

Esalen's Identity Crisis

For Decades, the Scenic Institute in Big Sur Was the Pioneer in the Self-Help Movement. But as Middle Age Approaches, It's Being Forced to Turn the Mirror on Itself.

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On an emerald expanse of California's majestic Central Coast, a series of intense human explorations are underway. In a large white yurt, several yogis are breathing, bending and meditating to deepen awareness of their Divine Inner Self. Next door, artists are painting doves, dolphins and goddesses as they create mandalas, an ancient symbol of the psyche, in search of self-understanding. Down the road, another group is propped against pillows, shoes kicked off as they analyze one another's dreams and unlock long-buried memories.

At one time, these scenes at the fabled Esalen Institute would have been considered avant-garde. Esalen once stood as the nation's leading laboratory of the human potential movement, the freewheeling center of social outlaws who experimented with LSD, Eastern meditation and in-your-face encounter groups to explore and expand themselves.

Today, as Esalen enters its fifth decade, it has settled into a comfortable middle-aged mainstream. Google turns up 7.7 million results for "human potential," including yoga retreats, art therapy classes and other self-help offerings commonplace around the country. The hippies and seekers who once made the place a youth paradise have aged, with just 14.5% of its 10,000 annual visitors younger than 35. What's more, Latinos, Asians and blacks, who compose the majority of Californians, are comparatively scarce at the institute. Along the way, longtime observers say, Esalen's creative spark has dimmed. Among other things, critics say, it has failed to explore in-depth many of the trends on the horizon today that are rooted in science and technology.



"When Esalen started, it was definitely the flagship of the human potential movement," says Marion Goldman, a University of Oregon professor of sociology and religious studies who is writing a book on the institute. "It will continue to be one of the major pilgrimage centers in the U.S. . . . but it no longer dominates the market."

Put simply: Is Esalen passé?

The seed that eventually grew into esalen was planted in 1950, when Stanford University student Michael Murphy accidentally stumbled into what would become a life-changing lecture on Hinduism by religion scholar Frederic Spiegelberg. His passion for Eastern religions stoked, Murphy went to India in 1956, after graduating from Stanford and serving in the U.S. Army, to spend 16 months at the ashram of Sri Aurobindo, an Indian yogi and philosopher. He returned to the Bay Area, where he worked odd jobs and meditated as much as eight hours a day. In 1960, he met Richard Price, a fellow seeker and Stanford graduate who would become Esalen's other founder.

Two years later, in October of 1962, Murphy and Price formally opened the doors to a philosophical and literal paradise. In its youthful heyday, Esalen was renowned for its alternative education, attracting some of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century: Historian Arnold Toynbee, theologian Paul Tillich and two-time Nobel Prize winner Linus Pauling all came to speak. Brilliant gurus presented provocative workshops in psychotherapy and spirituality. Esalen leaders took aim at social and political taboos, holding marathon encounters in race relations during the civil-rights struggle.

The place was edgy and hip, the talk of the town even in the *New Yorker* and other East Coast media. It attracted Hollywood stars and Sacramento politicians. It provided the stage for concerts by Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, George Harrison and Ravi Shankar, Simon & Garfunkel. It became grist for books and films, including such parodies as "Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice." It was emulated by a profusion of spiritual growth centers around the nation.

When it opened, Esalen offered only a dozen or so programs a season, but they tended to be intellectually dense explorations of the latest ideas in subjects such as evolutionary theory and psychotherapy. Seminars on major religious traditions featured study of the Upanishads, Tantra and Christian contemplative life decades before religious pluralism became commonplace.

A string of ground-breaking teachers soon brought international attention to Esalen. Timothy Leary preached a gospel of enlightenment through psychedelic drugs and

physicist Fritz Capra explored the mysticism of science. Frederick Perls helped launch Gestalt therapy and Will Schutz made confrontational encounter groups famous. Abraham Maslow developed a hopeful view of human psychology by studying high-performers rather than the neurotics favored by Freudian analysts. Ida Rolf made "rolfing" a household word in self-help circles with her deep-tissue bodywork.

Opening the American mind to Eastern mysticism, onetime Episcopal priest Alan Watts blended East and West in a synthesis of Zen Buddhism and Western psychology. Murphy promoted the mind-body movement in sports, while institute president George Leonard published radical visions of educational reform.

But that was then. the buzz has died down. mention you're writing about Esalen and the two most common reactions are: Is Esalen still around? Or, isn't that the place where hippies do drugs and get naked?

On its website, Esalen lists 47 noteworthy accomplishments in psychology, education, bodywork and holistic medicine. But 75% of them took place in the 1960s and '70s. Its U.S.-Soviet initiatives, which included Boris Yeltsin's first visit to the United States, took place primarily in the 1980s.

