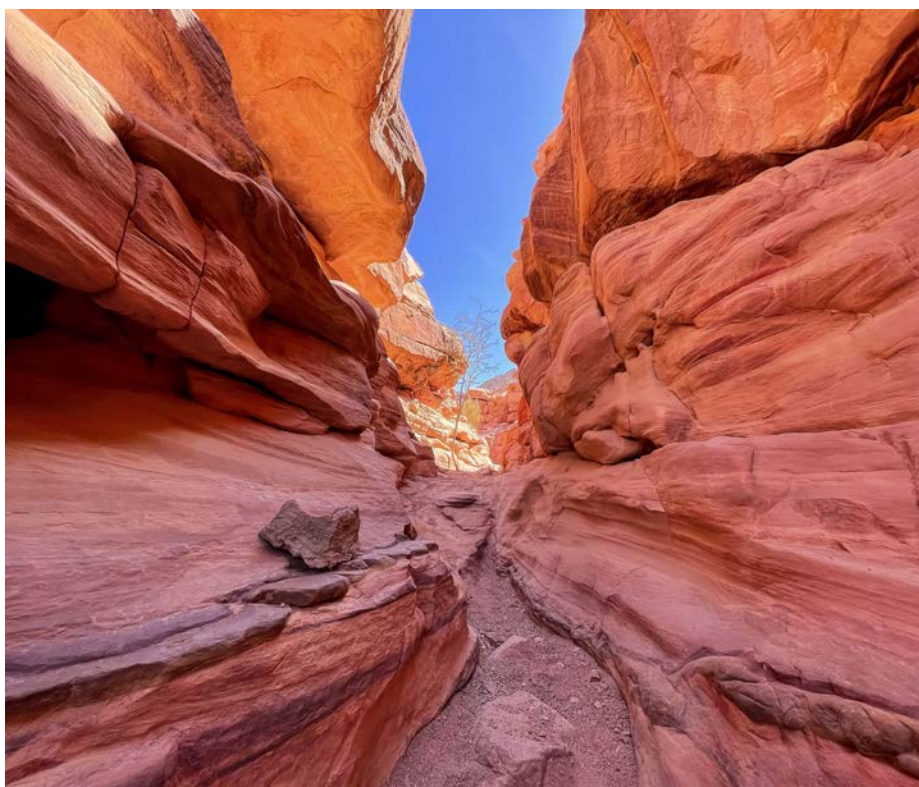


Alchemical Sufi Silent Retreat



**Sinai Desert
2023**

'May I Be Here Now'
(Gurdjieff)

The memories I'm about to relate may outwardly appear inconsequential but seen from within these experiences were so substantial that they still occupy my thoughts to this day, remaining in my memory as shrines on the wayside.

A minibus picks my friend Nicky and me up from Sharm El-Sheik. We're oblivious to what we've let ourselves in for, innocents abroad on a journey into uncertainty. It's a two-hour drive to the centre of the Sinai Desert. With continuing jihadist terror attacks, security is intense. Every 30Km our journey is punctuated with army roadblocks and checkpoints manned by peevish security agents, fresh-faced soldiers, and chain-smoking armed police, who scrutinize our passports.

I remark at how very few vehicles there are on the immaculately tarmacked highway cutting through the desert and am told that post-Covid the Egyptian economy has gone into freefall with devaluation of the Egyptian Pound and 30% inflation.

The further we drive into the desert the more inhospitable it becomes, countless miles of barren scrubland and distant soaring peaks. I ask myself: *'How can anyone survive in such a harsh environment?'* before the exhilarating yet disturbing thought occurs: *'You're gonna find out soon enough, boyo!'*

The sight of the desert envelopes my senses, and I wake up to the fact that this vast and silent pocket of the Earth is one of humanity's great theatres in its search for Meaning.

In this place of faith, the Sinai became the crucible of early Christian mysticism when countless seekers of transformation headed to the desert, their flight from the world paradoxically attaining phenomenal dimensions as the Roman world officially became Christian.

Living as cave-dwellers, hermits, and anchorites, the Desert Fathers and Mothers developed a Wisdom Literature and a monastic movement that has offered spiritual guidance to seekers of truth across the centuries. While I'm animated by the prospect of entering this sacred place, I'm aware too that these great desert contemplatives spoke again and again of the immense difficulty of inner work.

Our 'Caravan of Souls' in March 2023 on this Silent Sufi Retreat is an international brigade of ten people: Nicky, an Englishwoman, two Turks, two Americans, one French and one Taiwanese woman, two Englishmen, one being Shams, our retreat guide and a Representative in the Inayati Sufi Order. ¹

There is little conversation as we journey into the unknown, all of us enclosed in our private worlds of associations, or anxieties. Finally, we pull up by the side of the highway where four Bedouin are waiting. We haul our embarrassingly cumbersome rucksacks into two battered open backed 4x4 trucks and lurch off-road onto rocky outcrops and sand.

After two bumpy hours we arrive at a Bedouin village, half a dozen one-storey huts of corrugated tin, palm fronds and breeze blocks. A handful of untethered goats roam while four camels graze the scrubby desert floor exuding an innate dignity despite having their front legs roped together. A few children are visible although they keep their distance.

