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# Following Our Bliss

HOW THE SPIRITUAL IDEALS OF  
THE SIXTIES SHAPE OUR LIVES TODAY

**Don Lattin**



# following our bliss



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*In memory of my brother, Alan*

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For the past two decades I've covered the religion beat for daily newspapers in San Francisco, a city where the dominant religious preference seems to be "none of the above" or perhaps "all of the above." I've met Mother Teresa, held hands with the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, interviewed Billy Graham and Krishnamurti, cracked jokes with the Mormon prophet, and flown on the pope's plane. Oh, the messiahs I have known! Once I chased an American guru all the way out to his own private island in Fiji, where he was on retreat with a former *Playboy* playmate (Miss September 1976) and his eight other wives. I've investigated so many spiritual teachers, self-help swamis, and cult leaders that I've completely forgotten some of them. There have been many more memorable and compassionate souls, but too much corruption alongside all that compassion. Occupational hazard, I guess, hanging out in the dim alley where cynicism meets skepticism, looking for a little light.

This book began with the stories of children born into the Sixties counter-culture—cults, communes, meditation centers, and other alternative spiritual groups. The idea was to look at the Sixties through their eyes and hear the lessons learned by their parents. Along the way, it grew into a larger look at the spiritual legacy of the Sixties—at how feminism, the drug culture, the sexual revolution, rock 'n' roll, and the gay rights movement have challenged the religious establishment and shaped our lives. These are not "only in San Francisco" stories. They are drawn from scores of interviews with people living in Texas, Tennessee, Montana, New York, South Carolina, Oregon, Arizona, and elsewhere. This is an American story.

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It could not have been told without the friendship and critical assistance of Aimee Chitayat, Mitch Clogg, George Csicsery, Antonia Lattin, Susan Rock, and Cheryl Daniels Shohan. Many thanks to Wendy Miller and my colleagues at the *San Francisco Chronicle* for giving me a leave of absence to work on the manuscript; to the wise counsel of my agent, Amy Rennert, for getting it to the publisher; to the sharp eye of my editor, John Loudon, and his able assistant, Kris Ashley, for getting it into print; and to my wife, Laura, and the girls, for putting up with me through “all of the above.”

## INTRODUCTION

*Are you experienced?  
Have you ever been experienced?  
Well, I have.*

“ARE YOU EXPERIENCED”  
JIMI HENDRIX, 1968

We were a restless bunch, helplessly hoping, endlessly searching for ecstasy and enlightenment. We didn’t want to believe it. We wanted to *feel* it. We wanted to *experience* something beyond doctrine, dogma, and denominationalism—whether through Jesus, peyote, or a charismatic swami from the East. We were, famously, into spirituality, not religion.

What began with a call for what we could do for our country ended for many with a search for ourselves. Along the way a generation came of age, embracing the values, and the antivalues, of the era. Old forms of faith and family collapsed, and the search was on for something new. Parents acted like children and children like parents. We were a generation that was not content to stay in the suburbs and pray to God on Sunday morning. Many of us wanted to see God, to be God, or to at least recapture the ecstasy and revelation of that eye-opening acid trip we couldn’t get out of our system.

In his memoir, *Sleeping Where I Fall*, actor Peter Coyote describes his life in the Sixties as “the pursuit of absolute freedom.” He wanted to live in the “perpetual present.” Coyote rolled out to the West Coast in 1964 and soon fell in with the Diggers and the San Francisco Mime Troop, two guerrilla theater groups that mixed radical politics with prehippie antics. “From our point of view,” he writes, “freedom involved first liberating the imagination from economic assumptions of profit and private property that demanded existence at the expense of personal truthfulness and honor, then living according to personal authenticity and fidelity to inner directives and impulses.”<sup>1</sup> Does that sound high-minded? Don’t worry. Coyote goes on to confess that the Digger philosophy was also a great way to get high and get laid.

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In more ways than one, the Sixties were a riot. It seemed like the highs were higher and the lows were lower. We felt alive. “There was a kind of wistfulness,” recalls poet David Whyte. “We actually experienced life. Everything is so strained now. My son is sixteen, and it seems like he’s missing something. There’s a tremendous feeling of constraint. We were one of the last generations that were just let go to play when we were young. Now they are ferried from place to place and everything has to be scheduled. I think this has a huge effect. It’s molding our society in ways we haven’t comprehended.”

Perhaps every generation thinks their youth was an extraordinary time. It’s easy to romanticize the Sixties. It’s also easy to parody those times, and I’ve tried to do neither in this book. If you’re looking for a rant against the baby boomers, check out *Balsamic Dreams* or, for a more nuanced attack on the “bourgeois bohemians,” *Bobos in Paradise*.<sup>2</sup> Both books are entertaining, but they focus on only the upper crust of the boomer pie—the yuppies, the sell-outs, the radical chic, the costume hippies. Those are easy targets. This book looks at the real spiritual activists of the Sixties counterculture, idealists who were trying to save the world or at least transform themselves. They were the yeast in the dough of our generation, the lively culture that made it rise.

