

FATHOMING THE GIST

Gurdjieff makes it abundantly clear right from the start that he holds in contempt those who, as he put it, accustom themselves to the type of reading that proceeds in them automatically, entirely without the participation of any being-effort of their own; and whose thoughts flow in all directions without any intentional exertion of any part whatsoever of their presence. About such people, he says: "There never occurs in their mentation the process called to ponder."

To ponder means "to weigh in the mind, to consider carefully, to think deeply." Gurdjieff's "friendly advice" to the reader is to "try and fathom the gist" of his writings (the third way of reading), and not to read them mechanically (the one-brained way of the allegorical "worm," simply eating and excreting one's way blindly through the sentences as if they are "contemporary books and newspapers"); nor to be satisfied with reading them as if "aloud to another person" (the two-brained sheep-like method of simply hearing and following along passively behind the words). The real effort is to try "to fathom the gist" of Gurdjieff's writings.

Something that cannot be known or measured is said to be "unfathomable." Gurdjieff clearly did not intend that his writings should be unfathomable. Rather, the information he affords the reader is "computable," and the allotted task of that reader is to discover the way to fathom its gist.

How to begin? Perhaps the "fathom" is a good place to start, since the word itself relates to measures. The fathom is "the ratio of the height of a man to his arm span." It usually has to do with marine depths and mining measures, to what is below the surface; and its dictionary meaning is "getting to the bottom of." In nautical usage, it concerns measuring the depths using a *sounding* line: the fathom is equal to 1.829 meters, and a fathometer is a device used for registering ocean depths measuring the time required for the transmission and reflection of *sound waves*. The word is said to derive from Old English *foedm*, meaning "outstretched arms," since, in practice, a sailor could, with little error, measure his ropes according to the size of his armspan, approximately 6 feet, or 72 inches, which was very close to the meridian fathom at 45⁰ latitude.¹ Those who participate in the Gurdjieff Movements will immediately recognize the familiar gesture of extending the arms to the side. Few, however, (including our esteemed Movements teachers) realize that this gesture defines the measure of the fathom!

Obviously the fathom took for its basis of measurement *man himself*. In the words of the Egyptologist, Schwaller de Lubicz: "Man measures the earth and furnishes all the units of measure. Humanity is the measure, the atlas, on which living lands and their astronomical influences are read; it is the laboratory of all the miracles of the world."² The fathom, again quoting Schwaller, "plays the greatest role in the measures of the Temple of Luxor, dedicated to the Incarnation of the Spirit, or the Creation of Man."³ The fathom implies circuit and relates to time and space measures. It is not only a human measure but also the measure of the earth's circumference. The ancient value of the circumference of the earth was taken as 360, and our division of the circle into 360 degrees (attributed to Hipparchus) most certainly comes from this ancient tradition. Each of the 360 units was subdivided into 60, dividing the circumference into 21,600 units, each corresponding to 1 minute of arc. Carrying over this

¹ Schwaller de Lubicz, *The Temple in Man*, p. 65

² *The Temple of Man*, p.298 and 310

³ Schwaller de Lubicz, *The Temple in Man*, p. 65

subdivision to a large circle of terrestrial meridians, each minute of arc of the meridian represents 1000 human fathoms of length, a unit of measure preserved in our nautical mile.⁴

The British Admiralty, before the standardization of the International fathom, defined it as one-thousandth of the imperial nautical mile, or 6080 feet. Half this value gives 3040 feet. Consider that Gurdjieff, in the chapter “The Arch-preposterous,” uses the number 3,040,000 to define “volts.”⁵ Volts concern electricity, the source for “artificial light.” From encyclopedias come the historical facts:⁶ The word “electricity” comes from the Greek word *elektron*, the name for amber, a substance electrified by friction.⁷ Du Fay discovered the dual quality of electrification, and postulated that electrification is the result of an *inequality between two bodies*. The scientist named Volta discovered the *difference potential* causing the flow of electrical current. Faraday postulated transmission of electric force through polarized *particles*, and the creation of electric currents in a conductor by the variation of a surrounding magnetic field, leading to the use of *alternating current* and the dynamo. Gurdjieff introduces the idea of “artificial light,” and of “the striving-to-reblend-into-a-whole of two active parts of the Omnipresent-Okidanokh, which is proceeding at the present moment there, in this vacuum, has a force, as calculated by objective science of 3,040,000 what are called ‘volts’ and this force is indicated by the needle of that special appliance there.”⁸ There is a connection between fathoms, volts, and the Great Pyramid.

Current research has fixed the perimeter of the Great Pyramid to be approximately 3040 units. J. H. Cole’s survey of the pyramid, commissioned by the Egyptian Government in 1925, took the dimensions from outside edges of three recessed sockets. The issue of *sockets* remains a question of how the base of the pyramid should be measured – whether from the edge of its platform, or from the outsides of its *sockets* which retain its cornerstones. Gurdjieff seems to be saying the latter by drawing our attention to “these three socket-like *Momonodooars*.” The “special appliance” he refers to must be a hint of the Great Pyramid itself. The Giza Pyramid, standing as a permanent measuring rod and providing one of the most reliable standards of ancient metrology, may also have been an electrical appliance in ancient cultures. Voltage relates to direct electrical current by chemical action. A “volt” is defined as “the unit of electromotive force equal to a force that when steadily applied to a conductor whose resistance is one ohm will produce a current of one ampere.”

As stated, the word “fathom” pertains to “circuit,” and when applied to the idea of “circuitry,” it may be indicative of the plan and component parts of an electrical circuit, perhaps such as the circuitry of the brain.

We note with some curiosity that just as the Great Pyramid traditionally has been considered a tomb or crypt built for royal kings, so also the fathom has the connotation of burial, of crypts, and of the related idea of hidden encrypted information. The customary practice at sea is to bury the corpse six feet under the water, the fathom’s depth. For burial at sea, the corpse, to be disposed of, has to be *weighted* to allow it to sink beneath the waves, and requires a minimum six fathoms of water. Thus the phrase, “six feet under,” which means, in the vernacular, “to get rid of.” To get rid of something recalls the idea of entropy. Scientists say that planet Earth sheds its entropy by means of living organisms. These organisms take energy from the sun, degrade it into dense matter, and throw out (get rid of) the unusable part by emitting it out into the solar system. What is preserved is the information in the cells, retained in the genetic code of the DNA through generations, and throughout time.

⁴ Schwaller de Lubicz, *The Temple of Man*, p. 286

⁵ *Beelzebub’s Tales*, p. 157

⁶ This information comes from the *Grolier Encyclopedia*

⁷ Amber is mentioned on several occasions in *Beelzebub’s Tales*. See pages 70 and 75, for example.

⁸ *Beelzebub’s Tales*, p. 157