Life has been extremely tough for our Muzeina hosts, over recent years. Like all Sinai Bedouin, the Muzeina have been marginalised by the Egyptian authorities. They've also suffered the complete collapse of tourism after the chaos of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, an Islamic insurgency in the Sinai, the bombing of a Russian aircraft killing all 224 passengers and crew in 2015 and the murder of 300 Sufi worshippers in 2017. ²

Weeks before our arrival, the fear of kidnapping and other unspeakable horrors had lingered in my mind but Shams, who'd conducted similar retreats some years ago, assured me that all will be well.

After weeks of resistance, prevarication, and anxiety as to why I was putting myself through this, I remember Gurdjieff's injunction to a frightened old woman in Nazi-occupied Paris, and quietly say to myself: *'May I Be here, now!'* ³

The village Sheik, a tall handsome man in his early sixties, greets me warmly. He offers me a Marlborough cigarette and we quietly smoke together. Silvia, our Swiss interpreter, married to an Egyptian, introduces

¹ Founded by Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882-1927), who first introduced Sufism to the western world.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terrorism_in_Egypt

³ George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1877 – 1949): Armenian Spiritual Teacher, Writer, Philosopher, Composer & Teacher of Sacred Dances.

herself before the trucks are very swiftly loaded with supplies, sacks of bottled mineral water, bags of vegetables, fruits, tins, tea, dates, crockery, rice, rugs, pots and pans, and a gas stove. When they must go, Bedouin don't hang around.

An hour into our bumpy ride, our truck gets stuck in the thickening sand, and we're forced to disembark, supplies, luggage, and all. It takes the driver, half an hour to free the truck with well-placed rocks, as if negotiating a snowdrift. An hour later we arrive at a wadi, a riverbed surrounded by towering sandstone cliffs. Although its winter in the Sinai, there's been no rain for months and the riverbed is completely dry.

The Bedouin have already set up a tent where they'll cook and where we'll eat. Silvia gives us guidance on sleeping rough in the desert, cautioning we should never camp too far from the Bedouin tent for security reasons. She warns of venomous snakes, advising us to always make camp at least a meter away from a bush, close sleeping bags during the day, and lift clothes off the floor, with care. If we see a movement or hear a hiss, to stamp on the ground.

She also advises us to place boots or sandals under sleeping bags at night as desert foxes have a habit of stealing them; to never walk barefoot as the excruciatingly painful sting of the Deathstalker scorpion emits lethal venom capable of killing those with a heart condition.

I pay careful attention given that I'm recovering from a recent heart attack. Pointing beyond the canyon, to desert scrubland about 500 metres away, she informs us: '*Number Twos are allowed over there!*', naming it, 'The ATM'.

As darkness descends, we apprehensively disperse, each searching for a safe and isolated sleeping spot. I wander aimlessly around the canyon floor, but not too far from the protection of the Bedouin tent. Given Silvia's earlier warnings about snakes I remain vigilant but haven't a clue as to where the best place to camp might be.

Huge walls of rust-coloured sandstone rock tower above me. Boulders the size of lorries surround me. It is an extraordinary place where time and the elements have carved the rocks into otherworldly sculptures. Moving my eyes slowly up the canyon's shelves in the ethereal half-light I see curious shapes and figures: a crocodile's jaw, a child's spinning top, a hoof, a frowning eyebrow, a boat, a crab's claw, a chalice....

Finally, I find some level sand on the canyon floor, away from any bush. I remember my first teacher, George Jeffery ⁴ once telling me, '*There are no soft pillows on the Way*', little realizing at the time his remarks would one day be taken quite literally.

I sit for twenty minutes trying to be inwardly quiet, supported in my search for stillness by the desert's astounding silence, a silence I hope will assist me in the tough days ahead. ⁵

We enter the Bedouin tent at seven for supper. I'm struck by its modest beauty particularly the roof covered in hand-woven carpets. It's a timeless scene, Biblical even. A small fire imbues the tent with smoke, shedding light on four Bedouin men quietly sitting on the sandy floor, preparing food. We sit on the floor around a makeshift table, claustrophobically squeezed together. I wonder whether my arthritic knees, my abductor joint...my heart, will survive the forthcoming ordeal.

Over a supper of vegetable stew, couscous, fresh unleavened bread and sweet chai, Silvia talks respectfully of our Bedouin hosts, relating the proverb: *the Bedouin notice everything and forget nothing*. She advises us not to walk in front of the tribesmen as they pray, to never give them individual gifts in front of the others, and always remove sandals when entering their tent.

We retire at 10pm to our respective sleeping spots. As I wriggle into my long-johns and my excuse for a sleeping bag, an easterly wind whips through the canyon. Although wearing thermals, socks, gloves, scarf, and a balaclava, I'm still cold. I lie on my back as shooting stars elicit an involuntary gasp, and, for moments, forget the snakes and scorpions.... but not the cold.

⁴ George Jeffery (1925 – 1991). Teacher of The Gurdjieff Work, and author of *A Bridge to Reality*.

⁵ '*Silence is the language of God, all else is translation*' (Rumi).



This vast and silent pocket of the Earth is one of humanity's great theatres in its search for Meaning.