We will spend a lot of time looking at these times through the eyes of the *real* children of the Sixties—kids born and raised amid some of the era’s wildest social, spiritual, and sexual experimentation. As we’ll see, the Sixties were a mixed blessing for the actual children of that generation’s counterculture. To many of them, it was an era of shattered institutions and broken homes, a time that saw the rise of no-fault divorce and no-fault religion. No unequivocal moral can be drawn from their experiences, but the stories are amazing—tales of two generations that forever altered America’s spiritual landscape.

Many of their parents were converts to Buddhism, spiritualism, or other latter-day revelations. Having rejected the faith of their fathers, they were hesitant to impose their newly formed beliefs on their children. They didn’t want to lay their trip on the kids as their parents had with them. Other families profiled in this book provide a counterpoint to that kind of laissez-faire religious education. They practiced extreme religion, and the kids had no choice but to follow their parents down a predetermined spiritual path. These families fully embraced the era’s burst of idealism and naïveté, joining utopian movements and religious cults that promised to save the world through Krishna consciousness, Jesus Christ, or the messianic message of Sun Myung Moon. While their parents were out spreading a counterculture gospel, the kids were often left be-

hind at nurseries, boarding schools, and communal farms. Some were abandoned and abused and left the fold as soon as they could. Others kept the faith and even passed it on to a third generation.

Many of us have our own definition of the Sixties—not only what it was but *when* it was. January 1, 1960, to December 31, 1969, is technically the decade of the 1960s, but the Sixties is more a state of mind than a frame of time. Some scholars of the decade, focusing more on politics than religion, see the birth of the Sixties at the Greensboro lunch counter sit-ins on February 1, 1960, and pronounce it dead on May 4, 1970, when National Guardsmen shot and killed four students at Kent State University. Others argue that the Sixties began in the fifties, with the rise of the Beat movement, and ended with Watergate and the resignation of Richard Nixon on August 9, 1974. There are lots of markers we could pick, but the bookends we'll use for the Sixties encompass nearly two decades—from January 20, 1961, to November 18, 1978. Our “decade” begins with the inaugural speech of John F. Kennedy, a short but powerful address that set the stage for the idealism, religious activism, and social commitment that defined the best of the Sixties. For our purposes, the era ends in 1978 with the murder and mass suicide of more than nine hundred members of Peoples Temple. They were loyal followers of the Reverend Jim Jones, an activist San Francisco preacher who took his flock to South America to establish a socialist commune and escape escalating investigations by the federal government and the news media. There, amid piles of bloated bodies in the Guyana jungle, the spiritual and political dreams of the Sixties collapsed in a collective nightmare. Jonestown forever changed the way we look at cults and communes. For those of us close to the Peoples Temple tragedy, the carnage left us sad, shocked, and wondering what went wrong.

In this book the broader Sixties state of mind is spelled with a capital S while the actual decade of the sixties gets a lowercase letter. That means our Sixties takes us through most of the 1970s and what writer Tom Wolfe spotted early as “the Me Decade,” when the underlying inspiration for so many of our meditations, group therapies, and consciousness-raising techniques could be summed up in four little words: “Let’s talk about Me!”<sup>3</sup>

Much of Sixties spirituality was a reaction to the fifties—a decade of prosperity, rapid church growth, and McCarthyism. The words *under God* were inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance, and going to church was right up there with Mom and apple pie. But something happened between 1961 and 1978, from the hope of Kennedy to the horror of Jonestown. Trust in the nation’s

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institutions, including its religious institutions, went into free fall. New institutions, like the Peace Corps, the civil rights movement, and other organizations of liberation, rose to take their place, but the common bonds were broken.

There were battles in the streets and battles in the home. This was a revolution of faith and family. “Growing up in the fifties, starved for stimulation, connection, and meaning, activists and hippies turned their backs on the cautious lives of their parents,” writes Alice Echols. “Nothing defines the generation that came of age in the sixties better than its determination to live outside the parameters of reasonable behavior, which, after all, seemed at the very root of the problem, the cause of America’s terrible adventure shortage.”<sup>4</sup>

We overcame America’s adventure shortage with gusto, and with the help of two little pills. LSD and the birth control pill altered our ideas about sexual morality and reality itself. Mysticism and feminism were on the rise. Women entered the workplace and won the right to lead many churches and synagogues. Single mothers, gays, and lesbians forced us to redefine the family. Despite the Pill, lots of babies were born too soon, right in the middle of the great adventure. Most of them were loved, but sometimes they just got in the way.

Sixties spirituality is expressed not only through the freewheeling lives of those of us who left organized religion to follow our bliss. It also inspired changes in the churches and synagogues those spiritual seekers—and disaffected clergy—left behind. In the Catholic church, thousands of priests and nuns abandoned vows of celibacy to marry or left a church they saw as stagnant and oppressive. Their exodus only strengthened the hand of conservative, traditionalist forces in the Roman church. In mainline Protestant denominations such as the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a progressive political agenda and a new openness to gay rights chased conservative clergy and congregants from the fold. Many went straight into the arms of an emboldened conservative evangelical movement, which reset the political agenda to focus on issues such as abortion, school prayer, and “traditional family values.”

