

**Being serious**

Ouspensky used to tell his students that they had to be serious about working. Then he would ask them what “being serious” meant. It has to be said that the discussion on this point had its lighter moments (at least for us now):

MRS. M. How does one become serious if one does not think one is serious enough? [She continues along this line but could not be followed.]

MR. O. There are fifteen questions here. How can one become serious if one is not serious? This is not a question. How to keep silence if one is talking? Stop talking! How to stand if one sits? Get up! How to be in another room if one is in this one? Go into the other room!

MRS. M. Some of one may want to be serious?

MR. O. Question is wrong. I am trying to explain and you continue to ask. If I try to explain and at the same time you try to ask, this is not being serious. I tried about four times and each time you interrupt. So my explanation is mixed with your own thoughts and we have already lost the beginning.

MRS. M. Can I put it another way?

MR. O. How can you put it another way? You asked your question, I explained to you, I answered you but you did not wait until I answered. What is the use of explaining what you said when you speak before I have answered. You could wait.

MRS. M. I thought you had finished.

MR. O. How could you say this? I was speaking—you could wait, and I was trying to answer your question. Again you speak and again I answer. 'How to be serious if one is not serious'! This is wrong formulation because it means nothing at all. To try to be serious, first you must understand what it means, first ask yourself: 'Do I know what it means to be serious?' If you don't know, that would be a question. Then you can try to find what is connected with that, what is disconnected, what happens when you are serious and when you are not. If you just throw out such a question you use words without meaning; with such words we shall not move one inch from the spot. For instance, 'to be serious' means listening, not arguing, trying to understand. There is nothing difficult in this – this is what means 'to be serious'. [*A Record of Meetings* 20.8.31]

That was in 1931, and finally in 1938 he broke down and told them what it meant:

MR. O. You see, most of these remarks include too many things – work, self-remembering, higher parts of centres. This is not sufficient. Necessary to look how we can be serious now. For instance, one says it is remembering aim. Quite good, but as I say, aim may be wrong. 'Want to understand.' Also good, but not sufficient. So subjective. Being serious is something simpler, if you like. Necessary to divide two things. To be serious and to take things seriously. You speak all without exception only about how to take things seriously and which things, and not one

thing about what it means to be serious. I will tell you what it means. To be serious means to take nothing seriously with the exception of the things you know you want, that they are important and so on. Not to guess, not to try to justify things because you take them seriously. To be serious it is necessary to take nothing seriously unless you know it has to be taken seriously, and only the things you know for certain must be taken seriously. It looks too small, but when you apply it to things you will see this is the only solution and this is what is necessary. [*A Record of Meetings* 27.1.38]

What does “being serious” mean to us now? What do we do about it?

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Often ‘being serious’ starts or re-starts with a big experience. Here is one:

“After nearly twenty years in this work, Dr Roles having died and the world seeming a paler place, having heard of a realised man I determined to seek him out. This caused much opposition and discouragement but finally, after undertaking an interminable and most uncomfortable journey I arrived at his house. At first his servants would not let me in, but somehow I summoned up a name they recognised and I was allowed to pass.

“In an upper room a small man was sitting on a low dais speaking quietly to about 30 people gathered on the stone floor in front of him. The room was very quiet but the air was electric. I paused in the doorway, and he turned his head to look at me. Being bold and desperate I managed to hold his gaze which at first seemed mild and enquiring. Then his look hardened, becoming lofty and implacable and I sensed something like a great bird of prey and, beyond it, an infinitesimal susurrant as of enormous wings which seemed to echo deep inside me, reducing all my resolution and determination to a tiny but unbearable point of fear.

“In that frozen moment I understood he was in fact looking at, and meeting, something within me, with the deepest and sweetest love, and that my fear and confusion were only that I did not know what, in me, he was looking at and meeting. It was as if I, standing there, the whole person I knew, was only the merest shadow of something else, something completely real but of which I had no knowledge, and in that instant I was given a fleeting glimpse of what *he* saw. It was too much, and I began to faint, but he hooded his gaze and turned his head away to continue the discourse.

“Although this was no grand ‘road to Damascus’ affair and afterwards, all too quickly, I returned to my ‘normal’ state, that moment has sustained and redirected the whole of my life since.”

Here is another:

“Some years ago I was sitting at the back in a meeting at Colet. Suddenly I became aware of a change in my usual feeling of ‘I’. It seemed now located in my heart, and it expanded with a great feeling of love until it filled the whole of my chest. This lasted

perhaps for half an hour. This was when I understood that 'Real I' was not just an enlargement of ordinary 'I', but something different. A few years later, there came a repeated experience of a shift in consciousness, where the feeling of 'I' expanded still further, and this progressed with repeated experiences to the point where it was no longer strictly located. This experience cannot be summoned up at will, though it can be encouraged by concentrated thought, by attention, by stillness. Nevertheless there is a trace of it in every moment of self-awareness. 'It' is always present, because 'it' is simply 'isness'.

"I think my life has changed a lot through these experiences. I cannot say how exactly, but the outward form seems different."

If we are serious, we will find something to encourage us. Perhaps there is in fact nothing to be done, only to find the stillness in as many moments as we remember and learn to rest there with peaceful attention.

We get only what can be paid for, but, in this work, we cannot pay in advance. The blessings and inspiration are there all the time, surrounding us every day, but these things only become real for us if we know how to pay. The seed has been planted in all of us, we wouldn't be here in this room, discussing these things, if that were not the case. But the seed needs cultivating, carefully, with a *reliable* and patient and loving attention—and this patient tending of a precious seed is how we can pay for what we have already received.

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