



INTERVIEW

Q: Can you please tell me about Vernon Howard and the way he taught? Did he charge you in any way?

Vicki Woodyard: Vernon Howard taught esoteric Christianity, the development of conscious man as put forth by G. I. Gurdjieff. But he taught in his own voice, his own simple yet powerful vocabulary. He pulled no punches. This weeded out the sheep from the goats very quickly. One felt an inescapable tension, even walking through the door into his classroom. As someone said, "It was like taking your baggage through the X-ray machine at the airport. Vernon saw right through everyone."

There was a book table where a couple of students would sit and take money for the class, which lasted about an hour and a half. The price per class was three dollars. For that small amount of money, he delivered a 45-minute talk designed to scorch the ego and elevate the essence. No one was guaranteed anything and everyone was expected to reach beyond himself.

The energy in the room was palpable, quivering with electricity. We all knew how to behave around him. He would mention every now and then that no one got away with anything in that room. He said he would be

exposing the lies of the world and would be showing us that only God loved us. I knew that higher forces had led me to this isolated town in the Nevada desert. I had had dreams of going out there, had even had a dream outlining the constellation Leo in red stars. When I first got there on that visit, a student came up to me at the class break and said, "Shall we go outside and stargaze a little?" I knew that that something beyond the rational mind was operating.

When Vernon Howard fell ill, I asked for a sign that I would remain connected to him. The next evening, as my husband and I had dinner at a restaurant overlooking Lake Mead, we saw a double rainbow arching over the waters. After his death, his group moved to Arizona. We made a trip out west to see them. We stopped at a small diner called The Beeline Cafe. As we left the restaurant, a huge double rainbow arched over the building and I knew I had come home.

I kept notes on every visit we made to hear him speak for a seven-year period. After his death, I put the notes together and added some personal experiences of mine. This was time I considered to be the highlight of my spiritual life. His strictness and severity turned the spotlight in on the heretofore buried antics of the ego. He said things like "Go through your day experiencing every useless thought and emotion."

When I came across Irina Tweedie's book, *Daughter of Fire*, a weighty tome, I recognized the voice of Bhai Sahib as very much like the voice of Vernon Howard. It came from the same place, the place that ruthlessly destroys the false self, as Vernon called it, or the nafs, as the Sufis called it. There was no time off for good behavior; as no one has any guarantee of how long they will be with a spiritual teacher.

At some point, his secretary said this to me, “Thank God you made it in under the wire.” For within 7 years after I first heard him speak, he was dead. But his books are still selling and small groups of people still meet to study what he so generously gave us. He came to me in a dream after his death and said this to me, “Don’t be so accommodating. Act a little tough.” And that has been a guiding force in my life. For I was too soft, having been raised in the Deep South. I was too eager to give myself away and this is an ongoing lesson for me.

For three dollars a talk, I got benefits many times over that. He never charged anything but the bare minimum. By the time I came to his classes, he had no interaction with students. He gave his talk, then repaired to his home, a modest one that his students built for him. Soon after his death in 1992, it went up for sale and the group split into two different factions. This is usually what happens after the death of a powerful teacher.

What I am left with is the sure knowledge that the development of essence is the task of a true teacher and/or school. This cannot happen unless the student is thrown into the fire repeatedly. Vernon Howard knew how to do that and he had the strength to do it. I have sampled other teachings and teachers, but when one has been led to an essence teacher, one becomes himself or herself and gradually lets go of the idea that any further teacher is necessary. As Christ said to his disciples, “If you love Me, feed My lambs.” And I do that with my writing and occasional recording. I charge nothing, for I have nothing to give but the desire to pass it on.

Q: What was the three dollars for exactly? Was it to cover the rent, space or electric bill?

Vicki Woodyard: It was said that Vernon lived off of his book royalties, so the small amount went for the 3 things that you mentioned, I assume. I know he dressed simply, often buying his clothes from the used clothing store they had on the premises. For a long time, he carried his notes in a cardboard box. After he got ill, he began using a briefcase because it was easier to carry. He drove a used car and met all of the criterion I had for a selfless teacher.