Where did all the baby boomers go? Many returned to church once they had their own babies and traditional religious values no longer looked so oppressive. Some retreated to the certainty of the conservative evangelical movement; others discovered that neither Christianity nor Judaism are monolithic institutions. They found religious congregations that were more tolerant of diverse lifestyles and open to spirituality than those of their childhood. Millions never

returned to organized religion but remain highly active seekers, preferring to identify themselves as “spiritual” rather than “religious.”

How many millions? Tens of millions. In a national survey conducted in January 2002, pollster George Gallup Jr. found that one-third of Americans now describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.”<sup>5</sup> These are not just spiritual seekers and baby boomers stuck in the Sixties. Other recent surveys have found personalized spirituality even more common among those in Generation X, Americans born between 1965 and 1980. Jackson W. Carroll and Wade Clark Roof surveyed more than a thousand Americans and found rising religious individualism in Generation X. For example, nearly 73 percent of the younger generation agreed with the statement “An individual should arrive at religious beliefs independent of church groups.” That compared to 65 percent for the baby boomers (those born from 1945 to 1965) and 60 percent for older Americans.<sup>6</sup> Look at the numbers, and the trend is clear: in the new millennium, the children of the baby boomers are also following their own spiritual path.

What do we find at the end of this path? What are spiritual seekers actually seeking?

“People say that what we’re all seeking is the meaning of life,” replied mythologist Joseph Campbell. “I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive.”<sup>7</sup>

Shortly before his death in 1987, Campbell spoke at length with journalist Bill Moyers in the hugely popular PBS series *The Power of Myth*. It was an enlightening, far-ranging conversation. It gave millions of Americans a new way of looking at the mythic literature of the world’s religions. But many of us remember only three words from the long series of Moyers-Campbell interviews: “Follow your bliss.”

It came up when Campbell was talking about the last page in the Sinclair Lewis novel *Babbitt*, when the main character laments, “I have never done a single thing I’ve wanted to in my whole life!”

“That is a man who never followed his bliss,” Campbell said. “The religious people tell us we really won’t experience bliss until we die and go to heaven. But I believe in having as much as you can of the experience while you are still alive.”

Campbell, who was raised in the Catholic church, was not recommending a life of secular hedonism. Listen to what he said when Moyers, a Baptist, asked

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a follow-up question: “Do you ever have this sense when you are following your bliss, as I have at moments, of being helped by hidden hands?”

“All the time,” Campbell replied. “It is miraculous. . . . If you follow your bliss you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. When you can see that, you begin to meet people who are in the field of your bliss, and they open the doors to you. I say, follow your bliss and don’t be afraid, and the doors will open where you didn’t know they were going to be.”<sup>8</sup>

What do we find on the other side of the door? What *do* we find at the end of the path? We find our lives. There is no end. It’s a circular route back to us. We are on a spiritual path that seeks the development of human potential. We are not fearfully looking to a judgmental God for approval or to Messiah for eternal salvation. We are spiritual, not religious.

Critics—secular and religious—are quick to lampoon spiritual seekers, accusing them of simplistic, narcissistic, magical thinking that acknowledges neither the power of evil nor the complexity of the real world. There’s some truth to that critique, but Christians and other orthodox believers can be just as prone to magical thinking as those written off as “New Agers.” In fact, many people who call themselves “spiritual but not religious” are more tolerant, thoughtful, and open to science and the modern world. They’re often less likely to accept easy answers to the mysteries of life. And their eclectic philosophy is often fueled not by fear of God but by an inclusive vision of a world living in harmony. You may say they are dreamers, but compare their dream to the future vision in so many evangelical churches—an apocalyptic horror visited upon those who do not follow the one true faith.

“Is God Dead?” *Time* magazine asked that question in giant red letters on its black-bordered cover of April 8, 1966. Those who answered yes were seminary professors, intellectuals, and others unable to see over the walls of their own ideas and small circle of friends. Those believers in the march of secularism mistook the anemia of the mainline Protestant religious establishment—Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians—for a broader atheism that just wasn’t there. New expressions of God were breaking out all around them—Pentecostal Christians, New Age seekers, Mormon missionaries, and a resurgent Islam. Wes “Scoop” Nisker, the Buddhist comic and social commentator, gets closer to the truth when he quips: “If God wasn’t dead, he at least was having a midlife crisis.”<sup>9</sup>

If God didn't change, the way we approached her certainly did. But what do we mean when we call ourselves "spiritual"? And how do we raise our children to be "spiritual"? How do we pass on a religious tradition that seems to defy tradition?

Looking back at American religious history, we see that these are not new questions. From old-time religion to the New Age movement, American faith has always been a blend of individualism, communal spirit, and social experimentation. One of the religious traditions of the United States is having no religious tradition. Forget what the Reverends Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson tell you about "traditional family values" and our history as a "Christian nation." According to one estimate, less than 15 percent of those living in the American colonies in the 1770s belonged to any church.<sup>10</sup> Astrology, divination, and other occult practices were not just the province of witches in Salem; they enjoyed widespread appeal.

