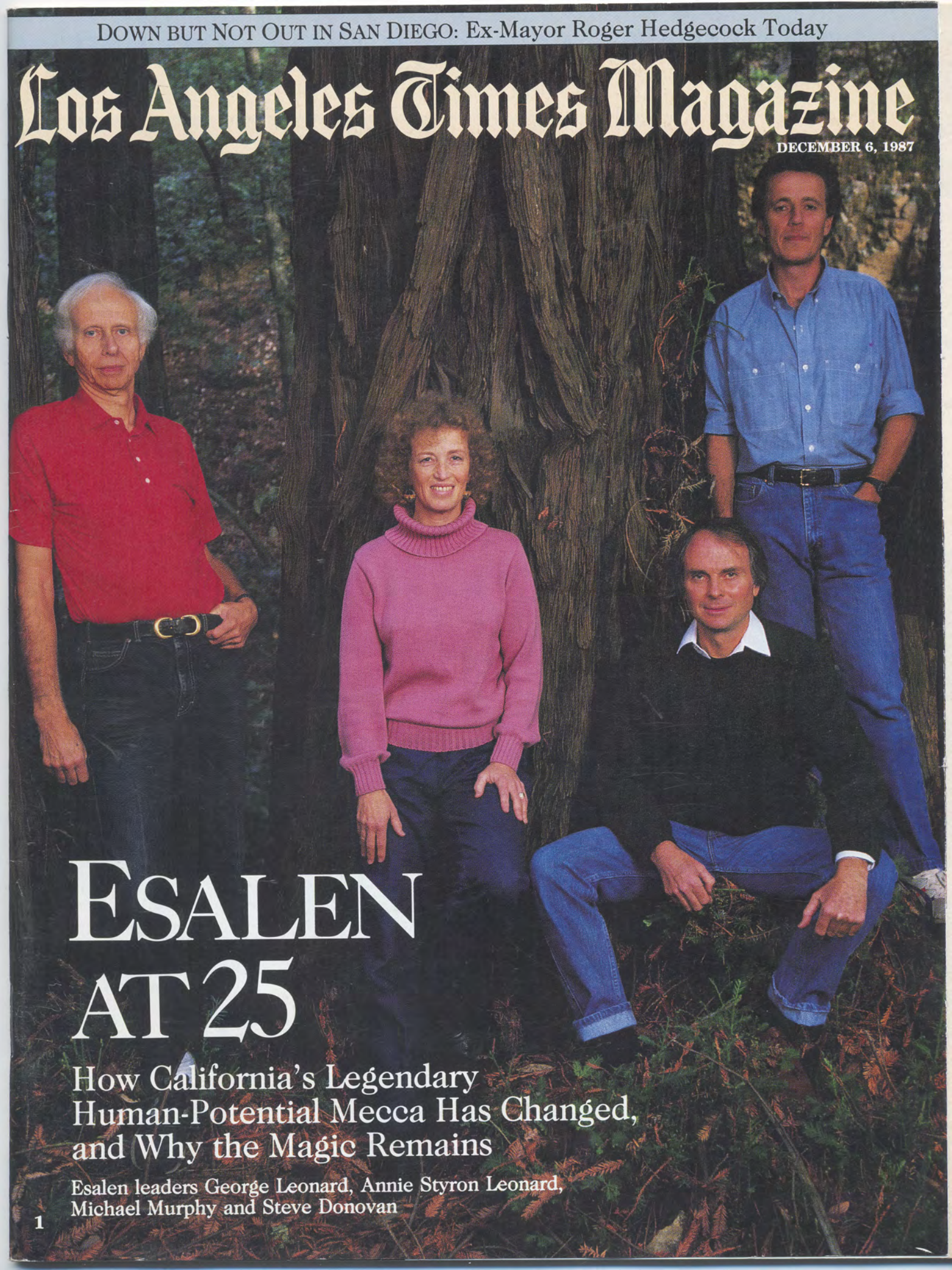


DOWN BUT NOT OUT IN SAN DIEGO: Ex-Mayor Roger Hedgecock Today

Los Angeles Times Magazine

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ESALEN AT 25

How California's Legendary
Human-Potential Mecca Has Changed,
and Why the Magic Remains

Esalen leaders George Leonard, Annie Styron Leonard,
Michael Murphy and Steve Donovan

ESALEN AT

I MUST BE THE LAST psycho-virgin in California. I've never been est-ed, encountered, or even rolfed. Call me hard-core unevolved. Now, on the occasion of its 25th anniversary, I make my maiden voyage to the Esalen Institute, trying to understand why people keep saying the place is magic. Once-shocking ideas that germinated there have spread to every YMCA and university extension in America. Is there anything left for Esalen at mid-life?

