

The Fourth Basic Course (excerpts)

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The Fourth Basic Course began memorably when a student spent a night shivering under two blankets and a comforter, and on the morrow packed his tennis rackets and golf clubs and caught the first plane back to California. Even more memorable was the silence which preceded Mr. B.'s inaugural address, after which he spoke of the unity between us in silence, and how speech separates. It was to be a lesson a long time in coming.

Then came the weeks of enthusiasm. The House was clean and the kitchen silent. Movements, the First Obligatory, the Enneagram, Themes, like and dislike, relationships with material objects, and Mr. B.'s Study of Man talks all helped to break the ice and build the feeling of discovery of new territory.

Amid great excitement, Mr. B. went off to inspect the Claymont estate in West Virginia, giving a public talk in London several weeks later about his hope to establish a "psychokinetic" community.

Soon after, the initial wave of enthusiasm was on the wane. It became harder to get out of bed in the morning to face cold water and 45 minutes of rhythms and Morning Exercise. We struggled with Practical Work.

For the week beginning Monday, December 9, 1974, the theme was completion. All went about their business as usual, though there was excitement in the air at the prospect of the Christmas break in less than two weeks. On the Wednesday, to everyone's surprise, an exeat was called for the next day, and most of the students took advantage of this. On that day, the staff did the Great Prayer together with Mr. B. who appointed himself Chief Cook for lunch, preparing enough soup for next day's lunch. In the evening there was meditation.

I write about Friday, December 13 as it happened to me. The day began as usual, with Morning Exercise, and would have been followed by breakfast had it not been for my own experiment with fasting. At 8:30 a.m. I went to work In Coombe Springs Press and had been there for some time when a messenger came in looking for Jill Baker, one of the qualified nurses on the course. Some minutes later Tony Blake entered looking agitated, and asked if Debbie Crabbe, the other qualified nurse was around. The answer was no for both, and assuming someone had become ill or injured while working, I went back to my own job. About 10:20 I stopped to get ready for 10:45 Movements. As I was walking up the stairs Sam Nussenblatt, the House Supervisor that day, was showing Father Carpenter, the priest from Stow-on-the-Wold, into the Bennett's' flat. Knowing Mr. B. to be a practicing Roman Catholic, I assumed it to be a routine visit.

The class began at 10:45 and was stopped at 11:30 a.m. for a general meeting. Everyone came into the ballroom, last of all Elizabeth B. She sat down and spoke:

"Mr. B. went out for his usual walk this morning and, on his return, I met him. He was almost doubled over with pain and looked like a very old man. I helped him up to his bed, sent out for Jill and Debbie and called for the doctor. We made him as comfortable as possible. Jill and Debbie made great efforts, but at a quarter past ten he died. This is not a time for emotion. He had always looked forward to his death, and we should be rejoicing for him."

I was stunned and could not easily believe it. Lunchtime came and although I had chosen not to eat, something inside me said yes, and I went into the dining room and ate the soup. I discovered afterwards that it was Mr. B's own soup. In the afternoon there were long Movements sessions. In the evening, Pierre led a meditation on the theme of completion. Afterwards was the first of three nights when all students took turns sitting with the body.

On Monday, December 16, a memorial service was held in Sherborne Church, attended by many visitors. The newly-formed church choir sang Mozart's Requiem which they had recently learned for Gurdjieff's memorial service. The next day a small family group went to the internment of the body at Sparkford. The following day Bhante arrived and also went to Sparkford. He returned to the House and led a meditation before going to India the next day. Friday night was feast night before the break for Christmas. Just before, Pierre addressed a general meeting. He said that there were many paths to the same end. It was now time for us, the students, to decide whether or not the way of Sherborne was the way for us. There were other paths which

might be more suitable to some individuals because of their types. He saw Sherborne as offering one thing which was almost peculiar to it, and that was the development of conscience.