Still, many of the initiatives have stood the test of time. "We're all different because of Esalen," says Kevin Starr, former California state librarian and historian. He particularly credits the institute for popularizing Eastern teachings and making them part of a California sensibility that would eventually influence the nation: a respect for mind-body connections, holistic health, explorations of interior spiritual and psychological landscapes.

Other ideas, however, have fizzled. Murphy says Esalen leaders no longer endorse the sometimes vicious encounter groups or experimentation with illegal drugs, he adds.

William Coulson, a retired Northern California psychotherapist, says that Maslow himself came to regret his own influential teachings on "self-actualization" that promoted the freedom to pursue your own destiny and potential. Central to Esalen's philosophy, such ideas were important four decades ago to help unshackle oppressed spirits—women shoehorned into domesticity, blacks denied equal opportunities, men afraid of intimacy. But Coulson, who studied Maslow's ideas with famed psychologist Carl Rogers at the La Jolla-based Western Behavioral Sciences Institute, says they are "potential civilization killers" for their excessive individualism at the cost of community.

Esalen leaders also acknowledge the shortcomings of navel-gazing and say they are switching gears. "It's not enough to look at ourselves; we have to see how we are connected with others," says Andy Nusbaum, Esalen's tall

and lanky executive director. "We're moving from 'me' to 'we.'"

But now, like other baby boomers, Esalen is aiming to recapture its faded glory. As it enters its fifth decade, it is embarking on a 10-year face-lift—improvements prompted by a disastrous storm four years ago. With a stunning new bathhouse, plans to refurbish much of the rest of the 163-acre property, a first-time capital campaign to raise \$25 million and six new program initiatives, Esalen's leaders hope to rebound with a roar.

"We're on the edge of what could amount to a second birth for Esalen," Murphy says.



Esalen is tucked between the Pacific Ocean and the Santa Lucia Mountains 45 miles south of Monterey, and has five acres of organic gardens in addition to large stands of California cypress and Monterey pines.

At first glance, all seems perfect in paradise. enter the property, tucked on a ribbon of jagged coastline between the Pacific Ocean and the Santa Lucia Mountains 45 miles south of Monterey, and you are immediately swept up in its ethereal, almost mystical beauty. California cypress and Monterey pines, twisted by powerful winds, dot the landscape. The senses come alive with the smell of mint here and sulfur there, the sounds of gurgling mountain streams and chirping birds, the sensation of cool ocean breezes against your cheek. Hinting of hidden realities, fog rolls in and out to reveal a mysterious play of shadow and light across the land. Five acres of lush organic gardens splash the grounds with the bright colors of violet lobelia, red poppies, magenta snapdragons, yellow sunflowers and rows and rows of green vegetables.

The land, long sacralized by Spanish missionaries and the indigenous Esselen Indians for whom the center is named, features testaments to myriad spiritual traditions. The grounds include a stone Buddha, a garden goddess, a Native American sweat lodge, a circular meditation hut, a Judeo-Christian Tree of Life, a picture of the Virgin Mary and a Taoist inscription on a large stone next to a burbling creek:

*Tao follows the way of the watercourse
As the heart/mind through meditation
Returns to the sea*

The rhythms of life here harken to simpler days. Workers tend and harvest more than 100 varieties of vegetables and edible flowers, which are used to prepare more than 600 meals a day, on average. The leftovers are composted, helping to nurture a new cycle of growth.

The distracting beeps, rings and clatter of modern society are largely absent. There is no cellphone reception, no high-speed computer lines, few TVs. The nights are black and the stars brilliantly clear, owing to the near absence of street lamps in the vicinity. With few lures of electronic isolation, people congregate in the lodge for lively conversation. With few means to multi-task, the mind can rest.

In 1998, however, Mother Nature savagely intruded on Esalen's idyllic existence. A fierce El Niño storm destroyed the outdoor mineral baths, depriving the institute of its most famous physical attraction. Mudslides closed Highway 1, the main route to Esalen, for three months, causing a serious decline in revenues.

The crisis prompted a moment of truth for Esalen's backers. Could they raise the millions of dollars needed to rebuild? Could they muster the engineering talent to overcome the formidable challenges of securing new baths on the side of 50-foot-tall cliffs? Could they craft a solid business plan and implement it in a place accustomed to freewheeling management? Should they even try?

"There was a question as to whether Esalen could survive at all," recalls Nusbaum.

But Leonard, the institute's president and an aikido master, stepped in with advice gleaned from three decades of martial-arts practice: "Take the hit as a gift."

