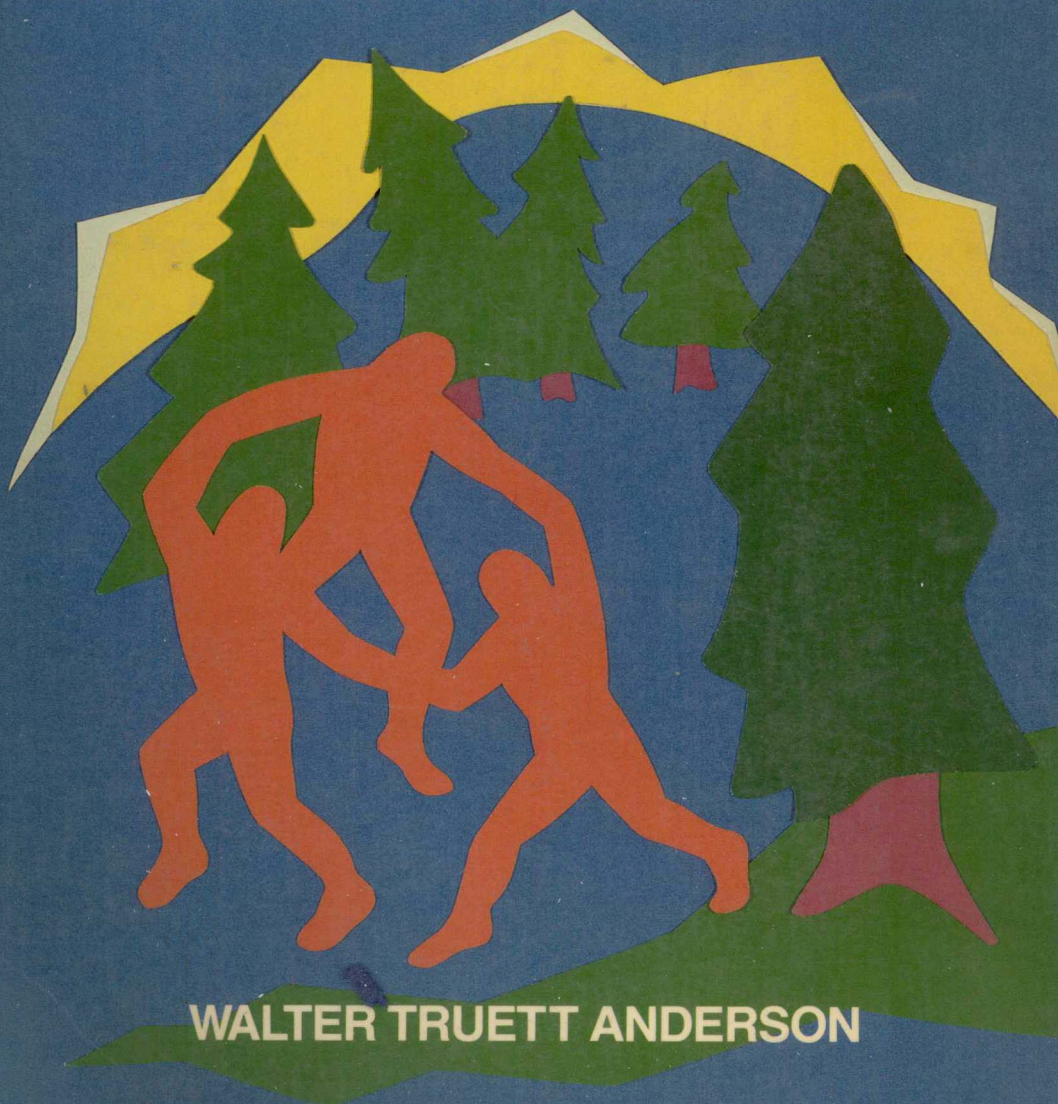


THE UPSTART SPRING

ESALEN AND THE AMERICAN AWAKENING



WALTER TRUETT ANDERSON

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Esalen and the
American Awakening

by **Walter Truett Anderson**

Addison-Wesley Publishing Company
Reading, Massachusetts • Menlo Park, California
London • Amsterdam • Don Mills, Ontario • Sydney

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Anderson, Walter Truett.

The upstart spring.

1. Anderson, Walter Truett. 2. Group relations training—Biography. 3. Esalen Institute. 4. Humanistic psychology. I. Title.
HM134.A52 1983 158'.2 83-9231
ISBN 0-201-11034-2
ISBN 0-201-11035-0 (pbk.)

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Published simultaneously in Canada.

