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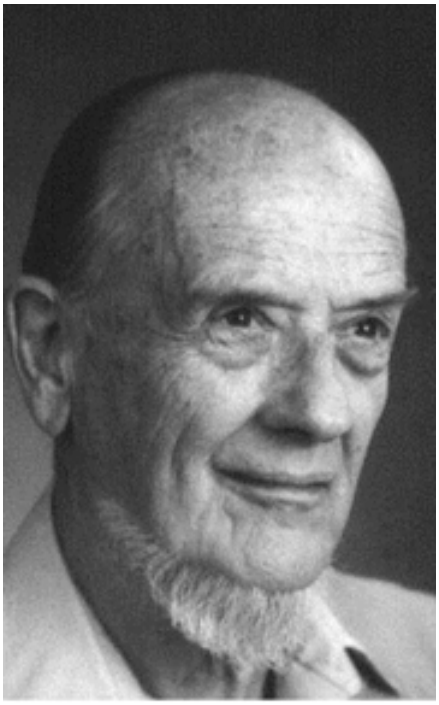
The Sacred Kept Sacred

The Life and Legacy of Paul Henry Beidler

(1906–1998)

"A celebration of three-centered harmony."

Paul Beidler was born in Lehighton, Pennsylvania, with his early education at local schools. In 1931 he graduated with a degree in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania. As a staff architect for the University Museum, he studied and made records of many archeological and architectural sites. These included the Meydum pyramid in Egypt, the excavations at Tell Billa and Tepe Gawra, Iraq, the crusader's castle at Athlit, Palestine, and ancient Mayan structures near Benque Viejo, British Honduras.



While in Persia, Egypt and Iraq he learned from Sufi dervishes, and for two years studied with Yezidi priests in Kurdistan, being admitted to the mysteries of Sheik Adi. He lived among the Yezidis to study them—from the inside out. Then there was Gurdjieff. When studying with Le Corbusier in Paris in the early 1930s, Beidler met the 'Tiger of Turkestan' at the Château Le Prieuré at Fontainebleau-Avon. Gurdjieff was extremely interested in what the young Paul Beidler had learned about the Yezidis and their ideas. Soon after their meeting at the Prieuré, Beidler was pressed by Gurdjieff for details of the Yezidi, as he knew that Beidler had more direct experience with the tradition. It was during this time that Gurdjieff bestowed the sobriquet "Maverick" on Beidler.

In the 1930s, Beidler spent time with Gurdjieff while he was visiting Frank Lloyd and Olgivanna Wright at Taliesin in Wisconsin. Later in 1949, he became an early member of the New York Foundation and also worked with Madame Ouspensky at Franklin Farms in Mendham, New Jersey.

Beidler also worked with John G. Bennett and is mentioned in his book *Witness*.[1] The reference in *Witness* is about a journey they took to Iraq and the ruins of Babylon in 1955. At that time Beidler was stationed in Baghdad. They were able to meet and study with several very old dervishes. Beidler spoke Aramaic, Turkish and a little of several other middle Eastern languages, and was helpful to Bennett in translating the conversations. Beidler actually did the speaking and listening, then translated back to Bennett, who was a copious note taker.

After returning from Asia in the 1940s, and with his experience with such luminaries as Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright, Beidler returned to the practice of architecture. He also lectured in architecture at Black Mountain College, an experimental college near Asheville North Carolina, founded in 1933 and organized around John Dewey's principles of education. On the recommendation of Walter Gropius, Beidler first visited Black Mountain College in February 1945 to discuss the architectural program there. In May he was appointed Instructor in Architecture and Consulting Architect.

Beidler also worked with several architectural firms including Jan Duiker in Amsterdam, Claude Stiehl in Honolulu, and with Webster and Wilson in Los Angeles. Later Beidler returned to the Lehigh Valley region, establishing a reputation for innovative designs applied to houses, churches and institutional buildings. From 1948–1953 he was lecturer in architectural design at Lehigh University in Bethlehem. During World War II, he was Captain on the MSS "Edna," a fishing vessel operating out of Barnegat Light, New Jersey.

In 1946 he established an architectural practice at Northeon, a studio in a rural area near Easton, Pennsylvania, continuing to experiment with analytical planning and structural design, while making the studio available for drama and dance performances by local and international artists. Articles he wrote on architecture and design were published in many American journals.[2] A member of several professional

societies, he was also actively involved with local planning committees, the American Museum of Natural History, Rotary International and the Explorer's Club.

"A profound sense of membership in and responsibility to humanity."