You don't come upon this collection of ideas, buildings and incomparable acreage at Big Sur because you're in the neighborhood. You travel to the Esalen Institute, roughly halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, on a pilgrimage—stalking the wild experience.

"Do I have to eat the food?" my husband asked as he prepared to perform his Ricky Ricardo function. The man is even more of a purist than I. Never therapized, never meditated, never vegetarianized, he agreed to join me at the weekend seminar entitled, "Leonard Energy Training and the Samurai Game." We dared Esalen to show us a good time.

As described in the Esalen catalogue, in addition to the energy-training exercises of instructor George Leonard, the seminar would give us the opportunity to "enter the state of consciousness of a medieval samurai, to live intensely in the moment, and to experience symbolic death and rebirth." Finally, before returning to the office on Monday, we would join in "a symbolic battle to the death through which participants will have a chance to experience the ultimate futility of war and the value of every moment of existence."

Are they serious?

So it was with a feeling of the ultimate ridiculousness of every moment of existence and some small hope of catching samurai night fever that we set out on Highway 1. But not in total innocence. We had heard the story of Esalen from friends who had been there, from writers who'd mythologized and satirized it, and from several decades of living in this strange state of California.

Ideas dismissed as crackpot in crackpot New England or as occult in the born-again heartland have been explored at Esalen by some of the best-publicized minds of our century. Not only Joan Baez and Simon and Garfunkel and some of the Beatles, but every celebrity intellectual of the past 25 years has been there. The Carl Saganicity is astounding. Participants have ranged from Henry Miller to Aldous Huxley to Paul Tillich to Arnold Toynbee to Susan Sontag to Herman Kahn to Buckminster Fuller to B.F. Skinner to Linus Pauling to Jerry Brown to Fritjof Capra. We're talking weight. It's as if someone with land, money, free time and relentless curiosity (an apt description of Esalen's leadership) decided to hold a party and everyone came.

"The place is magic," my next-door neighbor, a handsome young psychotherapist, had told me. I realized as he spoke that in describing their Esalen experiences, people tend to tell you more about themselves than they do about Esalen. My neighbor had to *share* that he has an "open marriage" and "a need to be naughty" to explain why he went to Esalen with his "lover." (I listened intently the whole time for some hint of whether the lover was a boy or girl.) He said they both threw off their clothes and began to make love in front of Fritz Perls' house, where behavioral scientist Gregory Bateson was about to lead a seminar. They

The Legendary Human-Potential Mecca Has Changed—but the Magic Remains

BY ALICE KAHN

scouts for talent, to attract teachers for the 500 seminars given each year.

But Murphy insists that the credo hasn't changed: "Come explore the mysteries with an open mind. This is what's been hardest to bring off. Some of my best friends are Buddhist fundamentalists, a kind of moral majority of Buddhism. But we need a new sensibility in the West, one which can be passionate in the heart but wide open intellectually."

It's hard to imagine this kind of exploration occurring anywhere but at the West's westernmost edge. Perhaps Esalen could have happened back East, but California's major intellectual advantage may well be its beauty, which forces you to take the physical world seriously.

"There's always been a fear of California back East," says Murphy, and he laughingly quotes Edmund Wilson writing about California in the *New Yorker*: "One only has to look at their ocean to know what kind of people they are."

As he said this, I thought about old Irving-called-Biff, rejuvenated at the sumptuous piece of California real estate that Mike Murphy has used to turn on the world. Biff said that after the samurai game, as he walked around with his imaginary crystalline ball, he was drawn to a girl out on the patio overlooking the ocean. "I just sat there and talked to her. I didn't think about the future. I didn't try to make her. I just enjoyed it. That is what I came here to feel. At my age, it's hard to do."

And with that Biff lay down on the floor of the seminar/exercise room and went to sleep. As he snoozed, the rest of us walked around the room one more time in a final exuberant strut to rhythmic music. Was it the ocean? Was it the massage? Was it the food? Was it some moment of self-discovery in the samurai game? Why did we all feel so good?