At the same time, the Enlightenment inspired many of our founding fathers to seek out "rational" or "reasonable" religion and to view the established churches and Christian orthodoxy with great suspicion. One scholar of that era offers an intriguing summary of how our founding fathers saw God. It sounds more like the vision of New Agers than conservative evangelicals: "Images of God as a personal being who craves admiration, worship and obedience could be summarily dismissed as inconsistent with the goal of enhancing human agency. Picking and choosing among competing religious ideas was not only possible, it was a necessary step toward full intellectual integrity." Robert Fuller goes on to note that fifty-two of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence were Masons. "Masons viewed God in impersonal terms, as the Grand Architect of the natural order. They neither approved nor condemned Christianity, but rather viewed it as one manifestation in a long series of historical religions—a series that would culminate in the emergence of a universal faith."<sup>11</sup>

So America's embrace of religious alternatives and our tradition of spiritual individualism go back a long way. If you think the New Age movement started in 1965, remember that William James found that countless nineteenth-century Americans engaged in "systematic exercise in passive relaxation, concentration, and meditation, and have even invoked something like hypnotic practice."<sup>12</sup>

Freedom of religion—and from religion—is one of the foundations upon which our nation stands. But in the 1960s and 1970s, freedom rang like never

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before. We became a mobile nation, tearing up our religious roots as we moved along. Relaxed immigration laws allowed the arrival of Buddhist teachers, Hindu swamis, Sufi mystics, and others with new varieties of religious experience. Today the spirituality born of the Sixties not only helps define our religious and family life but also shapes the way we work, the kind of health care we seek, and the food we eat.

This new spirituality takes many forms. Part 1 of this book looks at three varieties—the human potential movement, the revisioning of American Catholicism, and the longing for an entirely new kind of revelation. Part 2 explores the lives of those who turned to the East, to the mysticism and meditative practices of India, China, and Japan, and the difficulties they have passing on such culturally different traditions to a new generation.

Some say the Sixties were really about three things—sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. They see that unholy trinity and point to our former president, William Jefferson Clinton, as a poster child of the Sixties. But the real story of sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, and religion is very different, and you'll find it in part 3 of this book. Finally, in part 4, we'll look at paradise lost—at what happened to some of the messianic movements and utopian dreams of the Sixties. We'll end with a visit to the most infamous hippie commune in America, where a few unrepentant dreamers are still following their bliss.



## Searching for the Sixties

We start the search at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, the birthplace of the human potential movement and the spot where Sixties spirituality took root on the California coast. Esalen is a retreat center based upon the belief that our human consciousness and capabilities are evolving, in the broader culture and in ourselves. Through a variety of spiritual disciplines, physical training, and psychological therapies, we can transform our consciousness, improve our communication, and deepen our compassion for other people. There are many levels of reality, but most of us barely scratch the surface.

There is no doctrine, no exclusive claim to sacred truth. Sixties spirituality is like a course in comparative religion, a search for the mystical center in all major faiths. Esalen and Sixties spirituality are not about believing in God.

They're about *experiencing God*.

At Esalen we meet David Price, born in 1963 to the institute's cofounder, the late Richard Price. A literal child of the Sixties, David was born at ground zero of the Dionysian decade and shares the mixed memories of many kids raised amid the wonder and the craziness of that extraordinary era.

While Esalen blossomed during the early 1960s, another spiritual revival was happening on the other side of the world. In Rome the Second Vatican Council opened up Catholicism to the modern world, redefined the church as the “people of God,” and began (albeit briefly) a new openness toward other ideas and theologies. Like Esalen, Vatican II inspired a feeling of hope and sense of possibility. It also unleashed a new wave of social activism in the church that became an important part of the broader peace and justice movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and, mostly recently, in a revived antiwar movement.

In the late 1970s and 1980s there was reaction against this newfound freedom in the Catholic church and among evangelicals on the religious right. Pope Paul VI refused to reconsider church teachings against birth control, married priests, and the ordination of women. Pope John Paul II tightened the doctrinal reins, appointing bishops who would continue the campaign against perceived excesses of Vatican II. Thousands of priests and nuns left the fold, and we’ll meet some of them in chapter 2.

Millions of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews in the baby boomer generation left organized religion in the Sixties and embarked on a new spiritual search. There was no shortage of gurus, self-help groups, and new revelations to explore. In chapter 3 we look at one of them. *A Course in Miracles* envisions a loving and accepting God, not a deity who rules with fear and judgment. Like many other New Age philosophies that blossomed in the sixties and seventies, the goal here was not to trust Jesus but to “know thyself.”