The believers in unlimited human potential have begun to do just that. For starters, they have revived the glorious baths. The rebuilt bathhouse, designed by award-winning architect Micky Muennig, has drawn rave reviews. The airy and elegant concrete structure features arched doorways, a mosaic fountain, sandstone floors and the hushed ambience of an outdoor temple. On a clear day, bathers can see otters, seals, birds and migratory whales with their young.

The baths are central to Esalen's legend and lore. It was the hot springs that lured Michael Murphy's grandfather, Henry, to first purchase the property in 1910. A Salinas doctor who delivered novelist John Steinbeck, Henry Murphy envisioned a therapeutic spa and resort; eventually the family turned it into a modest tourist establishment called Slate's Hot Springs. By the time the younger Murphy took over in 1962, the baths were haunts for bohemian writers such as Henry Miller and gay men from San Francisco. Big moments include Yeltsin's 1989

visit to Esalen to relax and rethink U.S.-Soviet relations in what came to be known as "hot tub diplomacy."

Beyond the bathhouse, Esalen plans to reposition some of its buildings for increased solar energy use and ultimately dreams of getting off the electrical grid. Plans are also in the works to upgrade its aging buildings, add more private rooms and build a new 200-person conference room and meditation center.

To pay for the improvements, Esalen has launched a capital campaign for the first time in its history. Elements include benefit events by celebrities, such as actor John Cleese, and appeals to 20,000 former workshop participants to become "Friends of Esalen" donors. The nonprofit institute, governed by a nine-member elected board of trustees, has no endowment. Its budget—\$10.2 million this year—has relied almost entirely on workshop fees. But the storm forced a reappraisal.

"When El Niño hit, we realized we had to do something to reestablish our plant and make ourselves more sustainable for the future," Nusbaum says. "We can't do it by ourselves. No way."

How to actively solicit support, however, is a question Esalen is grappling with for the first time, never having overtly marketed itself. But a plan is in the works that will allow the institute to reach specific audiences, starting with the launch of an e-mail campaign to previous visitors, with dreams of an expansion.

"I think there is a sense of urgency to get the knowledge about Esalen out to a more mainstream audience—people who aren't necessarily into alternative medicine or yoga, like someone in Topeka," Nusbaum says.



He added that the new development plan will not increase room capacity, reassuring those who initially worried that Esalen leaders would turn it into a high-priced tourist resort. (Weekend rates covering a three-day workshop, lodging, three meals a day and unlimited use of the mineral baths range from \$545 per person for shared rooms to \$260 for sleeping bag space in meeting rooms.)

Esalen's spectacular setting, which the capital improvements will only enhance, offers the most compelling argument for why the institute is likely to remain a singularly special retreat center. Esalen fans say magic is made here, thanks to an alchemic confluence of so many natural "power" elements—the ocean, the mineral hot springs, freshwater creek and rising mountains. The result, they say, is an experience that cannot be found at the local gym or urban self-help center.

In today's troubled world, says psychologist Ken Dychtwald, Esalen's healing environment has assumed a new urgency.

"We need Esalen now more than in the 1960s and '70s," says Dychtwald, who heads the institute's alumni network. "With the world becoming increasingly distressed, and conflicts building at every level, there is a need for a peaceful, beautiful, magical environment where people can talk and share and interact with the great thinkers of our times."

Esalen, however, faces other questions, ones that are voiced by people such as Asher Padeh. The Miami Beach psychiatrist has been coming annually to Esalen with his wife, Ilonka, for the last 25 years. He adores the center's rugged beauty, sacred energy, organic meals, welcoming staff and opportunities to grow through workshops that include dream analysis and Chi Gong training. But he says the place has lost its genius gurus and bold, questing quality.

"There's no place like Esalen," Padeh says, with an affectionate sigh. "But it was more avant-garde in the early days. Personal freedom was paramount. Today it seems more mainstream. People do not dare come up with contra-establishment ideas. I believe freedom is the only environment where new ideas can come up."

In contrast to the programs of the early years, esalen's offerings today are more varied and less startling. They have multiplied to 500 workshops a year spanning religious studies, dance, health, psychology, relationships, bodywork and yoga. Seekers can learn to "Garden for the Soul," "Get the Love You Want" or explore their inner selves through golf while studying principles of psychosynthesis as they play the Monterey Peninsula's world-class golf courses. The largest offerings, however, are creative art classes. They include workshops such as "Vision Painting: Evoking the Light," "Basic Acting: Setting the Spirit Free" and "Floral Arts as Spiritual Practice."

Such workshops, popular though they may be, fail to offer the kind of intellectual breakthroughs that once characterized Esalen, according to Pierre Grimes, a Huntington Beach philosophy professor who leads dream analysis workshops here.

"People are seeking different spiritual directions but are avoiding the mind," he says.