One seminarian, Marty Jay, a singer from Melrose Avenue (the guy who had seen the flying saucer), offered an answer to the mystery when he began singing to the music, "Blame it on the bossa nova. . . ."

Until Esalen completes its mission—to explore the mysteries, to combine Eastern circular and Western linear thinking, to discover how the mind and the body and the spirit interact—we won't fully understand why the place is magic. Till then, the Bossa Nova Theory will have to do. □



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The baths gave Esalen its reputation as a kind of primal hot-tub scene.



managed to be naughty enough to force the tolerant Esalen staff to insist that they stop and get dressed or leave.

Another friend described the plain concrete tubs where bathers enjoy the hot natural mineral springs as looking “like something in Nazi Germany.” Later, I realized that my friend’s description was less an accurate picture of the scene than a revelation of her psyche.

Stories like these increased my curiosity and anticipation but nothing seemed more mythological than the history of the institute. In reading about Esalen, in talking to people who have been there and in interviewing key players, a series of tales—almost folkloric tales—keep cropping up. Yet everyone swears they’re true.

Let’s start with the legendary baths. More than anything else, the baths at Esalen have contributed to its reputation as a kind of primal hot-tub scene. Certainly there is nothing rarer than a natural hot spring on a cliff above the Pacific Ocean. Now that’s what I call magic.

Shortly after my arrival, I hit the baths. It was half to get it over with, half “heal me, oh wondrous waters.” I found the communal baths with the communal changing room more nurturing than sensuous, certainly less threatening than the pool at the Beverly Hilton. At an L.A. pool one is always comparing oneself to the bulimic, aerobaholic perfection of the other women in bikinis. Here you are part of a work of art: not airbrushed Playboy images, but the natural curves and acceptable flesh of real people.

You can find plenty of fuel for California satire in the baths. Spacey 20-year-olds chat endlessly about their dreams or about Jerry and Bob (of the Grateful Dead). Psychobabbling 30-year-olds harp on about their relationships (“... so I told him it was a continuous process. . . . My second husband let me be me”). Lonely women confront frustrated business executives: (“Look, you’re married, you’re here and your wife’s home with the kids. Would you want to marry someone like you?”).

But others in the baths fit no pattern. The investment banker from Brazil who keeps jumping out of the tub to place flowers on a statue of Buddha. The old man from Boston who never stops reading his suspense novel. The upholsterer from Costa Mesa whose first girlfriend brought him to Esalen when he got out of the Air Force. The

recreation director from the Philadelphia mental hospital who’s just taking a vacation.

Odd strangers meet here, like the Jewish recovered-alcoholic stockbroker from Alaska who explains to the German work-study student that she is acting *meshugge*. “Germans can’t understand Yiddish,” he says. “*Meshugge* means crazy.”

At one point, the oncologist’s wife from Pasadena looks up dreamily and says, “Can you imagine what Marriott would do with this place?”

Good question, because perhaps the most remarkable thing about Esalen is how it has resisted commercialization. Despite all the forces that would gladly have turned the place into a drug haven in the ’60s or a cult scene in the ’70s or a yuppie Disneyland in the ’80s, it remains shockingly plain and pleasant—undominated by anything other than the feeling that *anything* is possible.

MICHAEL MURPHY, Esalen’s founder and guiding spirit, recalls that over the years he and co-founder Dick Price often said, “Let’s blow the baths off the side of the cliffs.”

That’s because Murphy feels that the media pay undue attention to nudity at the baths, ignoring Esalen’s cerebral side, just as Western thinkers have focused on the mind apart from the body. It is clear that Murphy sees Esalen as an intellectual institution (but without the rigidity of a university or the overzealousness of an ashram), where the possibilities of what people are capable of—the human potential—may be explored. Esalen seems an attempt to merge elements of Murphy’s own education—Stanford University, the ashram of Sri Aurobindo in India and marathon running. It’s a haven for people who never wanted to major in anything.

Although Murphy insists that “the baths were simply there,” the history of the institute, this noble undertaking, this marriage of mind and body, really begins at the baths.