Cover design by Glenna Lang Graphics
Set in 11-point Companso by Datapage Division, Western Publishing Co.

ISBN 0-201-11034-2
0-201-11035-0 (pbk.)

ABCDEFGHIJ-DO-86543

First printing, August 1983

Preface: Looking In, Looking Out

I first visited Esalen in the mid-1960s, stopping over there for a night on one of my frequent drives up and down the California highways between Los Angeles, where I lived then, and San Francisco. My recollections of that brief visit have to do mainly with breakfast in the lodge. Fritz Perls was there; I knew who he was, because I had recently read *Gestalt Therapy* and been profoundly impressed by it, and I observed him closely—old man drinking coffee—for signs of abnormal mental health. Michael Murphy and his brother Dennis were standing in line at the serving table, laughing between themselves in great animation about something not apparent to anybody else. I am not sure I knew exactly who they were—I definitely did not know which was which—but I had the impression that one of them more or less owned the place.

An overnight stay, breakfast, a few images of people seen . . . my memoirs do not add up to much. Yet although that event is not, as they say, etched in my memory, I do recall precisely why I was there, and recall also that I counted it a successful visit. I had done what I intended to do, which was to check it out, touch base. I thought it was a place where some of whatever it was that was happening, was happening, and in stopping by there I had made a kind of ritualistic contact with the events of the times.

We are talking about the 1960s, a decade that gets so much attention you begin to think it must have hired a press agent. I have some misgivings about our national penchant for decade watching: we treat decades like supermarket commodities, to be labeled and packaged and put in their proper places on the shelf, and in so doing render ourselves insensitive to processes that develop over long periods of time, to continuities and repetitions and variations on themes. We overstate the differences. Still, it cannot be denied that certain spaces

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of time do have their own personalities, quirks that we remember them by.

In the mid-1960s there was a general feeling in circulation that something exciting and important was happening, and that it was happening in California. This was a new and stunning idea. California was a fine place, the weather was good, it had Hollywood and all that; but we never believed anything really happened there. The sound of history always echoed from other places, other times. Then suddenly that changed, and there blossomed in our midst a delirious consensus that the world was turning before our very eyes, here, now. "It's happening right now, baby," a phrase in currency for a while, pretty well summed it up.

This feeling was real. It may not have been justified. I am not here to argue that California circa 1965 was a Hegelian world-historical state, a banner carrier for the march of time. Yet the feeling, justified or not, was part of the common experience. Not that anybody knew what it was that was happening, or where it would lead. People rarely do have clearly defined ideas about such things anyway, and when they do, it usually turns out that they were wrong. The feeling was sort of a collective hunch, amorphous and not altogether rational.

It manifested itself in individual lives chiefly in the form of a heightened sense of possibilities, a belief that you could rather easily change yourself, or society, or both. Hadn't the students at Berkeley gotten themselves organized and forced the administration to change its rules about political activity on the campus? Hadn't the blacks in Watts, in a spontaneous outburst of rage, made the world pay attention to their community and its pain? Couldn't you similarly grab your own life and create for yourself a new appearance, a new occupation, a new (1960s term) *life style*? Couldn't you ingest this or that chemical and change your very consciousness?

This ebullience came with its share of fear and doubt. I knew many people—more as time went on—who foresaw catastrophes, backlash, breakdown, revolution from the left or from the right. But even the doubters participated in that exhilarating sense of motion and opportunity, that feeling of ground shifting beneath the feet.

My own life was, appropriately, much in motion. I had entered my thirties, had recently cut loose from my last full-time salaried job to start free-lancing, and was a part-time graduate student taking seminars in political science and social psychology. Free-lancing was what I had always expected to do; the graduate work was one of the decade's

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many surprises. In the places where I had grown up even a B.A. was regarded as an excessive amount of schooling, and I had supposed it would be all I needed. But then when I tried part-time graduate work I found it a bracing change of milieu from the television industry, which had recently been my employer. It was also a signal to myself that I was setting the course of my life in some other direction.

One summer I took a seminar in psychodrama, grandfather of the group psychotherapies. This decision, which hardly seemed of great moment to me at the time (I didn't even know what psychodrama was), had a major effect on my life over the next decade or so, and incidentally put me on a path that had many points of contact with Esalen. I had already been reading the works of the humanistic psychologists, and the psychodrama seminar—which turned out to be a rousing series of real group sessions, right there in the classroom at San Fernando Valley State College—rapidly took this line of inquiry from theory to practice. As it happened, I started attending psychodrama groups at about the same time that Esalen, unknown to me, was shifting its emphasis from intellectual seminars to group experiences. I went into a training group for psychodrama directors (something else I had never expected to do) in the summer of 1967, a time when Esalen entered a new phase as a center of encounter groups.