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'Run from what is comfortable...I have tried prudent planning long enough. From now on, I will be mad'.

(Rumi)

The night is an uncomfortable affair, punctuated by the incessant demands of the bladder. I vow to avoid drinking too much water in the evenings. At 5am, cursing I didn't invest in a decent sleeping bag, I get up, drink water, eat a sweet, and smoke a cigarette.

The sunrise meditation is at 6am, but first I need to empty my bowels. I walk through the canyon to a receptacle outside the Bedouin tent and carefully pour precious water into my water bottle. The ATM is in open desert with a few craggy outcrops offering cover. But it doesn't look inviting. As I scurry towards it, the darkness recedes and I become more visible, acutely aware of how far removed my western conditioned attitude to defecation is, compared to the natural state of such affairs. As instructed – although ridden with anxiety (even guilt, for heaven's sake!) about being seen – I make a small hole in the sand, unbuckle my sandals, peel off my trousers, bring my pants down to the ankles, toilet roll at the ready. But hell, I've mislaid the wet wipes. Stumbling bare-footed across the sharp rocks in search of my toilet bag, I cut my toes, before gingerly

returning to my little hole, to squat, and strain, emanating primal camel-like grunts. Finally, to my relief, the bowels open and I peer down at my deposit, proud at what has been successfully accomplished. I cap it with an almost ritualistic placing of a suitably sized large rock to hide the organic 'evidence'. While some things were transmuted over the coming days, this wasn't true of my ATM experiences!

At 6am, bedraggled and already exhausted, I reach the outcrop allocated for the sunrise mediation. My retreat comrades are already sitting on the uneven rocks in the half-light, swathed in blankets, looking east. As the sun rises, the deep orange hue of the surrounding sandstone mountains lightens. Shams leads us with breathing exercises, urging us to 'dissolve' into the air, the earth, the fiery vastness of the sun, to 'let go' of the baggage of persona, and to extinguish little 'me'.

I'm frustrated by being 'talked through' this meditation as I was hoping for my usual silent sitting. I observe my propensity to cling to certainty, *to what is 'known'*. No chance here. There *is* no escape, no option but to *Be here now*.

Consumed by a chattering monkey mind, I try and meditate. But 'Now' is illusive, at best furtive. I inwardly intone: '*May I be here now*', sensing the rise and fall of my breath, trying to let go of fear, let go of 'me'.

When I first spoke to Shams on Zoom four months ago, he said the retreat was about '*surrender, and dying to the known*'. At the time I casually agreed, but now, in this strange place, I see what a monumental task lies ahead. The less we cling onto our certainties the more I'm told we may find, but, in the cold morning air, far from home, among strangers, 'little me' clings on for dear life.

After the sunrise session we're told to walk slowly and consciously back to the Bedouin camp. To my alarm, Shams is standing outside the tent holding out his hands, indicating we follow suit, and join hands in a circle. Embarrassed, aware of my sweating palms, I nevertheless try to relax and breathe in the clear air but a few seconds later I find myself full of judgement at this 'new age nonsense', and struggle to return to the purifying silence.

By the time we arrive at the tent for breakfast, the Bedouin have miraculously prepared a fine feast: scrambled egg, bananas, oranges, tomatoes, tinned pineapple, packaged cheese, dates, honey, cucumbers, and fresh bread baked on their ever-burning fire. I'm touched by the care they take in handling food and in attending to their precious fire; touched

too by their quiet generosity and innate grace, intensified by their sensitivity towards our silence,

Inwardly though, I'm not silent, my mind invaded by automatic thoughts. Outwardly, our group appear relaxed, content even, free of the conventional need to 'make' conversation. I feel awkward and fake a smile although it probably looks like a grimace. Huddled together, shoulder to shoulder, elbow to elbow my spirits are lifted when I see the simple pleasure of a jar of good old-fashioned Nescafé coffee.

At 9am, clasping our notebooks and water bottles, we meet high in the canyon. Shams is already there and, as we arrive, counts us like sheep. He is an interesting fellow. His grandmother Cynthia Pearce worked with Gurdjieff in Paris and with Henriette Lannes in London.⁶ By all accounts she came from a wealthy family and her grandson Shams was educated at Eton. A Reiki practitioner and publisher of haiku poems in previous lives, he's now a Representative in the Inayatiyya Sufi Order.

Perched high in the cave, completely at home in the desert landscape, Shams eloquently relates humorous stories about Mullah Nassr Eddin ⁷, and reads from Rilke, Thomas Merton, Ibn 'Arabī, Julian of Norwich, and TS Eliot.

On a purely elementary level I initially dislike the man with the 'plum in his mouth', because his lean, moustachioed face reminded me of someone I didn't much care for back home! Longing for affirmation, I'm hurt he doesn't appear interested in my fascinating back-story and my wonderful personality! Almost immediately I observe in myself an irrepressible inclination to cling onto my likes and dislikes, my silent prejudices, my cynical judgements. But how to break free?

Serendipitously, the theme today is to unencumber 'little me' from the 'artificial self', the 'reactive self', the ego (*nafs*) ⁸, and '*transmute the baggage and compost it to make a garden*'.