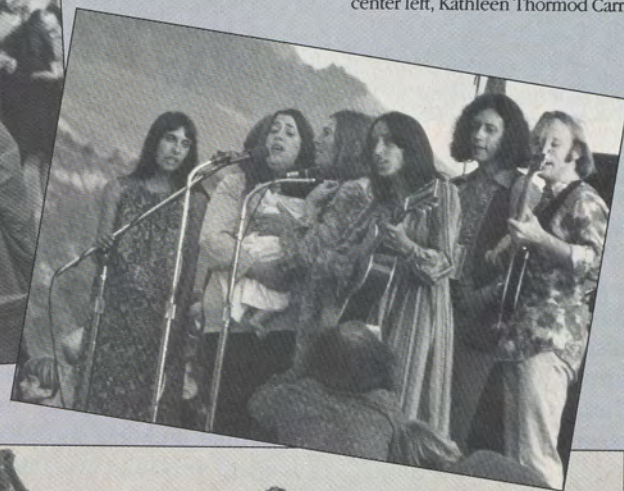
Murphy, who was born in Salinas in 1930, inherited the land through a trust from his grandmother. His grandfather, Dr. Henry Murphy, the man who delivered John Steinbeck and who was the model for a character in “East of Eden,” bought the 300-acre property in 1910 because of the hot spring. The Esalen Indians had long ago discovered its charm. Dr. Murphy planned to establish a European-style



An Esalen Historical Gallery

Bottom: George Leonard leads an aikido class, 1983. Clockwise from top left: a mid-'60s workshop on the cliffs; George Harrison and Ravi Shankar, late '60s; a 1967 folk festival with, from left, Mimi Farina, Cass Elliot, Judy Collins, Joan Baez, Arlo Guthrie and Stephen Stills; Alan Watts prepares to perform a marriage, late '60s; philosopher/psychologist Stanley Keleman, in foreground, sits on a deck outside the lodge while John Pierrakos, co-founder of bioenergetic therapy, practices some on Michael Murphy, 1966; a 1982 seminar with George and Annie Styron Leonard; Maharishi Mahesh Yogi meets psychologist Carl Rogers, 1966.

Photos by Paul Herbert except bottom, David Nelson; center left, Kathleen Thomod Carr.



The '80s and Beyond

IF THEY'RE NO longer doing group gropes and public spankings and deciding communally who picks the tomatoes, how does Esalen plan to move into the future?

Founder Michael Murphy is currently working on a "mission statement," the first such declaration in the institute's 25 years. He sees the place "less dominated by the metaphor of therapy and more by the arts, contemplation, intellectual inquiry and social outreach."

The new direction will result in some additions to the institute's collection of bedrooms, houses and meeting rooms, including one or two large houses to accommodate invitational conferences. This will allow visiting scholars to share quarters while they brainstorm topics not usually covered at universities. Recent conferences have included one led by UC Davis molecular biologist David Deamer on "New Directions in Biological Research and Evolutionary Theory." Former Yale philosophy professor Jay Ogilvy is using a Laurance Rockefeller grant to organize a conference called "Dialogues on Philosophy."



Esalen founders Michael Murphy, right, and Dick Price, who died in 1985.

James Garrison, executive director of Esalen's International Exchange Program and Democratic candidate for the 12th Congressional District, organized a Chinese-American forum on science and technology. Dulce Murphy (Michael's wife) led a U.S.-Soviet conference on behavioral and medical research. The program has been credited by Joseph Montville, a State Department foreign affairs analyst, with originating what he terms "track-two" diplomacy—people-to-people exchanges with the Soviet Union.

Lest anyone think that in all this intellectual yin Esalen has forgotten the physical yang, there are also on-

going certification programs in massage, clinical hypnosis, shamanistic healing and a new program, accredited by Antioch University, for health professionals in somatic studies.

Another physical realization of Esalen's new direction will be the addition of two buildings—a center for the arts and a new center for meditation. Murphy also hopes to improve the quality of life at Esalen, including the food and the rooms. He sees this as turning away from "another myth of the '60s, which was that simplicity is good, and therefore poverty is good, so the guests should suffer a little."

Although Esalen scouts are searching the United States and abroad for new seminar topics and qualified leaders, it continues to offer its "bread-and-butter" topics. These are meditation, psychotherapy, Eastern religion and massage. But, as seminar leader George Leonard points out, the catalogue claims have gotten more modest over the years. "We no longer say: 'You will achieve another state,'" says Leonard. "We say: 'There is the opportunity to achieve another state.'" —A.K.

healing spa on the California coast.

After grandson Michael and Stanford classmate Dick Price decided to establish a learning center on the property in 1961, The Taking of the Baths became the first event in the folkloric history of Esalen.