*The Baths at Esalen*



*Woodstock, 1969*

## CHAPTER I

# Esalen Institute and the First Child of the Sixties



*And so, become yourself  
because the past is just a “good-bye.”  
Don’t you ever ask them why.  
If they told you, you would die.  
So just look at them and sigh  
and know they love you.*

“TEACH YOUR CHILDREN”

CROSBY, STILLS, NASH, AND YOUNG, 1970

**E**very story needs a beginning and every religion its Garden of Eden. Ours begins on a green shelf perched above the rugged splendor of the central California coast. Blue and orange wildflowers dazzle in the noonday sun. Steaming hot springs bubble up from the ground, forming pools with a pungent smell but a sensuous, silky feel. Sixty feet below, the cold Pacific crashes ashore. This is a place of pilgrimage, but not just for humans. Monarch butterflies rest here during their annual migration. They make the round-trip only once, but somehow their progeny find the way back. In coastal canyons cool with morning fog, these noble insects annually blanket the landscape with wings of orange and black.

Big Sur is wild and full of wonder. It’s danger and delight. You feel the seasons. Rain and wind lash the coast in winter, sending mud and rock sliding

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down the hillsides. But those same storms nourish this dry landscape, inspiring green grasses, poppies, and lupine to shoot up in the spring. Summers are cold and foggy, but the salt air warms in early fall, drying the spring grass and fueling wildfires that blacken the land.

Big Sur opens you up, but it can tear at your soul, leaving emptiness inside. It's the end of the line for those of us who wandered across the continent, running from the past or toward an uncertain future. There's nowhere to go but off the cliff or into yourself. At the edge lies the serpent, coiled and ready to help you find the truth. Take this knowledge, drink this potion, shed your skin, find yourself, find God, find something, but be careful not to lose it because you can't go back.



David Price was conceived here. It happened in the Waterfall House, a little cabin built atop some of the rocks that channel Hot Springs Creek. The creek tumbles to the sea through one of those butterfly-covered canyons, past the shack where sperm met egg in 1963. His parents, Richard and Eileen, met at a resort called Big Sur Hot Springs. It would soon be known as Esalen Institute—ground zero for a revolution in consciousness, a place where the young and the hip would soon take off their clothes, drop their defenses, and revel, wail, whine, and dance around whatever came forth from the psyche, spirit, or soul. It would be silly, serious, spiritual, sensuous, self-indulgent—all at the same time. It would be religion, California style, and would spread across the country and around the world. It was about workshops, not worship, seeking your true self, not eternal salvation. It was experiential, not theological. What would happen at Big Sur during the next few years would be nothing less than the birth pangs of a new religion, a new kind of spirituality. But for young David, it was not the Garden of Eden. It was paradise lost.

His mother, Eileen, had come to Big Sur in 1958. She stayed for a while at the home of Emil White, an old friend of Henry Miller, who moved here in the 1940s. Miller attracted an enclave of artists, freethinkers, and hangers-on. His sexually explicit books, *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*, were still banned in the United States, and the author had become the folk hero of the fringe literati. Their Big Sur hangout had been notorious since 1947 when it was described in an article in *Harper's* magazine titled "The New Cult of Sex

and Anarchy.” Author Mildred Edie Brady found a new kind of religion percolating along the coast, an erotic, sentimental mysticism that traded a wrathful Jehovah for a subtler “life force.”<sup>1</sup> Its sages were Miller, D. H. Lawrence, and William Blake; its philosophers, the mystics G. I. Gurdjieff and P. D. Ouspensky, along with the crazed genius Wilhelm Reich.

David’s father, Richard, came to California to attend Stanford University. Richard earned an undergraduate degree in psychology in 1952 then headed back east to Harvard for graduate studies. Richard Price had no interest in the business world of his father, a corporate leader with Sears, Roebuck & Company back in Chicago, nor was he taken by mainstream academia. He soon left Harvard, returned to San Francisco, and signed up for classes at the Academy of Asian Studies. Price was drawn to Eastern mysticism and the emerging Beat scene in North Beach, but there were demons. A strange euphoria was building up inside him. One spring night he started acting out in a North Beach bar and was tossed into a paddy wagon by six San Francisco cops. According to the authorities, and his father, Price had gone nuts. He was now in the system, sent through a string of mental hospitals, ending with nearly a year at a private psychiatric center in New England called the Institute for Living. They pioneered shock treatment there, and they tried it out on Price. Later he’d refer to this as his “incarceration.” His brain was zapped dozens of times with insulin and electric shock. They beat him down but didn’t knock him out. Price returned to California in the spring of 1960, this time with a vision that there must be another road to mental health for those struggling with emotional and spiritual turmoil.

Eileen’s relationship with Richard lasted only a few months after David’s birth. She was living a few miles up Highway One from Big Sur Hot Springs, and Richard wasn’t around much. “My father was not very available when I was growing up,” David recalls. “He was still going in and out of his psychotic breaks. That finally went away by the seventies. He was around, but not that much. He was focused on the ‘I’ stuff then. He was a brilliant man. Brilliance and craziness can go together.”