A pattern to the Alchemical Retreat is emerging. Every morning and every afternoon we'll meet for an hour, high in the canyon, for the teachings and the Recitations, which we're expected to practise alone. The Recitations

⁶ Henriette Lannes (1899-1980), plenipotentiary of the Gurdjieff Work in London.

⁷ Mullah Nassr Eddin: Character in the Folklore of the Muslim World, humorous stories to be understood on different levels.

⁸ *Nafs*: An Arabic word occurring in the Holy Quran, literally meaning self or ego.

are invocations (*Zikrs, Remembrances*), of the 99 Names of God, as revealed in the Holy Quran.

Shams explains that, for Sufis, humanity is a theomorphic reflection of God. Each of us is formed in the image of God, and the Names are potentialities that are latent, unmanifested, in us. By reciting the Names, we journey towards the Mystery. Today's Recitations are *Al Hayy* (The Ever-Living), and *Al Qayyum* (The Eternal). ⁹ Although I struggle with the Arabic, I promise myself I'll try and recite them as consciously as I can over the coming days.

I stop every half an hour to smoke, pee, or gaze at the surrounding sculptured rocks soaring above me. The silence is absolute, vibrating. A line from a Rilke poem comes to mind: '*Listen to the ceaseless message that forms itself out of the silence*'. ¹⁰

Later, I struggle into my sleeping bag for a few hours of fragmented sleep. But, at five in the morning, I'm woken with a sudden jolt. I turn in my sleeping bag and to my horror, opposite, I see what I take to be a giant, lying in the canyon, about twenty feet away. A dead giant dressed as a dervish, lying prostrate on the back of a stationary low loader lorry!

I'm petrified, dumbstruck by the apparition, unable to compute what I'm seeing. The vision appears corporeal, not ghost-like. Whatever it is, hallucination, vision, self-deception, I don't know, but the more I stare the more confounded I become, and the more substantial the dead dervish appears. Unnerved, I struggle out of my sleeping bag. As I stand up, the 'lorry' leaves the canyon, the apparition dissolving before my eyes.

Relief is accompanied by the realization this won't have been the first time such a phenomenon has been witnessed in the Sinai.

⁹ Simone Weil wrote that Invocation of the Name lies at the very heart of all spiritual traditions, a means by which the seeker can find a gateway to enter conscious relationship with the Creator, inviting the Higher into the heart.

¹⁰ Rilke, (1875-1926) Austrian Poet, quoted from *Duino Elegies*



Time has carved the rocks into otherworldly sculptures.

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***‘Come, come, whoever you are. Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving. It doesn't matter. Ours is not a caravan of despair. Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times. Come, yet again, come, come.’
(Rumi)***

Cold, and still in shock after the early morning visitation, I sluggishly walk the 500 metres for our 6am sunrise meditation. We're taken through an hour of breathing exercises, but my sinuses react, and for some panic-stricken few seconds, I can't breathe at all. I stop and try to direct my attention into the sensation of my body.

When the hour is up, we all meet outside the Bedouin tent and much to my chagrin, endure the ritual hand-holding palaver again. My head bursts with associative thoughts and judgements: *‘What do they think they're doing?’*; *‘I'm an outsider, I don't belong here!’*; *‘Why the pretence, as if we're all long-lost friends?’*; and then a fleeting thought: *‘Maybe we are!’*

At our silent claustrophobic breakfast, I'm painfully aware that my legs are feeling the pressure of having to kneel or sit cross-legged on the floor. My kingdom for a chair! Again, I'm delighted to see the jar of Nescafé on the table. I gesticulate, and with a hint of desperation stretch out my hand. A Bedouin, ever attentive, pours hot water into my cup. It's a good old-fashioned coffee that ‘hits the spot’, although anxious about my next visit to the ATM, I'm concerned which spot it'll hit!

We meet at 9am among the craggy sandstone rocks in the canyon. Already, I've become more aware of the movement of the sun, and how its position in the sky determines the shade. Like the Bedouin, I've become a seeker of shadow and shade.

Shams explains that although 'the soul is still veiled', we're now entering the more 'subtle realms', and after last night's visitation by the dead Dervish, I tend to agree.

After a couple of hours in the heat, struggling with the Arabic: *Ya Shāfi* (The Healer), *Ya Kāfi* (The Shield), and *Ya Jameel* (The Beautiful), I fancy some tea. I head down to the Bedouin tent where two Bedouin are busy making bread on the simple gas stove. As I enter, they instantly say '*Marhaba*' (welcome) as if they're expecting me. I reply '*Shukran*' (thank you), the first words I've spoken in the desert.

Enthusiastically they stoke up the embers and boil water in an old pot. Bedouin drink copious amounts of sweet black tea with sugar dropped in by the handful, just how I like it! I'm passed a steaming shot glass. I offer my tobacco for a roll-up, but they prefer their own cigarettes.

Radi, 44, is tall, thin, with the face and demeanour of a hawk, while Sabah, 57 is softer, self-effacing, shy. I say: '*children?*' and Sabah, 57, holds out five fingers while Radi looks down a little sadly suggesting he has none. Saba speaks no English, while Radi has a smattering, and draws patterns on the sand illustrating Ronaldo and Messi's different routes to goal. When he asks: '*England? Harry Kane?*' I say: '*No, me Wales*', and to my astonishment he instantly says, '*Gareth Bale!*' – how extraordinary to be living in a global village!



