

## **Who Was Lord Pentland?**

*Excerpted from "What Is God?" by Jacob Needleman*

From the very beginning of my contact with the Gurdjieff Work I recognized as coming from Lord Pentland something I had never seen or felt in any human being.

I wish to be quite clear here because upon this quality that I sensed in him lies the basis in my own life for the conviction I have formed about the question, "What is God?"

What was it about him? As the years passed, I had more and more contact with him. And more and more I felt and sensed his uniqueness—not only in him, but in myself as a result of contact with him. From the very beginning I knew that he cared most of all for the inner development of all the men and women who worked with him. But I couldn't at first find the word or fact that would designate this ability or personal care he had for others. There was something paradoxically impersonal and mysteriously warm at the same time; something both rigorous and unpredictable.

And also something extraordinarily intelligent. As an academician and professor, I felt secure (perhaps foolishly) in my ability to judge another person's mind. Perhaps in my better moments I would never pretend to judge another person's spiritual development or sincerity of intention, but I knew a good mind when I saw it. His was by far the best I had ever encountered.

But that was not yet the most essential thing about him. It was something emanating from him. In order to communicate the nature of that something essential in him, I am obliged again to be quite personal. Some of the details of what I am about to

say may apply only to myself and my particular subjectivity. At the same time, I am certain, quite certain, that in its essence it applies to every man and woman in the modern world. Only in this way will I be able truly to offer my present understanding of what it was about him that was so remarkable, and to offer a precise name for it.

I will begin by saying that what I experienced from Lord Pentland was an attitude toward me that I had never encountered from anyone or even imagined. He seemed bewilderingly unimpressed by almost everything I said or did, and yet at the same time he seemed greatly interested in me. He responded to my questions often by showering down insights based on the Gurdjieff ideas that were clairvoyantly relevant to my personal life and which one after another erased or eclipsed everything I thought I had understood. I—Professor Jacob Needleman, who could, so to say, hold my own more or less with Plato, Hume, Kant and even the God of the Bible—I could not hold my own with the mind of this strangely intelligent man. Almost every time I spoke with him I experienced—on my very own turf of the intellect—the simultaneous deflation of my mind and exhilaration of the taste of Truth, the glimpse of a higher understanding. That was one aspect of my repeated encounters with Lord Pentland.

But it was only one aspect and by no means the most important one. Even more important was the emotional atmosphere that he created in the community of people who came together to put the teaching into practice. I have already mentioned the awakening of conscience that is one of the far and fundamental aims of work, an experience which Lord Pentland, with no mean hand, projected into the life of the whole community. I am speaking here about an atmosphere of suffering that, overall, had no basic negativity about it. On the contrary. A suffering in front of the awareness of one's own illusions

about oneself and in front of one's own egoism, awkwardness, fear, sentimentality—a suffering about one's own essential failure to be—to be . . . to be what? To fail . . . how? By what . . . measure? What standard? And the sharing, the communality of this suffering of seeing oneself and, at the same time, detecting the subtle background sense of liberation, impersonal liberation, a shared community of faintly liberated men and women, always falling away into the sleep of humanity, and at the same time, struggling to embrace the utter truth about oneself, the truth that included the light of possible liberation always waiting in the back of one's being, so to speak. Almost one hundred per cent of the men and women there, myself included, experienced this atmosphere in and around Lord Pentland as a quality of—I have no choice but to use this word now—a quality of love.

With surgical precision the conditions he created, and the personal “something” that he emanated, put one just an inch or so in front of the fundamental illusions about oneself within which one conducted one's ordinary life and which together formed one's sense of everyday identity. Within an inch of the final acknowledgment of what was right before one's eyes, the final receiving of the impressions being offered as a special kind of unknown food uniquely for human beings, impressions of the truth about oneself which, as we later understood, were precisely what was needed for the growth of one's being. But that final inch always had to be taken by oneself, by an act of one's will and intention. Nothing in this sphere could ever be forced. This is what I have been speaking of as the capacity to struggle, to work. The struggle was not against anything but one's unwillingness to see the truth, a struggle supported eventually by the knowledge that this

seeing was the first step toward the liberation one dreamt of, the first step in the movement toward becoming a real human being.

All this was suffering that radiated joy: the joy of voluntary suffering in front of truth. Not the suffering of the egoism, but closer to the honorable suffering of the human condition—not neurotic suffering, but on the way to essence-sorrow; a unique suffering and struggle to see and accept one’s distance from what one was meant to be and from what one imagined oneself to be. Again and again, on the individual and communal level, Lord Pentland brought his pupils into the honorableness of the struggle to pass from non-existence, humanly speaking, to being. And each individual man and woman, in his or her own way, loved this man and trusted his guidance.

One had read such things about how the pupils of Gurdjieff deeply loved and trusted him, even though many outside observers saw nothing they could value and created many fantastic rumors.

Now I can use the word that, I believe, accurately—at least in part—names what it was that Lord Pentland emanated. And it is this “something” that will lead us in thought, as it led me in experience, to the idea and the experience of God.

That “something” is *attention*.

How to understand this mystery?