Beidler then returned to Asia in 1955 to continue his firsthand explorations of the traditions which had influenced Gurdjieff, often using his U.S. Foreign Service postings as bases for exploration. He studied with the Chan and Taoist master Lu K'uan Yu in Hong Kong during the early 1960s. Beidler is mentioned in the book *The Secrets of Chinese Meditation*,[3] a small classic by Lu K'uan Yu, who wrote under the English name of Charles Luk. He recounted that Lu K'uan Yu would take his pupils to the top of the cliffs surrounding Hong Kong. There he would pull a ginger root out of his pocket, cut it into small pieces, and hand the pieces to each of them to meditate on.

With the U.S. Foreign Service during and after World War II, Beidler went to Japan, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Pakistan working as archeologist, architect, engineer, and advisor on housing and irrigation. While in Japan he worked with mentors from the Zen Buddhism and Taoist traditions, and became a Zen Buddhist monk. Beidler also studied in the tradition of early Chan patriarch Dajian Hui Neng (638–713), sixth Patriarch of Chan, and with Master Gosung Shin at Hui Neng Zen Temple. Master Shin anchored his teachings in the Platform Sutra of Hui Neng, as well as the Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra. Beidler offered space to Master Shin for a Zen center on the grounds of Northeon, and an American temple was established there.

In Thailand, he studied Buddhism further with Ajahn Chah, a revered teacher and abbot of the Wat Nong Pah Pong monastery in Thailand, which Ajahn Chah founded as the main monastery of the Forest Tradition of Theravada Buddhism. Beidler would occasionally read to students from the writings of Ajahn Chah, some of which are collected in his book *A Still Forest Pool*.[4] Beidler once remarked that Ajahn Chah "was the holiest man I have ever met." He recommended to students many of Ajahn Chah's writings, as well as the Diamond Sutra, an esteemed classic of Mahayana Buddhism.

When Beidler returned from Asia in the early 1970s, he took up residence on ancestral land in rural Easton, Pennsylvania. In 1973 he founded Northeon Forest on the site. The 30 plus acres were ostensibly a tree farm and wildlife refuge, but most importantly, he dedicated the center to the study and practice of the traditions he had come to revere. Eventually he named the center "The Search at Northeon Forest," focused on the teachings of Gurdjieff and other traditions with which Beidler was well experienced. His approach reflected the accuracy of Gurdjieff's sobriquet from the Prieuré.

When asked by a student what he considered the most important of his endeavors and accomplishments through his long and varied career, he immediately stated that Northeon Forest and his work with the hundreds of seekers who had come there was by far the most important part of his life.

Beidler's attitude towards money can best be summed up by this statement in his Prospectus for Northeon Forest: "This curb on commercial enterprise closes an avenue leading to spiritual deterioration and corruption. The absence of monetary concerns promotes feelings of reverence for and kinship with all mankind. Genuine payment can only be in the form of self-generated inner effort as a contribution to humanity's ultimate destiny."

No monetary payments were ever expected or accepted from students. All that Beidler ever asked in return for his teaching was that his students make genuine efforts towards Being.

Beidler confirmed that work on oneself was most beneficial amidst the disruptive, trying conditions of everyday life—but that even ardent seekers would be overwhelmed by life forces unless supported by energy from a focal point of striving. A basic premise is that systematic inner efforts while engaged in everyday activities can lead individuals to insight and substantial change in Being. Time spent in making a living, eating, sleeping, and home life can provide occasions for inner work.



Beidler as an architect in the 1940s

"Can one's search best be made in the microcosmic workplace, directed by 'the boss' who decides where, when how and by whom identified demands are met?"

Beidler identified “the basic pattern for most of our work” as what he called “The Holy Equation,” taken from Gurdjieff’s prayer: “Holy Affirming, Holy Denying, Holy Reconciling, Transubstantiate in me for my Being.” Holy Denying is our inherited and learned mechanical ‘self,’ displayed in traits, habits, thoughts, feelings, responding to desires to be educated, well thought of, superior, wealthy, or spiritual. Through self-observation we recognize various patterns in ourselves. After seeing these patterns, we can engage in Holy Affirming through conscious efforts to accept, endure, and meet them with objectivity. This affirmation of the automatic patterns in us brings about the Holy Reconciling, leading to change in substance.

“The marrow of the bones is now perceived to be a fitting repository for the Seeker’s gradual accumulation of Holy Reconcilings.”

Beidler emphasized the necessity for each seeker to labor and suffer individually in order to arrive at personal verification; that one should focus on the “Vertical Relationships,” valuing them above the ordinary relationships required by life. Reading books about “The Work,” as well as “wiseacring,” were discouraged. If books are to be read, Mr. Gurdjieff’s three series[5] were preferred, and Seekers were urged to see themselves as the “best book.”