Between the years when Grandpa Murphy had bathtubs hoisted up the cliffs and 1962, when Dick Price and Michael Murphy organized their first series of seminars, entitled "Human Potentialities," several groups used the property. An evangelical group rented the motel-like building and held revivals. Meanwhile, an assortment of beatniks, wild men from the nearby Santa Lucia Mountains and gays from Los Angeles and San Francisco claimed the baths as their own. These groups were not ready to surrender turf to Murphy, despite his property rights and his noble purpose.

In the first of many hard-to-believe tales, Murphy says, he asserted ownership in an event known as The Night of the Dobermans. On this night, a young security guard from Kentucky named Hunter Thompson ("executive caretaker"

is the way the Gonzoid One recalls his position) was unable to keep the intruders from the tubs. So Murphy, accompanied by reinforcements that included Joan Baez's boyfriend and several Doberman pinschers, went down to confront the invaders. There was a standoff until a fight broke out between two male Dobermans over a female. Their howls sent the gay men running. A few weeks later, the evangelicals split. Thus, the Esalen Institute was established.

The next event in this magical history tale was The Coming of Maslow. One dark night in the summer of 1962, progressive psychologist Abraham Maslow and his wife, Bertha, were lost in dense fog on the central California coast while on a trip south. Seeing a light that they believed to be a motel, they approached the building. Bertha Maslow thought it looked like the Bates Motel in "Psycho." They were greeted by Gia-fu Feng, a friend of Murphy and Price, who served as Esalen's chief cook, tai chi teacher and abacus-toting accountant. (He was also a graduate of the Wharton School and a veteran of Wall Street.) At first Feng was indifferent to the couple, but when Maslow signed his name, Feng went wild. Suddenly 12 scholars appeared from the Bates Motel clutching copies of Maslow's new book, "Toward a Psycholo-

Alice Kahn is a San Francisco Chronicle columnist and the author of "My Life as a Gal" (Delacorte Press).

'We went too far,' Murphy says. 'I wish we hadn't made mistakes, but we were adventurers.'



gy of Being," and the long relationship between the father of humanistic psychology and the Esalen Institute was forged.

"It's true! It's true!" Murphy laughs as he describes this strange coincidence. "I took it as a sign from beyond. I saw my beliefs confirmed in these omens."

The next tale in Esalen's history, like many folk tales, has several versions. It is the story of How Fritz Perls Beat Hollywood. In the late '60s, Esalen and the psychologists who flocked there had developed a number of new techniques for producing cathartic experiences, for allowing people to confess and confront their deepest, darkest secrets. One of these techniques—the encounter group—became, like the baths, a plus and minus for Esalen. Overused and over-publicized, it threatened to dominate Esalen's eclectic menu.

When Hollywood discovered encounter therapy, leaders feared that the institute would be overrun with movie stars. This fear ended after actress Jennifer Jones invited genius/madman Fritz Perls, the father of gestalt therapy, to a party at her Bel-Air mansion. With Rock Hudson, Tuesday Weld and James Coburn, among others, looking on, Perls had Natalie Wood take the hot seat. He told her, "You're nothing but a little spoiled brat who always wants her way."

Perls then took Wood across his knee and spanked her. Another version of the story has the incident ending with Roddy McDowall threatening to slug Perls. Either way, Hollywood stayed away from Esalen after that, except to immortalize such therapeutic excesses in satirical movies.

"By 1972, we worried about the excesses," says Murphy, and he explains that this includes the importance placed on the notion of climactic insights. "We went too far. I wish we hadn't made mistakes, but we were adventurers." Another notion from the '60s that Murphy eventually discarded was the communal way decisions were made at Esalen. "We learned that excessive communalism doesn't work."

Three years ago, Murphy and Price began to re-evaluate Esalen. For a time, Murphy says, he almost gave up and looked into selling the institute. He denies that this period of disillusionment had anything to do with the fact that he was then, at 54, becoming a father for the first time.

Instead of throwing in the towel, Murphy, Price and trustee Steve Donovan began to assert leadership both in organizing the finances and enriching the programs. This reorganization, he says, allowed Esalen "to set sail for the

long haul and continue to explore ideas that mainstream academia and behavioral sciences aren't looking into—but without the dogmatism of cults or religious schools."

"We're finally doing it right," Murphy recalls Price saying one day two years ago. The next day Price was killed in one of those mysterious events that are entwined with Esalen.