My involvement with psychodrama was an avocation (one of two—I also started teaching American government part time), and it was a splendid place from which to observe the amazing proliferation of group therapies that was then taking place in Southern California. That scene is briefly described in this book, because it is one of the sources that fed into Esalen. I saw it partly as an outsider, having only recently wandered into marginal status as a group psychotherapist; partly as an insider working in the field, getting to know others who were also in it, becoming familiar with its lore and language and ancient feuds.

I heard of Esalen often, knew people who went there to lead groups and people who went there to be in them. I went there for an Alan Watts seminar in 1967, and I went again a year or so later to an encounter weekend led by Steve Stroud and John Heider, two young graduates of Esalen's second residential program. Most of my exposure to what was then going on at Esalen, however, came about in a less direct way. There were a couple of Esalen-style "growth centers" in the Los Angeles area, as there were in other parts of the country, and these had become links in a kind of Chatauqua circuit, along which

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traveled the likes of Watts, Perls, Bernie Gunther, and Will Schutz. Watts did more or less conventional lectures, although he liked to dress up in a Japanese kimono and bang on an Oriental chime from time to time to emphasize a point; the others were not so much lectures as demonstrations: Gunther did sensory awakening exercises, Schutz did encounter exercises, Perls did gestalt therapy on a stage. I attended many of these events and sometimes had occasion to meet the visiting dignitaries. Doing some volunteer publicity work for the local growth center, I arranged to have Watts appear on a television talk show hosted by Maureen Reagan, our governor's daughter. I interviewed Fritz and wrote an article about him.

Thus, with my life sorting itself out into several occupations, I stalked about the edges of what later became known as the human potential movement and observed it from several perspectives: as a student, learning about the origins of group therapy; as a journalist, writing occasional pieces about it; as a political scientist, trying to figure out how it connected with the other events of the time; and increasingly as a practitioner—leading psychodrama groups and encounter groups, teaching group process to college students, doing group work with churches, schools, businesses, and hospitals.

In 1969 I started leading groups for Esalen. I probably would have gotten around to this sooner or later, but the way it happened is typical of how such things came about at Esalen. I visited Murphy at his San Francisco office in 1968 and, during a lull in the conversation, suggested that somebody lead a hike in the mountains and graft some of Esalen's techniques onto the experience of being in the High Sierra. Murphy agreed that it was a good idea and asked me if I wanted to do it. I said I was only suggesting that he get somebody to do it. Murphy said that since it was my idea I should do it. I said I would think about it and flew back to Los Angeles, amazed by what I had just seen of Esalen's way of doing business. Finally I did lead a mountain encounter and it was a success, but it could easily have been a disaster and I often marveled that the portals had swung open so readily, allowing me to stumble through with a group process that was accepted before it was invented. People have assured me that when Murphy made such decisions it was out of intuition, not carelessness. I would like to believe that, but I'm not sure; Abraham Maslow is reported to have said that if Satan himself came to Esalen, Mike Murphy would have invited him to lead a seminar.

I continued to lead occasional programs at Big Sur (and, after we

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moved north, at Esalen's San Francisco branch), but I was never central to Esalen's existence, nor was it to mine. I do not mean to imply by this that I am neutral or objective toward Esalen, only to identify with some precision my own role in relation to it. I visited Big Sur two or three times a year and had grown to love it. The place will do that to you; it creeps into your affections and makes you want to organize your life in such a way that you can return there from time to time. I had some contact with Michael Murphy and Richard Price, but not much sense of Esalen as an organization and no particular opinions about it except a general charge of approval. I knew about such things as the rivalry between Perls and Schutz (Perls had talked about that when I interviewed him in 1969); but I had no idea of what went on in the inner circles of Esalen's management, nor did I know about the suicides that were such shattering events for those who were living at Big Sur.