His mother also had problems. She’d taken LSD several times and had amazing mystical journeys. It opened her up to the spirit world. She could hear the music of the spheres. Then one day the music sounded weird. She didn’t come down from the drug as she had before. It was a bad trip, Eileen was frightened, and she had an eighteen-month-old child on her hands. One of her LSD guides at Big Sur was a man named Richard Alpert, later known as Ram

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Dass. He sent her up to San Francisco to see a psychiatrist. The shrink wanted to give her more pills. She didn't want more pills, but she didn't know what to do. Then she wandered into a metaphysical bookstore where an Indian guru, Swami Chinmayananda, was speaking. Eileen was already interested in Indian philosophy. She'd read Krishnamurti and visited the Vedanta Temple in Hollywood, but this was different. Chinmayananda was the real thing: smart, dynamic, funny, and apparently without ego—an embodiment of his teachings. At her new guru's direction, Eileen changed her name to Nalini. She and David left Big Sur and moved up to the northern California town of Napa to be closer to other devotees. There she married another vegetarian and student of Indian philosophy.

It was not easy for David. "My mother got into Hinduism very heavily, which I still rebel against. 'Mom's going off to India. Who's taking care of you?' Well, that was a problem. There was my stepfather. This is where I have a lot of issues with my mother. She was New York Italian—a very Catholic family. She substituted one orthodoxy for another. But she was on the leading edge even if she wasn't aware of it. The Beat scene. India. Hindu stuff in '64 and '65, before George Harrison was into it. She took acid with Richard Alpert at Big Sur, before he was Ram Dass. Joan Baez lived next door when I was a kid. My father was in a relationship with Jane Fonda. Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young were here. Bob Dylan. I was too young to get it. Bob Dylan didn't mean anything to me as a kid."

David Price did not want pop stars and instant enlightenment. He wanted a mom and dad like they had on TV, stores to go to, and other kids to play with. Forty years later, when he spoke to me about his childhood, David and I were sitting on the Esalen grounds, just up the hill from the cabin where he was conceived. "People wax nostalgic about the good old days and how everything was so perfect in the past, and details like this get overlooked. The sexuality was so free, I think people didn't want to be reminded about kids—that there was some consequence to their activity."

Oh, yeah, consequences. The real world. At Esalen, it's easy to forget about the real world—at least for a day or two. It had been a year since I had first met David at Esalen, and I was back. On that day, I woke up in a private room next to a workshop space called "Maslow." Some seminarists, as Esalen calls its customers, had passed the night in there on the floor, curled up in sleeping bags. Their home for the night is named after Abraham Maslow, one of the founding fathers of humanistic psychology. Maslow was fascinated by "peak

experiences,” intense moments when we suddenly feel a sense of ecstasy, empathy, and awe. These are the seeds of all religion, but most churches merely hint at this ineffable wonder. That was something for Jesus or the saints, but not for us. It’s different here. People come to Esalen to have peak experiences, and they often do.



It’s one of those mornings at Esalen when all things seem possible. From my deck at sunrise, I see a solitary man practicing t’ai chi on the deck next to the swimming pool, right on the edge of the cliff. His arms rise with the tides and a lazy bed of kelp floating near shore. The ocean is murky green in the morning light but soon brightens to a serene blue. Garden of Eden, indeed.

Over in the dining room, a few early risers seek out caffeine. Before long, the first seminarians arrive for a morning yoga class, mostly women wearing tights and sensible shoes. The early morning buzz of self-improvement fills the air. The budding yogis stretch their arms and legs as a line of Tibetan prayer flags—green, yellow, blue, and white—flap in a soft breeze. Others are already in the yoga room, which is named after Aldous Huxley, the novelist and providential explorer of mystical states, and they are singing and swaying to mellow music. “It’s Yoouuuu. . . . it’s yoouuu,” they chant, sounding like a chorus of offbeat owls.

Other sounds arise. Beyond the shelter of a giant Monterey pine, the swish of powerful sprinklers can be heard over the waves. Long streams of water shoot over a flower garden, an enlivening quilt of pink, white, maroon, and blue. A path winds through the garden, down the side of a small canyon, and onto a bridge that crosses the creek at Waterfall House—now expanded and remodeled into a charming little *zendo*, a circular meditation room with black cushions.

Esalen always seems on the verge of going upscale. There are lots of expensive cars and sport utility vehicles in the parking lot. There’s a giant Ford Expedition XLT, painted a tasteful forest green, gleaming as though it’s right off the showroom floor. There’s a metallic gray BMW Z3 convertible that’s so new it doesn’t even have license plates. You can almost hear the proud owners: “Let’s drive the car down to Esalen this weekend and do a workshop.” But on the northern end of the property, where the Esalen staff lives, it still looks like the

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funky sixties. There's a woman living in a ragged tepee. There's an old pickup truck with a large yin-yang symbol on the hood and a Compost Happens bumper sticker on the rear fender. You can almost feel how it was back then in the Sixties, when young David was playing by himself down in the creek.

Back in those days, raising kids was not what was happening. The baby boom had turned to bust. It was the dawn of a new decade, high time to act out a grand vision.