PRICE, LIKE MURPHY, came from a rich family and was also bright, handsome and charismatic. After graduate work in psychology at Harvard, he joined the Air Force, where he had an episode that he experienced as a religious phenomenon but which was labeled a psychotic break. His family had him institutionalized, and he was given 67 insulin-shock treatments. This explains his passionate interest in developing alternate forms of psychotherapy at Esalen.

He also became a great outdoorsman at Big Sur, developing trails that led from the institute grounds to the steep mountains above. He was killed on one of these trails by the random fall of a huge boulder.

"There was a one-in-a-billion chance of this boulder hitting him," Murphy says. "We went up there and traced its path. A two-ton boulder exploded 10 feet below him. A 200-pound shard flew up and broke his spine. He was killed instantly. The boulder leaped 100 yards through a narrow opening in the redwoods. It partook of the occult."

All this potential for magic, disastrous and wondrous, was in my mind as I walked around the grounds—passed the waterfall near where Dick Price died, climbed down to the beach where waves erode up to five feet of cliff each year, walked among the eucalyptus trees where hundreds of monarch butterflies breed, ambled by the child-care center where a little boy sat on an open structure labeled "Pottievile."

My husband and I ate heartily that Friday night—a fantastic dinner that included enchiladas, beans, corn *pozole*, a salad bar that would be the envy of any in Beverly Hills and several salsas made with fresh chilis and tomatoes grown on Esalen's own farm. "Those are expensive tomatoes," Steve Donovan later told me, pointing out that it's actually cheaper to buy them than grow their own.

Despite such luxuries, Donovan has managed to cut the Esalen debt from \$200,000 in 1977 to a surplus of more than quadruple that this year, all of which will go into seeding

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such new projects as a Soviet/American exchange program. The \$3,624,000 budget includes a few salaries in the \$40,000 range. Donovan, 46, a Columbia University MBA ("I was a fast-track yuppie in the '60s") gets \$27,000 for a half-time position.

"It's part of the culture of the place not to be a platform for individuals to get wealthy—it's a bit socialistic that way," says Donovan. "In the '60s and '70s, most of the people who worked here were in their 20s and 30s. Now these people have been here 15 to 20 years and they're married, have kids. We're trying to create an economic environment that supports families."

DONOVAN figures that George Leonard took home about \$600 for the 12-hour weekend program I attended. The program began Friday night after dinner when we entered the seminar room and set out on the road to

medieval Japan.

There were more than 40 "seminarians"; four guys to every gal, and our leaders—George Leonard; his wife, Annie Styron Leonard, and Jack Cirie. Leonard was a civil rights reporter and a *Look* editor when he first came to Esalen in 1965 to interview Mike Murphy for a story called "The Human Potential." He has been involved with the place ever since as vice president and seminar leader and is yet another seemingly ageless, impeccably educated, open-minded explorer. As he told me, "I still can't explain to my mother what I do."

At 64, Leonard is a contributing editor at *Esquire*, the author of such books as "Education and Ecstasy" and "The End of Sex," and the co-owner of an aikido center in Marin County. Like Murphy and others at the helm, he is eager to explain how Esalen differs from what he calls "the schlock" that invariably is associated with the human potential scene. He will later cringe when a seminarian insists that he saw a "flying saucer over the ocean from the baths" and dismiss

Ways to 'Do' Esalen

THE ESALEN catalogue is the best way to find out what the institute has to offer. You can acquire one by telephoning (408) 667-3000 or by writing to the Esalen Institute, Big Sur, Calif. 93920. A section in the front of the catalogue called "Ways of Being at Esalen" explains the options, from a visit to the hot springs (free to local residents between 1 and 5 a.m. weekdays) to a residency program that can cost several thousand dollars.

There are monthlong programs, work-study programs, wilderness programs, continuing education courses for nurses and doctors, and invitational conferences to bring together experts in a given field.

The most common introductions to Esalen:

■ "Experiencing Esalen." This weekend seminar (Friday afternoon to Sunday noon) is designed for the uninitiated. An individual selects from a smorgasbord of self-awareness workshops that can include sensory awareness, gestalt practice, group process, guided fantasy, meditation and massage.