Q: What are your thoughts on Christ not charging for his teachings? Why do you think he taught this way?

Vicki Woodyard: I would not assume to answer this question. I do know that Rumi's statement, "The price of kissing is your life" is the correct payment for any serious spiritual student. The Way requires that, and the student is always found wanting on one level or another. I used to resist the physical aspect of the Work. His secretary said to me once, "Just present the body." One man left because he objected to sweeping the floor of the hall after class. Vernon would give tasks to people like putting the folding chairs back where they belonged. And people would manage to make that more difficult than it was. "Such is the nature of people trying to work together. A necessary friction is produced. The Work should be uncomfortable; that is part of the price you pay. It is called conscious suffering.

Q: Is there a time or a reason when it is ok to charge?

Vicki Woodyard: Yes, absolutely. People show their respect to the teacher/teaching by contributing in one form or another. For some it is through group work, such as maintaining the building, speaking about the Work, writing about it, cooking for the group. Some sort of payment is required. Gurdjieff would hit people up for money (shearing the sheep, he

called it). That seemed to be part of the process, but he took extraordinary measures to awaken people.

Although I paid for each class of Vernon's that I attended, I also paid in terms of my life substance (losing a child and spouse). Each human life requires a payment of one sort or another. For those in the Work, conscious suffering is the price. Gurdjieff's life was in peril at different periods, through accidents and the like. I get a sense that it is different for each person. So this conversation, for me, is about a much bigger issue than dollars. It is about spending one's life force to open the gateless gate, as it were.

Q: Can you please give me an example of taking the inner work seriously? By inner work do you mean conditioning and so on?

Vicki Woodyard: An example of taking the inner work seriously. One has to do this daily. "Sufficient unto the day are the evils thereof." One looks inside oneself and witnesses the chaos of the moment. And there will always be chaos on the level of the mind. When my husband was ill, it threw my mind into the ultimate chaos. My young daughter had died of cancer, so I knew when he was diagnosed that there would be several years of illness and then the ultimate loss. I had to witness my compulsive desire to escape the suffering by trying to think my way out. I would watch myself trying to get a grip on the suffering by staying overly organized. In other words, to use neurosis as a coping skill. Ultimately, it failed, and I would end up weeping and having fits of rage. All the things that happen when one is faced with a loved one's final illness. My inner work became a sincere cry, "God help me." It is said that the Work will find a way. And it ultimately did. What happens is that the mind is made to surrender.

Q: Also how does one become ripe? Can this ripeness be forced in some way? Can you get this ripness by going to satsangs on facebook for example?

Vicki Woodyard: One becomes ripe by staying with a true teaching over the course of one's lifetime. One thing a genuine teacher can do is to exert some outside influence by way of talks, or satsangs, as some call them. To be in the presence and consciousness of a teacher is necessary at some point in any aspirant's life. This is not a do-it-yourself course for the ego. Far from it.

Facebook satsangs are futile exercises at best. YouTube lends itself to self-aggrandizement. I realize that this statement will be vigorously protested, but so be it. On the other hand, as a friend of mine said, "The universe is idiot-proofed," so no real harm can be done. Let them proceed in an endless loop of proclamations about the Self. The Self just smiles.

Q: What are your views on charging for enlightenment intensive retreats and so on? Did Vernon Howard do these by the way and did he charge for them?

Vicki Woodyard: Many teachers today like Eckhart Tolle and others mention Christ but they charge you when they do this. If Christ were around today, do you think he would give webinars for money or on skype or charge for satsang, or retreats?

No. But one would be asked to die to himself. Money is easier to give!

Some people say that if you don't charge, it's very unprofessional, or say it's probably because you have low self esteem, or have no experience, or you are proselytizing and should be looked at with suspicion. What are your thoughts on this?

Vicki Woodyard: I am suspicious about those people, since they seem to be rationalizing. As I said earlier, it is appropriate for a true teacher to ask for a modest payment and it is always considered appropriate to sell books, etc. to earn money for one's bodily requirements.

Beyond that, the tao sends the teachings in many different forms, in many different eras. The Word is beyond being bought and sold.

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