### **ACT ONE**

It's 1960. Richard Price meets Michael Murphy in San Francisco at an old brick house near Golden Gate Park. It's full of seekers and followers of an Indian guru named Sri Aurobindo. It turns out that Price and Murphy were both born in 1930, graduated from Stanford in 1952 with psychology degrees, but never met at the university. They both come from successful, hardworking American families—one in the Midwest and one from central California. They start talking and realize that they both learned about Aurobindo, a Bengal-born, Western-educated yogi, back in the comparative religion class of Professor Frederic Spiegelberg. Murphy has just gotten back from India, where he studied at Aurobindo's ashram. The guru died back in 1950, but his ideas planted a seed in Michael's soul that will later blossom into Esalen Institute and the human potential movement. "Man lives mostly in his surface mind, life, and body," Aurobindo wrote, "but there is an inner being within him, with greater possibilities to which he has to awake—to greater beauty, harmony, power, and knowledge."

### **ACT TWO**

Flash back fifty years to 1910. Michael Murphy's grandfather, Henry Murphy, a successful doctor from the small California farming town of Salinas, stands on a cliff at Big Sur. He's just bought 375 acres of magnificent coastal property from the original homesteader, Tom Slate, and dreams of building a European-style health spa at what was then known as Slate's Hot Springs. But little can be done until Highway 1 connects Big Sur to the rest of the world in the 1930s. "Then the war comes," Michael Murphy recalls in a voice offstage. "They black out the highway. You can't drive down Highway 1. All my grandfather's dreams end right there with Pearl Harbor." Henry Murphy dies after the war, but Michael's grandmother keeps his dream alive.

**ACT THREE**

It's 1961. Michael Murphy and Richard Price have come down to reclaim the family property at Big Sur and play out their version of Grandpa Murphy's dream. They are greeted by a strange assortment of bikers, gay bathers, fundamentalist Christians, and other locals hanging out at the Murphy family hot springs. Henry Miller, the famous novelist and bohemian, still lives nearby and comes down for daily soaks. Joan Baez lives in one of the old cabins. Murphy's grandmother has hired a young guy from Kentucky to guard the place. His name is Hunter Thompson, and he has shown up on the heels of Henry Miller. Neither the folksinger nor the gonzo journalist are famous yet, but it's quite a mix. "It's really wild," Murphy recalls. "Hunter Thompson is the caretaker, and he is fully armed. My grandmother has retained an evangelical lady, Mrs. Webb, who holds prayer meetings. Henry Miller and his crowd are down during the day, and at night the Hells Angels appear. It took Dick and me awhile to establish law and order."

**ACT FOUR**

It's 1964, and Fritz Perls, the cofounder of Gestalt therapy, enters stage right. Esalen Institute is just a few years old, and Perls stalks the grounds like an Old Testament prophet. He will spend the next seven years there, until his death in 1970. Onstage, a spotlight illuminates the "hot seat." Perls is holding one of his famous Gestalt sessions before a live audience in the rustic Esalen lodge. A brave female volunteer sits down and is asked to recount a dream. Fritz pays close attention to her words but also to her mannerisms. He lets her ramble on, allowing her to make a fool of herself. Then he goes silent, smoking a cigarette while the poor girl squirms.

"Without a doubt, the sessions were good theater," writes Esalen historian Walter Truett Anderson. "The people were real, the problems were real, and the emotions were real."<sup>2</sup>

Perls hated the hand-holding of most therapists, who allowed patients to wallow in the past, hand over money, and never really change. Some felt Perls was a genius. Others thought he was a psychopath. But Perls had quite a history. He'd met Freud and was a patient of Wilhelm Reich back in the 1930s. Reich was an Austrian psychologist and biophysicist who believed that there was something called "orgone energy" and that it must be released through

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sexual activity. Otherwise, sexual inhibitions led to neurotic behavior, individually and as a society. Later, living in the United States, he developed an “orgone box” to help release that energy. The government didn’t believe his claims, convicted him of fraud, and sentenced him to two years in prison, where he died in 1957. But many of his ideas were embraced by Perls and brought to Esalen. “Reich had the idea (novel at the time, though it would become central to Gestalt therapy) that it was more productive to pay attention to the patient’s present action and attitudes than to embark on archaeological expeditions through the past,” Anderson writes. “And he always insisted that neurosis took up residence in the body as well as the mind. He had his patients do breathing exercises, and even—unthinkable for a Freudian—touched them with his hands to massage tense and twisted areas of the body.”<sup>3</sup>

Esalen’s first event had been in January 1962, when Alan Watts, the brilliant writer, prodigious drinker, and great popularizer of Eastern religion, held a seminar at Big Sur Hot Springs. Maslow and his peak experiences came later that year. In the late sixties and early seventies, Will Schutz, the author of the best-selling book *Joy*, ran encounter groups and helped spark a wave of interest in group therapy. Journalist Tom Wolfe, the ruthless chronicler of the seventies scene, gives us a taste of that period:

