



THE UPSTART SPRING

Esalen and the
American Awakening

by Walter Truett Anderson

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by adventitious circumstances, but which in its course is largely steered by endogenous processes.

In terms of this picture, spontaneous remission is no problem. This is only the final and natural outcome of the total process. What needs to be explained is the failure of many who embark upon this voyage to return from it. Do these encounter circumstances either in family life or in institutional care so grossly maladaptive that even the richest and best organized hallucinatory experience cannot save them?¹

Among the spokesmen for this point of view, none was more brilliant or charismatic than the Scottish-born R. D. Laing, who in the late 1960s rapidly emerged as conventional psychiatry's most eloquent adversary. Laing talked about his work at Kingsley Hall in London, where patients were given space, time, comfort, and support—but no drugs, no shock treatments. They were allowed to move through psychosis at their own pace. His was a radical philosophy that was profoundly suspicious of psychiatric authority, doubting any presumption that the doctors were so much healthier than the patients that they were entitled to impose painful treatments in the name of therapy.

Murphy and Price were both great admirers of Laing—Ronny Laing, they called him—and brought him to Big Sur for a weekend seminar in 1967. In the description of his Esalen seminar he wrote: "Humanity is estranged from its authentic possibilities. This limited vision prevents any unequivocal view of the sanity of commonsense, of the madness of the so-called madman."

Price wanted more on this subject than one seminar. He hoped to expose more people to Laing's ideas, and he was beginning to think about starting, perhaps as an annex of Esalen, a treatment center modeled on Kingsley Hall. A project along these lines did develop. Its organizer and driving force was a young clinical psychologist named Julian Silverman. Silverman, who worked in the National Institute of Mental Health center in Bethesda, Maryland, first wandered into Big Sur early in 1967 during the last months of the first residential program, only a few weeks after Laing had been there. Silverman had come out to the West Coast to do some consulting work at the Langley-Porter Neuropsychiatric Clinic in San Francisco, and one day he ran into Ed Maupin, whom he knew from graduate school. Maupin had brought some of the residents to Langley-Porter to meet Joe Ka-

miya, a psychologist and friend of Esalen who was doing research on the effects of meditation on brain waves. While the residents were taking turns meditating on the electroencephalograph, Maupin invited Silverman to come have a look at Big Sur. This was a momentous occurrence for Silverman, who ended up staying a long time.

Silverman, a lean, animated, fast-talking New Yorker, had seen a lot of campuses, clinics, and federal offices, but he had never seen anything like Esalen. It was like entering another world. "It was the most exciting, heavy—it was awe-ful, in the hyphenated sense of the word," he said. "I felt like I was about two thousand years in the past. I was in this place, and here were these girls in long skirts serving meals at these tables. The atmosphere was very bawdy, and the scene was extraordinarily sensual. The place was lit by candlelight. I walked into the lodge, and the next thing I knew I was sitting here talking to this dark-haired, magical, sparkling-eyed guy who was going 'wow' and 'golly' and 'whee' to whatever I was saying."

The dark-haired guy was Murphy, who had not yet moved on to San Francisco, and what he was being enthusiastic about were Silverman's accomplishments in research. Silverman was, at the time, head of the section on perceptual and cognitive studies in the Adult Psychiatry Branch at the National Institute of Mental Health. He was especially interested in schizophrenia and had done laboratory experiments with a group of schizophrenics in which he correlated visual stimuli with brain wave responses and established that they could somehow turn down the volume of sensory input from the outside world. He had studied the literature of psychedelia, and had personally experimented with LSD. He had researched the attitudes of other primitive cultures in regard to altered states of consciousness, and had had an article about shamanism and schizophrenia published in *The American Anthropologist*. And he, too, was a fan of Ronny Laing's.

Murphy told Silverman there was somebody he had to meet—meaning Price, who was away that weekend—and signed him up to come back to Big Sur and lead a seminar. It was entitled "Shamanism, Psychedelics, and the Schizophrenias" and was held in the summer of 1967. Price attended the seminar, and he and Silverman became good friends. Price was delighted to make an ally of a hotshot young psychologist who shared some of his views and had good connections to the psychiatric-scientific establishment; Silverman was delighted to have an excuse to spend time at Big Sur.