But although I was only distantly connected to the Esalen Institute, I was deeply involved in the wider sweep of things of which Esalen was a part. Humanistic psychology—by which I mean the intellectual movement identified with such people as Abraham Maslow, Perls, Carl Rogers, and Rollo May—seemed to me then (and does still) to contain an important part of the answer to what is tragically wrong with American life. I remain equally partisan about that much-lam-pooned pastime, group therapy. I know its shortcomings well, but I have seen too many good things come out of it to be able to dismiss it all with the facile disdain that comes so readily to many who have written about it. I have seen, in fact, more manifestations of the major human virtues, such as courage and compassion and commitment and honesty, in groups than in any other realm of human interaction. And they have touched my own life in many ways. I don't think my wife and I would ever have made it to the altar in 1968 without the aid of a couple of psychodrama sessions that got us through turmoils that could otherwise have scuttled the relationship, and an ongoing group for couples that we joined later was a major support for us in the early years of marriage. Such personal experiences left me strongly skeptical toward the view of group therapy as the great wrecking yard of relationships.

It was easy for me to see humanistic psychology and group therapy as a cause; and when they began to take on a recognizable identity as a movement, I was in it. This meant that I was resistant toward criticisms of it and inclined to think well of whoever or whatever was also

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a part of it. That is still my general bias, and the one that pervades these pages—but it is one that has been buffeted by twenty years of experience, during which time I have come reluctantly to the conclusion that many of the criticisms are pretty well on target. My involvement with this movement has given me a more sympathetic understanding than I ever had before of people—George Orwell comes to mind—who were committed to socialism but less than enthusiastic about some of the directions it took. I have watched the humanistic psychology movement become the human potential movement, seen that give way in turn to the various Aquarian, estian, and transformational faiths of the 1970s and 1980s, and there have been times when it has seemed to me that the tendency has been steadily in the direction of promising more and delivering less. I fear that if the movement perishes, it will be because it has strangled on its own rhetoric and not because it has been done in by its enemies. In this respect and in others, I am a troubled and critical follower of the cause.

The cause itself is a complex affair, not at all the simple hot-tub binge it is taken to be. For some reason the general practice has been to view as a single unit all the things that Esalen and the human potential movement have embraced, and to vote them up or down accordingly. This might be excusable in a hasty newspaper article, but it has also been done in books that purport to be informed and thoughtful critiques. Esalen and the movement—or movements—linked with it constitute a large and varied field of activity, some of its wings and ideas much at odds with others, and anybody who does not have mixed feelings about it cannot have been paying attention.

The story of Esalen could have been written as an exercise in trashing the human potential movement, or as a hymn to Esalen, the fountainhead of transformation. But, for reasons I have tried to indicate with these biographical fragments, I could not have done either. It is not a matter of being objective or neutral, but of being true to my own very subjective point of view. I think Esalen is important, a subject whose history is worth being recorded; it is, as I suspected when I first looked in there, a place where a part of "it" was happening. It is a subject that I approach with respect, but not with reverence. You would miss an important part of American life if you failed to take Esalen seriously, and you would be making an equally great mistake if you took it too seriously.

This book is primarily a chronicle, a story of Esalen and the people and ideas that became associated with it. In that regard I am, like any

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other historian, a retailer of other people's experiences. The analysis that weaves through the narrative is, of course, mine. I am grateful to the many people who told me their stories; I want to acknowledge, especially, the generosity of Michael Murphy and Richard Price, who gave many hours of their time for interviews and spoke frankly about their lives with no guarantee as to how I would use the material and no right of final approval over the book. I am grateful also to those who read the manuscript in various drafts (Tom Greening, Gerry Haigh, Abe Levitsky, Stuart Miller, Ted and Betty Roszak); to Cheryl Brandt for some valuable editing and typing assistance; to Barbara Lowenstein for setting the project in motion and then reminding me about once a week that I was taking too long to finish it; to Cyrisse Jaffee for editorial work at the final stages; to Frances Apt for copyediting; to my dear wife, Mauriça, for many things, including going with me to that funny place up the coast to hear Alan Watts in 1967 and providing a vast amount of help and encouragement and hard work on this book; and to my son Dan, who was no help at all but nice to have around.

My title is taken from some lines by Christopher Fry. The reader will encounter them farther along, at the point where they are quoted from an Esalen brochure. It seemed to me preferable to let them appear in their own due time rather than to use the traditional quotation in the front of the book. The subtitle, *Esalen and the American Awakening*, is the result of a search for some phrase to describe the context of the times, the whatever-it-was that was happening of which Esalen was a part. The word *awakening* feels right, even though it does invoke other, more specifically religious, upheavals—especially that curious period in colonial history called the Great Awakening, when a spontaneous wave of spiritual fervor, a stampede in pursuit of direct religious experience, swept the land.¹ It seems far-out to suggest a parallel between the 1960s and the 1740s, but when I return occasionally to the history books I am struck by the similarities. The Great Awakening of colonial times had its Timothy Learys, its itinerant preachers traveling the lecture circuit, its excesses, and its charlatans. It was also strongly individualistic, personalistic; the psychological concept of narcissism had not been invented yet, and its detractors settled for dismissing it as an outburst of—supreme word of Puritan contempt—*enthusiasm*.