*Encounter sessions, particularly of the Schutz variety, were often wild events. Such aggression! Such sobs! tears! moans, hysteria, vile recriminations, shocking revelations, and such explosions of hostility between husbands and wives, such mudballs of profanity from previously mousy mommies and workadaddies, such red-mad attacks.*<sup>4</sup>

Forty years later the workshops have been dialed down a few notches. Gestalt sessions and encounter groups are still available in the broader Esalen mix. When I’m there I just like to hang out. On this visit, it’s a bright spring day and the Pacific Ocean is the color of blue jeans. Seminar attendees sit on the large green lawn that gently slopes down from the dining room to the edge of the cliff. Esalen is booked solid, and it’s the usual five-ring circus. There’s a workshop on dreams, one about dance, and another called “Lasting Love: Real or Just a Fairy Tale?” There was a workshop promising “Transformation: From Facade to Self,” and a fifth and final one on “Authenticity, Intuition, and Creativity: A Workshop for Gay and Bisexual Men.”



Esalen remains a refuge for people in transition. You constantly hear them talking about life's little dramas, but especially in the silky radiance of the baths. That night, two women talk about a workshop they're taking on keeping the spark alive in intimate relationships. One woman had talked her boyfriend out of coming with her to Esalen. "It didn't seem right to have him here," she says. "I came here to reinvent myself."

Her friend sighs and lowers herself a little deeper into the steaming water. "You know, I didn't have one serious relationship in my thirties. Actually, I'm not sure if I ever had one. It's hard to believe the kind of guys I used to go out with in my twenties. I wouldn't walk across a room to meet one of those guys now."

In another large tub, four older women are talking about dying, about going to a hospice. "Often it's the children who refuse to let go," one of them says.

"Look at those stars," another woman says, pointing.

Extraordinary things happen in the baths at Esalen, some of them historic. According to Esalen lore, this hot water helped end the Cold War. During the 1980s, when President Ronald Reagan was condemning the Soviet Union as the "evil empire," Esalen was doing its bit to improve Russian relations. "We had Russian Politburo members and their State Department counterparts here—guys who are used to wearing suits and ties and talking to each other across big tables," said David Price. "First we had them sitting on the floor of the Big House with pillows, meeting as people rather than adversaries. Then we threw them, naked, into the hot tubs together."

Michael Murphy, the man who made this place famous, hates hot tubs and social nudity. Back in the 1980s, when Esalen was celebrating its twenty-fifth birthday, I had lunch with Michael at the hillside home in Marin County he shared with his wife, Dulce, and their two-year-old son, MacKensie. They were about to move into a new house in Marin, and the first thing Murphy was going to do was tear out the hot tub. "We have a wide range of friends, and this mixed nudity makes some people very uncomfortable. I'm sorry Esalen contributed to this whole hot tub thing," said Murphy, who once considered becoming an Episcopal priest. "People down there at Esalen think I'm very

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puritanical. I've slowly tried to restrain a lot of the nudity. We've had to make some tougher rules because of these characters who want to show their enlightenment by walking nude into the dining room."<sup>5</sup>

Murphy's vision for Esalen is a place for serious study and analysis of the body and the mind, an experiential think tank where scientists and mystics come together to unlock the mysteries of higher consciousness and paranormal phenomena. Murphy wants Esalen to be famous for its Soviet-American Exchange Program, its collection of studies on exceptional human functioning, and its program of "Revisioning Philosophy." But it's famous for the baths, which were there before Murphy or his grandfather ever heard of the place.

Nothing bothers him or his longtime Esalen associate, George Leonard, more than people using *Esalen* and *hot tub* in the same sentence. Leonard, who originally met Murphy as a journalist working for *Look* magazine, remembers sitting in the living room of his San Francisco home with Murphy one afternoon in 1964, writing ideas on little pieces of paper and arranging them on the floor. One of the slips of paper read "human potential movement." They weren't sure they liked the sound of it, but they decided to go with that name. "Our original idea had more to do with the civil rights movement. It was about unused human capacities. It had a lot to do with education. One aspect of it was learning to feel and to be open, but it had nothing to do with hot tubs," recalled Leonard, who went on to become a popular author and martial arts instructor. "The media discovered Esalen in 1968, and they couldn't figure it out. They saw people nude in the baths, and they thought it must be about sex. They didn't understand about multiple levels of consciousness, one of the basic ideas of Esalen—the idea that Western objective consciousness is only one form of consciousness."

But most people don't come to Esalen to think. They come to feel. For years, there's been a gentle tug-of-war at Esalen between workers on the body, seekers of the spirit, and explorers of the mind—a perennial irony for a place designed to bring mind, body, and spirit together.

"When Dick and I took it over, the idea was to do these seminars. For me, the mission is the same today," Murphy told me fifteen years later. "This was an experiment. Nobody got paid much. The spirit of the Sixties and the idealism was the thing. It's been forty years now, and the place has matured. We've tried to not let anyone capture the flag. We were not like est, which had a viewpoint and was for profit. We conceived ourselves as a mini-university. Now we're getting a more mature staff. There's an evolution under way from ac-