind, body and heart, the awareness of God and our real identity in and as Christ.)

No one taught us this process. Our attention is habitually drawn in many directions, so we begin by paying attention to our **attention.** We start out in the Work as babies in practicing this. We miss the mark many times; that's part of the process.

"Q. Why is it so difficult to control attention? A. Lack of habit. We are too accustomed to letting things happen. When we want to control attention or something else, we find it difficult, just as physical work is difficult if we are not accustomed to it."
- P.D. Ouspensky, [*The Fourth Way*](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/575306)

Without judgment, without violence, we gently, persistently, repeatedly shift our attention, to begin to see the deep ruts of mechanical thought and behavior. With time, patience and practice, our attention begins to be trained in service to the Work.

As the Work comes alive in us, we gratefully realize that **life is school**. Our whole lives become recontextualized as opportunity to Work, to awaken, to grow in awareness of and union with the Living God. Events, relationships, and difficulties – large or small – become transformed from annoyances or reasons for hopelessness to part of our God-given curriculum.

As we practice and internalize the triadic process (self-observation, non-identification and Self-remembering), we experience liberation from the bondage of habitual ways of being and thinking. And we come to understand – again and again – that *we* are not the healer; it is the Divine Therapist. So we relax and grow in trust that Divine Consciousness is drawing us patiently, inexorably to and through the next old wound to be healed. It is the Light that heals and transforms.

"Presume that the world's actual 'purpose' is perfect and fully known by God. See it as neutral overall but with the benefit that it provides optimal opportunity for spiritual growth and the evolution of consciousness. It is a school for enlightenment and the revelation of Divinity whereby consciousness/awareness reawakens to its Source. Thus, to pursue enlightenment in and of itself serves the world and God."

- David R. Hawkins, M.D., Ph.D., *Discovery of the Presence of God: Devotional Nonduality*

**We make payment.**

"How can I pay for the gifts I have received in my life? What is the price of transformation? … First, if we want something, we must pay with efforts — or better yet, super-efforts. Effort needs knowledge and recognition of the moment when the effort is useful. Such efforts include doing a task well, being present to yourself as often as you can during your waking hours, seeing yourself attempting to be quiet and immobile when emotions are taxing your energies, sensing yourself and working to prevent your attention from being pulled out of you and absorbed in a life situation — that is identifying. You engage in 'intentional suffering' when you sacrifice your internal considering … when you refrain from expressing a negative emotion. … We would love to vent our ire, criticize a person or situation, or simply gossip or bad-mouth someone. Not doing it is intentional suffering. We all have experienced how hard this is, especially when we are personally attacked. … Time is payment. We are allotted only a limited time in our life for our inner transformation. The time we give to the Work is payment. The remainder of the time is just life. … When I see how I fall short or when I recognize the quality — or lack of quality — I give to my efforts, I am shown my weaknesses. My efforts show me who and what I am, if I am there to *see*. And this is painful payment. … Payment is a very important principle in the Work. … You have to make payment before receiving anything and the first real payment is to take the trouble to study and understand the things you hear and read. This, in turn, creates the possibility, the conditions, required for the next levels of payment. You sacrifice imagination to live in the *real* world. If you work long enough, perhaps you will sacrifice your negativity, your anger, your laziness and your multitude of contradictory 'I's. You may eventually be able to sacrifice who you are for what you can be."

- John Fuchs, *Forty Years After Gurdjieff: A Guide to Practical Work*

**We wish.**

Perhaps the most important effort we can make in the Work – especially at the beginning of a new octave – is **wish.** A wish, according to the Work, is more than a preference or a small desire for something. A wish is born of our profound longing for ever-deeper relationship with, and service to, God, our sisters and brothers, and all creation. In Luke 11:9, we are given direct instructions on how to wish:

*Ask and it will be given to you;*

*Seek and you will find;*

*Knock and the door will be opened to you.*

- Luke 11:9

So we see that more than an intellectual prayer, a wish comes from all three centers — the mind (*ask)*, the heart (*seek)* and even the body (*knock)*.

"What is too often missing is knowing what I want. And it is this that undermines my will to work. Without knowing what I want, I will not make any effort. I will sleep. Without wishing for a different quality in myself, to turn toward my higher possibilities, I will have nothing to lean on, nothing to support work. I must always, again and again, come back to this question: What do I wish? It must become the most important question of my life. Yet this wish for a different quality has no force at all if it comes from my ordinary 'I.' It must be related to something completely different from my ordinary 'I' and free from the desire for a result. I must not forget *why* I wish. This must be for me really a question of life or death – I wish to *be,* to live in a certain way."

- Jeanne de Salzmann, *The Reality of Being*

"I Am. I Wish. I can Work."

- Work Aphorism/Affirmation/Wish

"One must never do an exercise without preparation. All your functions are automatized. Before any exercise, you must sacrifice five, ten, fifteen minutes to relax and to calm your associations. Whether the exercise is big or little – all exercises."

- G. I. Gurdjieff, Transcript from "Paris Meetings, 1943," reprinted in *Parabola,* Spring 2018

**Homework**: Wish. A wish is a powerful prayer; it is how we a*sk, seek and knock;* it is a ferment by which we animate our participation in the Trinitarian life that is our destiny. It is important. It is said that our deepest wish is actually God's wish for us. So, wish big! Whether you are new to the Work and activating a wish for the first time, or are a long-time practitioner re-discovering and re-grounding your wish, take time to ponder: "What is my wish?" Then take time to plant that wish deeply, by praying it in all three centers with deep intention. Think it, feel it and sense it in your body. May it be so. Amen.