Radi with shisha and tea.

Walking back to my desolate sleeping spot, I'm suddenly overcome with sadness. A disheartening depression descends like a shadow, sapping my will of all enthusiasm. I sense in my guts my terrible contradictions, my two natures, one seeking realisation, the other annihilation.

Suddenly, I'm weighed down by hopelessness and doubt, mystified as to why this cauldron of negativity has unexpectedly erupted: where is the meaning I supposed I'd once gathered. What, who, is this 'shadow seeker'¹¹?

By this my third day, I'm acutely aware that under the desert's searing glare, there's no place to hide and all deceit is burnt away. The desert has set a mirror before me, and I'm faced with myself. There are no scapegoats here.

In my reflection I see a man enslaved to a hodgepodge of prejudices and daydreams, a man submerged in a sea of 'identifications', today, self-pity and anxiety. A helpless creature enslaved by his mind's endless idiotic monologues, his cruel judgments on other poor devils, and paradoxically a squirming fear of others' verdict on him.

Yes, this is how I am. Perhaps this is how we all are? I don't know. How foolish of me to think that by coming to the desert I can attain awareness of anything Higher when I am as I am! A second birth? A divine revelation? Give us a break!

There's nothing I can do, except return to the Recitations and to the all-pervading stillness. Unobtrusively the shadow disappears as if it can't bear the integrity of this silence. A tenuous verticality accompanies a return to the present moment. Then just as unobtrusively my feeble attention is taken, ricocheting between returning and leaving.

I quietly beseech: '*Lord Have Mercy*' and for moments, I'm present again, and I pray, for Jayne my wife, for my family, friends, and (believe it or not), for the world.

After supper, we silently and slowly walk the soft sands for the evening *zikr*. Under the starry sky we're urged 'to surrender to the Unknown and 'open to the Mystery of Becoming', reciting: *Bismillah er-Rahman er-Rahim*, (In the Name of God, The Most Merciful, The Compassionate). The rhythmic chant both a dance and a prayer.

¹¹ 'Shadow Seeker': term used by George Jeffery in *Erinord*, Published by Rex Collings Ltd, (1976).



No place to hide.

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‘Life is real only then, when I am’.
(Gurdjieff)

Next morning, I navigate the jagged outcrop of rocks and join the sunrise meditation session. The sun silently rises over the desert, burning away the darkness and the chill. After the breathing exercises we walk back to the Bedouin tent, noticeably slower, the desert wordlessly demanding a response to Her authority.

I surmise to an onlooker that we must look like hermits from another age. Or perhaps hermit crabs, such was the shuffling progression of our group, each of us inured in ourselves, each already porous, leaking at the edges, on the edge of the unknown, even to ourselves; hermit pilgrims journeying into our deepest selves. As we silently take off our sandals and enter the tent I realize, as if for the first time, I’m not the only one among our bedraggled caravan of souls struggling. How arrogant to assume it’s only ‘poor little me’ suffering, a thought accompanied by a flash of compassion.



Each on the edge of the Unknown.

I sense too, a growing connection with our Bedouin hosts. While few words have been exchanged between us, there's an unspoken recognition that only in silence can the message of the desert be heard.

I recognise in these composed self-reliant tribesmen a resilience and a native tranquillity borne out of their precarious, tough lives. I'm humbled by their unruffled generosity in serving, sustaining, and protecting us. They are as much a part of this caravan of souls as we are. For them 'the spiritual life' isn't an appendage, TE Lawrence once observing: *'in the vast, echoing and Godlike desert, The Bedouin do not look for God within, so sure are they that they are within God'*.¹²

After the meeting I find shade in the canyon and doze off. I'm suddenly woken by the timbre of my late mother's voice - resonant, clear, and distinctly close. For a few brief moments, she's present to me, a living, loving presence, I joyfully bathe in the sound of her Welsh lilt. Then, as I recall her last few excruciating years in the nursing home, I cry and, as I do, her subtle manifestation vanishes, and I'm alone again, a remorseful, motherless, child.

I return to the *zikrs* of the day: '*al-Ghaffār*,' (the Forgiver) and '*at-Tawwāb*,' (the Acceptor of Repentance), which now take on a new intensity. I discern a delicate alchemical process is invisibly and mysteriously unfolding. Embryonic and undramatic yes, but undoubtedly healing and, in Rumi's words, 'burning the past on the fire of Now'.

¹² T. E. Lawrence, (1888-1935), *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

But how? My attention is fragile. Now is fugitive. I return to my Gurdjieff practice and gently try to return to the present moment, directing my awareness into my body, sensing head, arms, torso, legs, feet on the floor, my breath rising and falling, thus allowing an inner movement to a less coarse, finer, level.

For most of my adult life the Gurdjieff Work has been my sustaining inner companion, experience verifying that the quality of my attention is the key to the meaning of my life and to a possible growth of being. Through the Work, I've learnt that only by keen self-observation and a concomitant sincerity will the true shallowness of my inner stillness be revealed. To deepen awareness, I need a pure unsullied attention, free of all taint, free of all conditioning, allowing me to step out of myself and die to the known. But I'm reckless with this sacred gift of attention ¹³, constantly taken by emotional reactions and automatic thoughts. As such 'I' disappear, and become a mere puppet, not living my life, but *having my life lived for me*.