Together, they began planning a more ambitious project, a series of

seminars, workshops, and symposia under the overall title "The Value of Psychotic Experience." Silverman was to be the coordinator of the series, which would be held mainly in Big Sur, with a couple of special events in San Francisco, and Laing was to be the visiting expert. It became a major Esalen event in the summer of 1968. Among the participants were some of the best local authorities—Joe Adams, Alan Watts, the Jungian analyst John Perry—as well as the Polish psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabroski, who had developed theoretical work on the concept of "positive disintegration," and the Czech psychiatrist Stanislav Grof, one of the leading European practitioners of psychotherapy with LSD. Fritz Perls did gestalt dream work with the people who came to the five-day program at Big Sur, and Allen Ginsberg joined in a symposium on "The Poetry of Madness" up in San Francisco. It was, on the whole, a successful event. Its only serious setback was when Laing, after having agreed to come, decided at the last minute that the United States of America in 1968 was not a place he felt safe in visiting. He thought there was about to be some kind of a civil war, and he didn't want to be around when it started. Silverman and Price had long telephone conversations with him, and even got Watts to talk to him and try to get him to change his mind, but Laing refused to set foot on American territory.

Although Laing was not present in person, which caused some embarrassment, since his name was on the printed program, his presence was felt. The conference churned up a lot of enthusiasm among the panelists for some further effort, perhaps even a new institution based on the Kingsley Hall model.

While the new project was being discussed, early in 1969, Price had another psychotic episode. It may have been caused by some of the stresses and excitements of running Esalen, but it had a more obvious link to a visit from his father, Herman Price, in late 1968.

The elder Price used to come out once in a while for a duty visit; he would stay, uncomfortably, for a day or two. Esalen was not quite the place for a retired corporate officer in his mid-seventies. This last visit—and it was the last visit before his death—he and his son had an unusual exchange, a genuine conversation, in which the father talked about himself. He fell into a kind of reverie and reminisced about his boyhood in Lithuania. This monologue was seasoned with recollections of violent events: he talked about coming into a room in which a young man lay dying, shot by Zionists for having informed to the police; he talked about another time, when he saw a group of

Zionists, in chains, being herded through the streets by czarist soldiers. He had never before shared such things with his son—stories about his youth and about his Jewish background. Richard got more of a picture of his father's life that one day than he had in his entire previous thirty-eight years. The images lingered in his memory after his father had left, became more vivid the more he thought about them, and began to take on a powerful hallucinatory reality. Price knew he was slipping into psychosis.

When he felt the psychosis coming on, Price took care to ensure that he would not be sent away to an institution and that his parents would not find out. He wanted to be able to go through with it, whatever it was, without insulin and electroshock therapy. His friends made arrangements for him to stay back in the hills with an accommodating Big Sur Heavy who had a remote marijuana farm. When he did not come out of the psychosis as quickly as they had hoped, they moved him to another house, nearer Esalen. They were finding out something they had not, perhaps, fully understood about the Laing approach to dealing with psychosis: caring for someone in a psychotic state is an incredible amount of work, a gargantuan consumer of patience and hours. There was nobody available with the skill or the time to stay with Price through an episode whose duration no one could predict. Finally Jack Downing, a psychiatrist, took responsibility for having Price committed to the state mental hospital at Agnews, near San Jose. After a week or so there, he was ready to go home again.

It had been a trying time, but Price would always laugh when he told people about the conclusion of it, because the irony was too good: Agnews was the hospital that had agreed to work with Esalen on a model program for alternative approaches to treating psychosis. It had not yet begun when Price was there, but it did start not long after he was released. The building he was in stood just across a courtyard from the one that would be used for this project. Price could lounge at the window there, like Moses on the hills above the promised land, and look out over what would be, for a while, California's outpost of Kingsley Hall.

It was called the Agnews Project and was a joint enterprise of the state, the National Institute of Mental Health, and Esalen. Silverman left his job at Bethesda and came on as a full-time staff psychologist at Agnews. They had hoped to get Laing to become a part of the project, but he still refused to set foot in the United States. The project proceeded without him. It was a three-year research program, its main