“Cherish and value that newly discovered area of apparent emptiness where nothing of the mechanism’s values exist ... a central growing space of non-thought, non-belief, non-desire, non-thing, non-ego.”

Practices and exercises were created using programs written by Mr. Beidler, as well as from personal discoveries of students. Seminars, sacred dances, and meditation, complement the work. Joining the resident core at meetings were men and women commuting from nearby communities as well as residents from other regions and countries, representing various backgrounds, professions, religions and lifestyles, where they practiced the work under conditions much different than at Northeon Forest.

When a student once asked Beidler what the purpose of his search and the search at Northeon Forest was, he replied: “to understand the meaning and principles common to all religions and true spiritual traditions.”

“The choreography of life consciously danced.”

Reflections and Memories from Northeon Forest

The following are writings from seekers who worked with Mr. Beidler at Northeon Forest. They reflect the manner of Beidler’s transmission of his understanding, and the impact he had on his students. Beidler’s methods of teaching often reflected the indirect and seemingly cryptic methods of his Sufi and Zen background, and of course the Gurdjieff Work.

Silence

Two instances with Paul H. Beidler stand out very clearly for me. So immediate is their impact still, that when I recall them I am filled with tears. Both concern silence.

In the first instance, we were in the woods during a Sunday morning meeting. We had worked our way up to the source of the spring which supplied fresh water for Northeon Forest residents. Just after we sat down, scattered around the spring, tired, Paul suddenly called out, cupping his hands to his mouth, “Is anybody out there?”

After a silence that I remember as being rather long and somehow uncomfortable, he again called out, “Thank You!”

With these words my doubt and confusion vanished, or were transformed into affirmation. Immediately the sanctity and fullness of life, the presence that is life became palpable and alive.



A meditation walk at Northeon Forest in the 1980s

The second instance concerns the first meeting after Mr. Beidler's death. It was a Thursday evening meeting. There was a circle of sitting cushions laid out on the carpet, with Paul's cushion clearly placed. We came in and sat down.

The impact of the silence was immediate—like I had been hit. A sense of incredible fullness was there—the space felt pregnant—and yet an incredible absence as well. The feeling of loss was profound. The group sat in silence. I could not control my sobbing. The reality of the silence, the fullness and absence it contained. Paul's empty cushion and yet palpable presence ... in the space that the silence held, my grief surfaced. And a realization that this silence is waiting, it is always waiting, to be heard. And that "representatives of the other side," a term Paul used to refer to members of the Northeon Forest group who had died, are here with us all the time, in the silence.

Silence?

I remember at one of the large gatherings there was an outdoor work activity. I don't recall exactly, but it was some type of gardening work—clearing and arranging the grounds. Everyone was busy with different tasks. All were working in silence. Mr. Beidler stood nearby observing for a while and then uncharacteristically broke the silence, speaking things like: "I don't like it that way, it should be different.," and, "That doesn't look right, I know a better way." This drew subdued laughter from those who heard him and immediately understood what he was pointing to. Along with being a humorous moment, he seemed to be showing us that all was not silence and that often there is much inner chatter that goes on unobserved.

Transmission

Beidler preferred to transmit his understanding through his actions and demonstrations, with an embodied sense of his respect for and joy in the Search. This approach released the students from the dominance of an intellectually structured search, and led them to the discovery of a deeper feeling for direction and practical approaches leading to individual realizations. He never lectured to students, either individually or as a group. I remember one period of several months where he was almost completely silent at meetings, only bringing a deep presence, solemnity and joy that evoked a similar response, and a fuller sense of an inner Search beyond words.

Crystallization

I once asked Mr. Beidler about Gurdjieff's theory that we must create our own soul. He replied, "One should avoid crystallization for as long as possible." The implication for me was that it is better to die with an attitude of questioning everything and not jumping to conclusions rather than dying with a collection of fixed

beliefs and adherence to dogma. This reminded me of another comment from him, “Always strive to remain on the question side of things.”

Simple Acts of Kindness

Beidler’s usually dour “no frills” demeanor, though masking his deep compassion and support of students, marked his usual presentation. Laughter and humor were rare, though his inner smiles often erupted in a glow that broke through this externally stern presentation. When he saw a student too burdened by the work, or deeply distressed, he would respond with a simple act of kindness, often too subtle to be noticed. Students report these examples:

“It didn’t take much for me to divine that I wasn’t a star pupil, however, when I was sitting near him during one exercise, he reached over and gently moved a wisp of hair from my forehead. Somehow that deeply touched me.”