However, it's audacious to think my being is growing or my baggage is already composted. All afternoon, one of our Caravan of Souls, a Taiwanese woman continuously paces the canyon, chanting in a high-pitched shrill voice, and I'm consumed by irritation and annoyance. Through gritted teeth I quietly hiss: '*Bloody Yoko Ono!*'

Almost immediately I'm struck by my hypocrisy in 'seeking the higher', while devoured by violent judgments and reactions. The charming, gentlemanly image I have of myself is blown to smithereens. If I believed after a few days on this silent retreat I'd emerge as a sheep from a sheep dip, sanitized and purified, serene and forbearing, then I'm completely deceiving myself. I'm shaken to the marrow by the realization that far from being composted, I'm still full of excrement!

As I sit brooding in the canyon, Shams walks by. Before the retreat he'd warned that as our mask, our protective 'artificial self', loses its force, there'll inevitably come a time when we're confronted by some harsh truths about ourselves. Starkly aware of how glued I am to this 'self', I feel compelled to speak with him.

Sitting opposite each other in the shade on the sandy floor, I realize the last few days have completely scrambled my brain and I'm incapable of formulating any thoughts. Struggling to find the right words, my whole body begins to shake, and a steady stream of tears involuntarily flows down my face. Finally, I'm able to compose myself and relate the

¹³ '*Where our attention is, God is*', Mme. Jeanne De Salzmann, *The Reality of Being*, Shambhala Publications, 2010

experiences of the dead dervish, my mum's presence, and my inner violence.

Shams doesn't appear surprised by my trembling body, my tears, nor my 'confessions'. He surmises the dead dervish might represent 'the old man dying', perhaps even a new man waiting to be reborn? He suggests I leave the floor of the canyon where I've camped until now and 'go higher'. By sincerely acknowledging and accepting my weaknesses, I'm able to 'let go', and sense an interior softening taking place. The breaking of the carapace around my heart allows me to trust, and I thank Shams for his counsel. Somewhat restored, I pack up my sleeping bag from the canyon floor and go in search of higher ground.

Later that afternoon, the silence is shattered by the sound of shouting and the thump and crash of rocks hitting the ground. A deadly Black Egyptian Desert Cobra has been spotted very close to the Bedouin tent. As venomous as a King Cobra, the Bedouin have no hesitation in stoning it to death. On descending back to the floor of the canyon, I find some of my comrades visibly shaken by the brutality of the proceedings. The proximity of this lethal creature to the Bedouin tent meant the tribesmen had little choice but to slay the snake. Later that day Nicky is ill with sunstroke, a warning to us all to stay in the shade.

As the intensity of the heat melts away, we meet at 5:30pm by a large shady outcrop looking east over the desert. As the sun sets, we listen to readings: Mullah Nasruddin stories and Eliot's *Four Quartets*: '*At the still point of the turning world.... there the dance is.....Except for the point, the still point, there would be no dance, and there is only the dance*'.¹⁴ Eliot's words are balm as they drift gently across the desert sands. I fondly recollect the times I've heard these words in my Gurdjieff group with my spiritual friends back home, remembering Gurdjieff's words: '*Common Aim, stronger than Blood*'.¹⁵

Later, as I navigate the unfamiliar rocky terrain to my new camping spot, I'm surprised to find I'm not using a torch anymore. Desert living has heightened my senses and with a newfound confidence I climb high into the canyon. Walking through the darkness, I intuitively detect a shift occurring, as if an inner compass is pointing me in a new direction.

Unable to sleep in my new surroundings, I lie on my back in the hope of seeing shooting stars. I'm thrilled to see the Milky Way is even more visible

¹⁴ TS Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', *Four Quartets*.

¹⁵ Gurdjieff, quoted from, *Life is Real Only Then When I Am*.

in this higher place. My eyes are riveted to the fantastic spectacle. Then I shudder, as awe turns to an almost organic terror. A question, deeply embedded in my psyche arises: '*Who am I?*' Knowing that I don't know, I place my attention into the rise and fall of my breath and simply affirm my existence. As I say, '*May I Be here Now*', the universe seems to open its arms to little me: '*Yes I am here and yes you are here too*'.

Imperceptibly I'm drawn into, and then enveloped by the reverberant emptiness of silent space. My sense of 'self' with its petty manifestations, dissolves. Something, *someone*, nameless deep within, carrying a current of wisdom and knowledge counsels, *I am*, a living particle, a precious fragment of the Source of both the visible and the invisible worlds.



'The Bedouin do not look for God within so sure are they that they are within God'
(T.E. Lawrence).

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***'I was a Hidden Treasure that yearned to be known, so I created the Worlds: both visible and invisible'.
(Hadith Qudsi)***

Next morning, as has become routine, we form a circle outside the Bedouin tent. We recite: *Bismillah er-Rahman er-Rahim*, (In the Name of God, The Merciful, The Compassionate). After only a few hours' sleep, I'm not feeling particularly prayerful and long for a Nescafé coffee and a smoke.