The price is \$270, which includes a simple but attractive all-wood

room—no telephone, no TV, some antique furniture, linens, wildflowers, private bath. Some rooms have patios and ocean views. You can hear the waves crash from anywhere on the property. The price includes all meals from Friday night dinner to Sunday brunch. The food is delicious, wholesome, heavy on fresh vegetables and whole-grain breads. A dinner meat-entree or breakfast egg dish is usually offered in addition to vegetarian choices. Food is served buffet style, with plenty to go around, in a friendly lodge dining room. At dinner time there is a beer-and-wine bar.

The baths are open 24 hours and require no additional charge. You can use the large swimming pool (some people wear suits, some don't), explore the beautiful grounds or hike in one of the nearby state parks.

■ Weekend seminars. Several are offered each weekend. Two of the most popular are the "Ram Dass Event," which sells out months in advance, and a "Weekend in Developing Comic Perspective," which explores the wisdom of Baba Lenny Bruce. These also cost \$270 and include the same room, food and

amenities discussed above.

The "samurai game" described in this article is one such seminar. When I called to make reservations, I asked if I had to attend all the meetings. "You can do whatever you want," said the reassuring voice.

■ Five-day workshops. These cost \$530 and include room and meals. Topics might include "Painting Experience," "Food for Health," "Using Risk to Effect Change," "Pleasure and Addiction" or "On Being a Man."

■ The room, the food, the baths—hold the enlightenment. You can stay at Esalen for about \$150 a weekend (meals included) as space is available.

■ El Cheapo. Esalen tries to accommodate anyone regardless of ability to pay. It offers scholarships, sleeping-bag rates for university students, senior citizen discounts, bunk-bed rooms to share with three others and family rates.

You could spend the whole weekend at Esalen just looking at the ocean. But don't forget to reserve a world-famous massage—\$50 for an hour of heaven. Your body, from the nape of your neck to the balls of your feet, will thank you.

—A.K.

Shirley MacLaine-ism as "end-of-the-millennium behavior."

But, Leonard also adds, "there is a spiritual side of life, and the neighborhood Protestant church is the last place to have a mystical experience."

Cirie's is another only-at-Esalen story. After attending Yale he entered the Marine Corps, where he served for 20 years. He was a lieutenant colonel like his colleague and acquaintance Oliver North. Oliver North is one famous name bandied about who never came to Esalen. Perhaps if he had, we'd be peddling consciousness instead of M-16s to the Contras.

In 1983, while Cirie was on leave, he came to Esalen and played the samurai game with George Leonard. For the first time he saw the potential to experience some of the intensity of the military without the backdrop of a war. The next year, he put on his uniform—medals and all—and a fellow officer retired him from the corps on the cliffs at Esalen.

Annie Leonard, one-time executive at the Guggenheim Museum and an editor of the Whole Earth Catalogue, is a pleasant, lively woman who avoids psychobabble. (She calls anxiety "the jitters.") She leads us in several exercises in which we find our "center"—a concept nobody questions.

The exercises have, to my husband's relief, a familiar, this-worldly quality. We learn such techniques as an "unmuggable walk" and moving to avoid being clobbered. It's a little aikido, a little self-defense, a little relaxation. People "share" how they feel. Some say they feel grounded and centered. Some say they feel the energy. I feel a little silly, but I don't say so because I'm having a good time. It's more fun than TV and more physical than talking to your friends. It's different. Being an adult, I realize, is the most behaviorally boring thing on earth.

"Esalen is adventure more than therapy," Leonard would tell me later. "We're not here to make the sick well. We take people who are already OK and make them better."

By the time the samurai game began Saturday afternoon, we were feeling fine. It may have been the exercises or it may have been the hourlong massages we took on the outdoor tables near the ocean. The husband was actually approaching blissed-out. "Are you having a good time?" I asked him. "Be-

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Was it the ocean? Was it the massage? Was it the food? Why did we feel so good?

ing massaged by a naked lady is not bad," he said. He would later speak of Katherine, his masseuse, in the same tone I am sure the destitute reserve for Mother Teresa.

The game consisted of dividing the seminarians into two groups, the armies of the North and South. Under orders of our leader (our "daimio," chosen randomly by a fellow warrior), we would be called forth to battle—the battles consisting of combatants squaring off to see who could hold such yoga positions as the eagle (leg out, arms spread) or the white crane (arms up, foot up) the longest. We also matched valor playing the children's finger game of paper/rock/scissors.