“At a personal interview, after being in the Work for many years, I asked him if being present/waking up got easier when you were older, at a different stage of life. His answer: ‘No, it gets harder.’ At which point I burst into tears. His response then was full of compassion and gentleness—that with practice, perhaps it could get easier or more frequent.”

Vacation

Mr. Beidler seemed genuinely pleased and touched that a clergyman had joined one of the groups. He was very respectful toward the man. At one meeting, he asked him, without warning, to lead a prayer. The clergyman made a joke that he was on vacation, although he did lead the prayer. Mr. Beidler did not let the comment drop. He repeatedly referred to the idea of a clergyman not praying because he was on vacation.



Egypt, 1930. Paul Beidler and Ahmed Abd el-Aziz measure the stones on the north face of the Meydum Pyramid.

Evil

Mr. Beidler was always available for individual meetings on whatever subjects might be of interest to a person. I had been concerned for some time about the “problem of evil” and decided to ask him a fundamental question on this topic in order to obtain his perspective. During our meeting, I phrased the questions as “Is there evil in the world?” After a long silence as he pondered the question quite seriously, he responded:

“Yes, but it’s not what you think it is.”

The Televangelist Question

The Work brings many difficulties as a serious inquiry is made into the nature of our physical, emotional and intellectual mechanisms. Often there are periods of doubt, confusion and general suffering as we see ourselves more and more as what we truly are. During one of our meetings I was in the throes of one of these darker periods.

I had recently watched a few minutes of a television evangelist talking of the joy and wonders of his truth and faith. I felt miserable and wondered why I should follow a path that brought so much suffering and difficulty, while his path brought so much joy and positivity. I brought my misery and self-pity to Mr. Beidler, and asked “the televangelist question.” He paused, looked at me for a moment, and simply asked a question which exposed a fundamental truth about suffering:

“You think he doesn’t suffer?”

The Sliding Meeting

Our Sunday meetings were mostly somber and silent gatherings. Laughter and frivolity were avoided. This particular meeting began on a cold and icy winter morning. It was an extended gathering with many coming from long distances, bringing their children. We were heading up an icy hill to the forest to gather

wood, when some children came whizzing by us on flattened cardboard boxes, shouting and screaming with the joy and excitement of the slide.

The contrast between the adults going uphill and the children going downhill was vivid in both demeanor and direction. Suddenly, one of the uphill group members stopped and suggested we use the opportunity to change our role and emulate the children—take on the role of children enjoying a slide down an icy hill. While cautiously watching for Mr. Beidler's response, half expecting him to disapprove, we proceeded to grab cardboard flatted boxes from a pile near the path and began sliding, allowing whatever shouts and screams to come out. To our great surprise, Mr. Beidler, now well into his 70's, grabbed a box and joined the group of sliders, laughing and screaming like a child.

Walnuts or Bananas

After I had worked with the Northeon Forest group for a while, Beidler began calling me the "young man who won't buy green bananas," referring to my tendency to forgo any trust in the future or make plans. In the late 1970's, he supervised the planting of a grove of walnut trees at Northeon Forest. I asked him why he had chosen walnut trees, and he responded "because they are the slowest growing of trees." I knew then I had a comeback, and I began referring to him as "the old man who plants walnut trees."

Thus began a long period of friendly differences on the question of whether it is better to live for today or live for tomorrow. I of course espoused the position of living in the present, and he gently pointed out the virtues of planning and living with the future in mind. At one visit with him, a seemingly trivial discussion somehow made me realize that it wasn't an either or choice between the future and the present, and that a fully integrated life must include both.

Northeon Forest

It is hard to believe such a place ever existed. Northeon Forest is still there, but the remembrance of it goes beyond being larger than life. It is as if that was life, and now you are living in a dream. And you were at least trying to live, not just trying to get by.

You learned to know it very well. The path leading up to the mill, through patches of ivy-like growth and rocks. The mill where you learned movements, had discussions, or received your instructions for work periods. The stream that ran down the hill through the front of the property, surrounded by vegetation, so every time you walked by it you saw a different rock or whirlpool, as if it were a new discovery. The bamboo we planted and that grew wildly, making a small forest of its own. No Man's Land, an area of the forest that was deliberately left untouched. The view from the ridge, where the main trail was at its highest point. The big rocks where we sat for contemplation and occasional drawn-out chants of "Om." The geometric structure in the forest where we could meditate. And the forest itself, like your mind, something you could hack away at but never control, always changing and following its own course.