Although it's extremely hot today, 33C. I decide to practice the morning *zikrs* away from the shade of the canyon. On entering the exposed valley floor, I'm grateful for my faithful water bottle and the keffiyeh protecting my head. But within half an hour under the merciless sun I begin to panic and desperately scan the rocky outcrops for shade.

Thankfully I spot some shelter. Although little more than a slight overhang it is just large enough to crawl into and protect my head. Despite a bush nearby, anxiety about snakes and scorpions is quickly alleviated by the relief of cover.

There's no wind today, and the only sound is the soft lament of rock doves. From my perch I watch white-crowned Wheatears flutter in the sky, flitting from crevice to cliff to cave. A sudden fitful movement catches my eye as a gecko lizard disappears under a nearby rock.

Cramped in the crevice, my thoughts turn to the anchorites of 4th century Egypt, who headed for the Sinai. Living in caves and crevices, not unlike mine, but for years not days, I wonder what inner struggles these spiritual warriors endured in their 'cells of self-knowledge'¹⁶, with their experiments with consciousness. What demoniacal powers did they encounter in their head-on confrontations with the subconscious? What sacred thunder did they hear as the Absolute erupted into their consciousness?

Sitting in the crevice I look north to the mountains rising out of the shimmering heat. With a breath-taking authority they appear to pose an unutterable challenge. I am insignificant, they are indifferent. Their gaze is fixed beyond the here or now, beyond centuries, or aeons yet to come.

Their gaze is fixed towards Eternity. 'Joe' doesn't exist for these mountains; indeed, 'Joe' couldn't exist for them, nor ever will.

Chilled by the stark realisation of my 'nothingness', I feel compelled to say out loud with all the force I can muster: '*May I be here now*', simply affirming my existence, and perhaps answering the desert's challenge, *to Be*.

As I recite: '*Al-Quddus*', (The Holy, The Divine), '*Al-Matin*', (The Firm) and '*As-Salaam*', (The Source of All Peace), I'm aware that subtly, seamlessly, I've grown to love this intrinsically beautiful language of Revelation. Rather than think about the meaning of the words, or indeed think at all, these exquisite invocations become a heartfelt Call to Unity.

As I submit to their innate splendour, a wordless vibration enters my chest summoning me to wholeness. The Names, little more than words or abstractions before today, are made flesh.

What had previously been an opaque frontier between the religious studies teacher, rich with ideas, and the seeker, poor in faith, is transformed into a membrane of a growing life containing both. All the metaphysical arguments, all the theological debates, all the historical and social complexities, all the conflicts, the contradictions, the complaints, and caricatures about 'God' are now occupied, by an intense new quality of personal experience.

'God' isn't some naïve anthropomorphic projection but an ineffable force radiating immense cosmic energy into the Sinai, the sands, the stars, the human soul, into all of creation, here and now.

¹⁶ Evelyn Underhill: 'Cells of self-knowledge', *A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, twelfth edition published by E. P. Dutton, 1930.

I have finally found Faith – or Faith has gracefully found me. Faith,¹⁷ that untouchable, invisible mountain around which light curves, until that is, the mountain chooses to touch us¹⁸. If only for moments I am no longer separate but connected to the all-pervading unity of all things.

In recounting this and other experiences I'm aware of an egoistic predisposition to fabricate, speak falsely, or 'out of turn', or heaven forbid consider myself to be in some way 'specially gifted'. And yes, my very motives for speaking of such events rightly arouse suspicion, but as far as I'm able, I'll be circumspect, and not speak carelessly or casually about these intimations of another order.

Although fleeting and almost vanishing in the very moments they appear, these 'events' bring with them a bittersweet taste, both joy at what's been given but also a gnawing remorse that ordinarily I defy this tender apprehension of Divine Immanence.

But for now, a waking intuition opens a door of perception to an essence-knowing inner empiricism: *God yearns to be known*. With it comes the realization that much of our suffering is initiated and indeed nourished by the delusion of *separateness*. Ordinarily I'm imprisoned by this illusion and live a life of desperate separation, separate from my true self, separate from others, separate from Creation, separate from God.¹⁹

But, after years of intellectual contortions, my heart finally opens, illumined by an inpouring of faith. I *believe in order to understand*²⁰ and in so doing recognise that the Higher can only be apprehended by a radical inward act, an intentional choice, to sacrifice the ego and submit to the Eternal.

¹⁷ Hebrews 11:1: 'Faith is evidence of things unseen'. Kierkegaard's *The Leap of Faith*: when the Eternal appears through a paradoxical fusion, a gift from Above and a radical inner choice from within, a sacrificing of one's ego in the specifically human act of submission to the Eternal.

¹⁸ René Daumal, *Mount Analogue: a novel of symbolically authentic non-Euclidean adventures in mountain climbing*, Boston: Shambhala, (1992).

¹⁹ Einstein: 'A human being is a part of the whole called the 'universe', a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts, and feelings, as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us...'

²⁰ St Augustine: Credo ut intelligam: 'For I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe—that unless I believe I shall not understand.'