Grimes is urging Esalen leaders to recapture the cutting edge by exploring the most interesting innovations in science—for instance, he says, cellular biologist Bruce Lipton's research into the innate intelligence of cells. He also says Esalen should present more speakers who flout conventional wisdom—political activist and MIT linguist Noam Chomsky, say, or archeologists whose discoveries are challenging biblical claims.

Walter Truett Anderson, a futurist and author of a 1983 book about Esalen, says the institute's proximity to Silicon Valley could position it to play a larger role in exploring the latest technological research. "To my knowledge, Esalen is not seriously out front in talking about genetics, biotechnology or the various convergences of technology to improve human performance," he says.

The debate over direction is not new. From the earliest days, Esalen was a breeding ground of powerful egos and intellects who competed for control. The most notorious rivalry was between Perls, who wanted Esalen to champion the self-introspection of his Gestalt therapy, and Schutz, who pushed group dynamics through encounters, according to David Price, Esalen's information services manager and son of the co-founder. (Richard Price was killed by a falling boulder during a hike in 1985.)

But Esalen's hallmark has been a steadfast refusal to allow any one guru to "capture the flag," Price says—an attitude he says eventually drove followers of the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh from Esalen to Oregon to start their commune there. To ensure that spirit remains after the founders pass on, Esalen recently changed its bylaws to strengthen the checks and balances on the board of trustees.

"Esalen has always tried to present as many different ideas as possible," Price says. "It avoids things cultish or guru-oriented."

Nancy Lunney-Wheeler, Esalen's program director, says she is considering ideas such as Grimes' to bring in more intellectually rigorous topics—but wonders aloud how they would sell. In January, for instance, Esalen offered a workshop on novelist Aldous Huxley's life and work that drew fewer than 10 people, a third of what the more popular classes attract. The biggest draws, Lunney-Wheeler says, are yoga, arts, meditation and classes on relationships.

"Esalen needs to keep ahead of the curve, but at the same time keep popular," she says. "What's cutting edge is not necessarily what's popular."

Esalen's edgiest programs are not found in the public courses. They are offered by the institute's little-known Center for Theory & Research, which organizes projects and conferences on what it calls "frontier inquiry." Among other things, the center held "citizen diplomat" conferences with Soviets during the Cold War, explored more sustainable methods of capitalism with leading CEOs; launched early programs in alternative and holistic health; and taught meditation and mindfulness to AIDS patients and inner-city youth. The center has compiled an archive of 10,000 cases studies of supernormal human functioning, such as acts of telepathy and extraordinary strength, and a bibliography of scientific research on meditation.

And now the center, as part of Esalen's overall rejuvenation, is set to unveil six new research initiatives. They include programs on Western esoteric studies, supernormal human capacities and whether consciousness survives bodily death. Other initiatives will seek to improve the effectiveness of environmental groups and gauge methods to improve human performance, including raising IQ, known as Integral Transformative Practice.

In addition, just as Murphy and others reached out to Soviet thinkers during the Cold War, they are now exploring similar "citizen-diplomat" initiatives with Islamic mystics.

"We're in outlaw country, the road less traveled," Murphy says.

Murphy, 73, believes that Esalen is overly identified with the 1960s and unfairly lampooned as the vanguard of California's touchy-feely New Agers. Too often, he says, the institute's solid intellectual achievements are ignored.

Whatever changes have transformed Esalen over time, Murphy says, the mission to help people fulfill their potential remains evergreen.

Bill Schier, 43, is a case in point. The New York native says he was a hard-driving prosecutor in Northern Virginia when his world suddenly fell apart a few years ago. A 14-year marriage ended in divorce. Shortly afterward, his uncle and best friend died.

"What am I doing with my life?" he asked himself.

At his therapist's recommendation, he visited Esalen in October 2000. During a workshop, "Experiencing Esalen," he sat in a circle and studied his feet, as instructed during a sensory awareness session. He says he found the whole thing ridiculous—and blurted that out to the group.

Then, Schier says, a startling thing happened. People offered support and companionship. Total strangers who cared? Clearly, he thought, this was not New York.

After a weekend of art, deep conversations, steaming baths and nourishing organic food, Schier says he felt transformed. In 2001, he quit his job and enrolled in the institute's extended student program. Working jobs in the

kitchen and at the entry gate, Schier says he's resolving lifelong problems stemming from a troubled childhood.

"I'm a lot less stoic than I used to be," Schier says. "I'm less afraid of my emotions. I'm more able to express my disappointments and joys, and deal with the disappointments of others."

Such testimonies suggest that Esalen maintains its value as a self-help mecca. Nusbaum, the institute's executive director, says, "Everyone who comes here leaves different than when they arrived."

Now all they have to do is get more people to come.