Maverick

An excerpt from a letter by Beidler responding to a student's question: "With regards to 'movements,' need I reiterate that I am very familiar with Gurdjieff's methods and also those practiced by the New York Foundation. I practiced the former at the Château in Fontainebleau and then the latter for seven years with the Foundation. After teaching movements at Northeon Forest for nine years in the 'orthodox' Foundation fashion, the liberties I now take are carefully considered to be more in line with Gurdjieff's own creative fashion. The Foundation does not agree with my approach nor did I seek their approval."

Masterly

Remembering Paul Henry Beidler for me is with gratitude – thankfulness – reverence – joy – love – praise – and humility. Why? Because of his sacrifice of himself for the Work and others.

How many people has he helped in search of love – light – truth – wholeness – peace – harmony – god we may never know – hundreds or more.

Paul the gentleman – Paul the gentle – Paul the compassionate – Paul the demonstrator – Paul the orator – Paul the designer – Paul the teacher – Paul the comforter – Paul the kind calm benevolent instructor.

For me it was the forgiving of my shortcomings, insanity and obvious flaws. To him I was good raw rough material that could benefit from the Work.

His unselfish contribution of his time money and property to help seekers, for others, the Work itself, and possibly himself, an example that is rare; in a word Masterly.

Remembering Paul Beidler

It is hard to remember Paul and not think of the Work. He was always connecting questions and situations to their significance to the Work and to the group.

Paul was just, generous and wise. He was an "un-guru." He encouraged us to embrace uncertainty and the search. Once when I whined to him about a decision I had to make, he suggested that I might try to be grateful that I had a choice.

I can picture Paul sitting on his hassock in the mill, wearing his wool cap, reading the new programs. Each new program exactly a page long, precisely written in his neat script, with the date of the next gathering.

I see him pushing one hand against the other to demonstrate the equal and opposite force of the Holy Affirming meeting the force of the Holy Denying.

I still remember and use many of the ideas and exercises from my time at Northeon Forest: the 12 joint exercise, relaxed face, inner smile, mid-course, multiple I's, non-desire, sensing, awe, reverence and rejoicing. When I lived at Northeon I worked as a dishwasher. Paul helped me create a conscious movement sequence for washing the dishes. For plates one stroke, for cups another, etc.

Paul and the Northeon Forest group introduced me to the concept of Being, and thereby opened a whole new part of life. "Oh consciousness, help us to remember to feed our Being." We asked about the causes and value of suffering. "That I may deserve help from higher powers whose existence may be seen to depend on the vibrations emitted from the suffering and sacrifice of humanity." Paul pulled me out of the tailspin that was my life and gave me conscious direction.

I'll always be grateful.

Epilogue

Beidler pursued his Search continuously for over 70 years. He encountered an amazing web of traditions and spiritual teachers and always sought to meet them on their terms, in their own sphere of understanding. And to Beidler, that meant not just understanding their ideas, but engaging deeply their practices.

The Search continues at Northeon Forest, and in the legacy of affiliated groups and students around the world. Beidler remained a humble Seeker until the end, and through this, bequeathed his Search to his students and others, as part of his "responsibility to humanity." □

This article was compiled and written by Darwin Tichenor. Mr. Tichenor first met Paul Beidler in 1976 and worked with him continuously for 22 years until Beidler's death in 1998. Tichenor has participated in or led groups exploring spiritual ideas in a practical form since 1976. He resides in Madison, Wisconsin, where he is a member of the Northeon Forest Gurdjieff group which he started there in 1984. Contributors to this article include Udon Beidler, Howard Oidick, Ian MacFarlane, Edward Gorecki, Gloria Peterson Jones, Amy Kowalski, Mike Engebrettson, Judy Dornstriech, David Howell, Jean-Guy Richard, Lance Arbor, Linda Piper.

The quotations in italics throughout this article are from programs written by Mr. Beidler.

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[1] *Witness: The Autobiography of John G. Bennett* (1974) Tucson: Omen Press, pp. 307–314.

[2] *Architectural Record* (September 1944), *Arts Education and Policy Review* (1946), *The Charette* (1950).

[3] Lu K'uan Yu (who wrote under the English name of Charles Luk), *The Secrets of Chinese Meditation* (1964) London: Rider, p. 13.

[4] Ajahn Chah, *A Still Forest Pool* (2004) Wheaton, IL: Quest Books.

[5] G. I. Gurdjieff, *All & Everything: Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (1950) NY: Harcourt, Brace, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1963) NY: E. P. Dutton, *Life Is Real Only Then, When "I Am"* (1981) NY: Elsevier-Dutton Publishing.

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