The war gods (the Leonards and Cirie) would orchestrate the battles, playing Japanese martial music and adjusting the lights. Occasionally, they irrationally ordered the "death, maiming or blinding" of one of the players. If you "died" you had to remain motionless with your eyes shut for the rest of the game. (As in life, the longer you survived, the more you enjoyed it.) You also couldn't smile or laugh. Violating the rules could result in the "blinding or maiming" of your fellow soldiers.

Leonard sees the game as "a realization of some of the earlier goals of Esalen—to give the mind, body and spirit the same value." But, he adds, it is "a more sophisticated and aesthetically pleasing way to do it. It's ungross. The early encounters were kind of gross."

This trend toward the aesthetic is echoed by Mike Murphy when he talks about the future of Esalen. He says one of his regrets is that the arts have been neglected at the institute; he plans to build a new art center. "There are many metaphors for the kind of exploration we're doing," says Murphy. "Art is as good as therapy. I want to see the arts come into more prominence. Our roots are in Bauhaus, Stanislavsky acting, Paul Klee. My old friend Andre (as in "My Dinner With . . .") Gregory is the kind of person I would like to see at Esalen."

By dinner time on the night of the samurai game, my husband had been "maimed" because of incompetence on the part of our leader, our daimio. Poor Ricky Ricardo had to eat with one hand behind his back, and I had to cut his barbecued ribs. I began to hate our daimio, a petty little martinet. Later, when he was ordered to "blind" a soldier because of another mistake and he chose me for the honor, I began to despise him. Leonard told me that the worst daimio he had seen in the 10 years he'd been playing the game was a fellow who insisted that his troops say, "We who are about to die salute you."

The game drove home my own rebellious nature. During dinner, against our leaders' orders, my husband and I sneaked off and drank a beer as we watched the sunset from Esalen's scented garden. We also laughed. Ha. Ha.

Later, when I was "blinded," I cheated by peeking under the blindfold. I wanted to see who my sympathetic team-

mates were. Within seconds of my blinding, one fellow warrior grabbed my behind. Others insisted on massaging my back. There's something about a blinded samurai woman that really brings out the touchy-feely in these people.

I felt something like genuine pride as my husband, with one hand behind his back, out-eagled a black belt in karate. I felt sad when he was killed—hit with a "ninja star," symbolically represented in the game by a Minute Maid orange-juice-can lid. Eventually we both felt some secret glee when our daimio was forced to commit seppuku.

It was my unfortunate task to "kill" a member of the other army by out-white-craning him. He was a 70-year-old Jewish man from New York named Irving who insisted on being called Biff. He said he had come to Esalen looking for his youth. I was very touched by this man. And I killed him.

It was him or me.

At the end of the game, on Sunday morning, we did a little aikido-like dance to the music of "The Skater's Waltz" with the person we had killed. I glided around with Irving/Biff, sending good vibes his way. He sent forgiveness.

Our final exercise was to close our eyes and place an imaginary crystalline ball in our center. By now, I knew instinctively where my center was, even if I still couldn't tell my *chakra* from my *pupik*.

After inserting the ball, we were to open our eyes and walk around Esalen trying to see things without prejudice. When I opened my eyes, I had this strong memory of what kindergarten felt like. I was in a room full of fascinating people all sitting cross-legged on the floor. Instead of seeing a bunch of middle-aged, middle-class jerks, I saw a group of boys and girls I wanted to be my friends. Even the hated daimio was just another interesting kid.

I won't say it was a miracle. I won't say that I experienced what was felt in those cathartic encounters at Esalen 20 years ago or what the evangelicals experienced at Esalen in the '50s or what the Indians experienced at Esalen before White Man first drove his Porsche up the coast. But I felt good.

Yes. OK. I believe. The place is magic.

Murphy fears that the real story of Esalen never gets told. The story, he says, is of the future, of the invitational conferences the institute is now giving—to explore new physics, to have prominent scientists explain discoveries in interdisciplinary undertakings such as psychoneuro-immunology or biology and evolution, to increase citizen efforts to forge ties with China and the Soviet Union and to look at creative solutions to disaster in the Middle East. The story is also of the archives on paranormal experiences that Murphy has been collecting—work that began years ago with the San Francisco 49ers. Murphy plans to publish this research in a book called "The Future of the Body," which he describes as "a neo-Aurobindonean marriage of science and metaphysics." Plans are in the works to upgrade the Esalen grounds to make its 50 bedrooms more attractive. Another program