If I may be so presumptuous as to try and describe this inwardly ineffable event, I endorse, unhesitatingly, the words of Mother Julian of Norwich: *'All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.'*²¹

After supper we meet for the sunset *zikh*. As we walk slowly in the desert dark, our meeting place is only discernible by the glow of a candle. Shams dabs our left wrists with the exquisite smelling incense. Huddled in our blankets, we recite: *'La Illaha Ill'illa Hu'*, (There is no God, but God), and invite the sacred words to flow through us.

²¹ Mother Julian of Norwich. *Revelations of Divine Love*. Translated by Clifton Wolters. Penguin, 1966. The Quran says: *'Remember Me and I will remember you'*, and in Judeo-Christianity the first commandment is to: *'Love God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength'*.



'I was a Hidden Treasure that yearned to be known' (Hadith Qudsi).

-6-

***'When I close my eyes to the outer world and look within, I see the whole universe as a bubble raised in the ocean of the heart'.
(Hazrat Inayat Khan)***

I wake at 5am. Refreshed, I relax in my sleeping bag, luxuriating in the silence, before heading down the canyon for the sunrise meditation. When I reach the rocky crags, my companions are already there. Although dusty, sore, and peeled to the bone, I sense they're lighter, more open, more real. Tempered by the Sinai's steely challenge to surrender, I see aching, tired bodies, drawn ripened faces, yet eyes alight with a new hope.

Although we've not spoken for days, our familial manner suggests our common aim has forged an inexplicable bond between us. Pretence stripped away, our superficial differences have dissolved and we're no longer Taiwanese, Welsh, German, American, Turkish, English or French, but neighbours, pilgrims of eternity, citizens of a timeless world, united in our quest for unity.



Citizens of a timeless world.

We're given the *zikrs* for this, our final day of the Retreat: *Ya Qarīb* (The Near One); *Ya Muhīt* (The All-Pervading); *Ya Mujīd* (The Responsive), and *Ya Raqīb* (The Ever Watchful).

The Invocations now effortlessly enter and saturate my nervous system. With an organic certainty I sense The All Pervading One is responsive, near.... 'Closer...than my jugular vein'.

An almost reverential silence pervades the Bedouin tent as we enjoy our simple last two meals together. I sense the exchange of energies between us has become more refined, a pristine sensitivity palpable.

During supper Shams breaks the silence and informs us the next *zikr* will take place at 3am the following morning.

In preparation, I'm nuzzled in my sleeping bag by 9pm, relieved that the anxieties of the last few days have magically evaporated. After a few hours' sleep, my alarm clock wakes me at 2:30am, and I negotiate the uneven rocks down the wadi. Unsure as to exactly where our meeting spot is, I'm relieved to see a lantern glow and the silhouettes of my comrades sitting in a circle of silence outside a small cave.

Shams dabs our wrists with the exquisite smelling incense, and, once more, we recite: '*La Illaha Ill'Allah Hu*', (There is no God, but God). Lifting

our heads to the heavens as we chant *Hu*,²² my body quivers with a dormant promise, and intimations of another current of life. And then, the thrill of unity.

The person who has spent a lifetime studying metaphysical ideas, the 'I' with so many half-memories associated with words for God/ The Absolute' is electrified by an unfamiliar pulse, a vibration I can only name – and I've no other choice but to use this word – as Love.

After the recitation, we continue sitting, gratefully savouring these august moments together.

On returning to my camp, I'm surprised to find myself full of energy. Even though it's the middle of the night, I'm wide awake and sit, drinking in the numinous silence. Wholly still, I seek to empty myself of myself.

Within moments, without drama or commentary, the heavens, the stars the sun and moon are within me, and I am within them. Outer and inner momentarily no longer exist. The boundaries between where my individual identity begins and ends, imperceptibly dissolves and I'm enfolded in a boundless infinite realm of endless space.

Time is no longer moment-to-moment but a stream of eternal present awareness. Infused by and at one with the heavens, the words spoken a thousand years ago by Philotheus of Sinai become flesh: '*The heart purified becomes in itself a heaven with sun, moon and stars*'.²³

As the alchemical retreat comes to an end, I've no doubt, that over time the perfume of our extraordinary journey will inevitably fade. Yet an inner intelligence assures me the fragrance will not entirely disappear, for as Rumi said, *old wine doesn't return to grapes*.

I'll undoubtedly return, like a puppet, to my habitual ways in so called 'ordinary' life, but I'm not leaving the retreat unchanged and an imprint, however faint, remains.

'You cannot stay on the summit forever; you must come down again. So why bother in the first place? Just this: What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above. One climbs, one sees. One descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen. There is an

²² HU: Sacred Sound: The Ultimate, beyond all attribute, yet the nearest of all. HU stands for everything; in every breath we breathe. The Source which can only be reached by complete annihilation of everything, because it is beyond all existence, beyond all being.

²³ Philotheus of Sinai (*On Sobriety*, 27), quoted in *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, Olivier Clement, New City Publications, 1993. Likewise, the Herefordshire Poet Thomas Traherne writes: '*You never enjoy the world aright till you are clothed with the heavens and crowned with the stars. Till you can sing, rejoice, and delight in God*'.

art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one can at least still know.'

²⁴



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²⁴ René Daumal, *Mount Analogue: a novel of symbolically authentic non-Euclidean adventures in mountain climbing*, Boston: Shambhala, (1992).