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The Great Awakening was characterized not only by a hankering for personal participation in the mysteries, but also by a sense of an agenda; some believed it was the prelude to the Millennium, the beginning of Christ's rule on earth. Years later, when the Awakening had been eclipsed by the American Revolution, there were those who believed its business was not yet done. David Austin wrote in 1794: "It seems no unnatural conclusion from ancient prophecy, . . . that in order to usher in . . . the latter-day glory, two great revolutions are to take place; the first outward and political, the second inward and spiritual."² That suggests another point of contact with the awakening of the 1960s: an uncertainty about the connection between the political and the personal.

The Sufis say that ordinary life is a kind of slumber from which only a few extraordinary human beings have ever truly awakened. They also say that there are occasions in the lives of the rest of us when we awaken for a moment and catch a fuller glimpse of the true vastness of our being before we fall asleep again. I find that a cogent and unusually scrutable piece of Oriental wisdom, and I think a good case could be made that it is true for societies as well as for individuals—that there are periods in the history of any civilization when its rest is disturbed, and that in such periods the inner life runs near the surface, ordinary people crave mystical experience, there is much odd behavior, and many things seem possible.

1

Summer 1961. It was hot and smoggy in Santa Monica, a day the two young men, just getting out of a battered red pickup, would remember well. The day was not a turning point, exactly; they were already embarked on a certain course of action, and their conversation with the older man that afternoon did not divert them from it. They remembered it, rather, as a day when the gears shifted, when they took on a new momentum.

They were each thirty years old and had been living in San Francisco on the periphery of the subculture that the press called the Beat Generation. You would not mistake either one of them for a Beat poet. They were trim, clean-shaven, neatly dressed in casual clothes. One of them, Michael Murphy, was dark-haired and dark-eyed, with a flashing smile; the other, Richard Price, had light brown hair, blue eyes, and a slim, handsome face. They were products of prosperous upper-middle-class families. Stanford graduates. So far, neither Murphy nor Price had done anything the world would notice or record, but they had hopes. They had a project that was part business venture and part crusade. They were just getting ready to take over the management of a little hot-springs resort on the Big Sur coast, and they wanted to put on some lecture programs there—make the place a kind of forum for the exploration of religion and philosophy and psychology, for new ideas about the meaning and possibilities of life.

The decade was young and full of hope. A youthful president of the United States, who had campaigned on a promise to get America moving again—a vague yet stirring aspiration—was in office. New energy, new idealism, seemed to be emerging in the land. Brisk intellectuals were going to Washington to give the nation's government the benefit of their brilliance and boundless self-confidence. A new agency called the Peace Corps was being started up, and many Americans

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were thinking about going abroad to help people in other countries. Freedom riders in Atlanta, blacks and whites struggling together against discrimination, signaled to the world that there still survived in America, even after the numbing decade of Joseph McCarthy and the witch hunts, some of the old spirit of Thoreau and the abolitionists and the Underground Railroad. There was plenty of trouble, much to fear, yet the mood was definitely one of exuberance and optimism. The world watched the exploits of astronauts and cosmonauts; someday soon, it was expected, a man would walk on the moon. After that there would be expeditions to the planets and the stars, great adventures out in the cosmos.

In San Francisco, a different and more local kind of awakening had been going on. The Beat writers, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg and the rest of the North Beach crowd, were more than just another literary movement; they had somehow caught the public fancy with their attack on middle-American morality and rejection of the work-and-get-ahead ethic. The national attention had turned not only toward them, but toward San Francisco; some spoke about a "San Francisco Renaissance," of which the Beat movement was only a part. Suddenly, California was not a distant cultural outpost, its eyes fixed on the East Coast, but a place where ideas were stirring, a place where things began.

About a year earlier, Richard Price had gone over to Berkeley to hear a lecture by Aldous Huxley, English novelist turned California visionary, who was going about the college campuses talking on a subject he called "human potentialities." It was Huxley's view of where civilization stood in 1960, and where it needed to go from there:

Let us begin [said Huxley, in his kindly Oxonian accents] by asking a question: What would have happened to a child of 170 I.Q. born into a Paleolithic family at the time of, say, the cave paintings of Lascaux? Well, quite obviously, he could have been nothing except a hunter and a food gatherer. There was no other opportunity for him to be anything else.

The biologists have shown us that, physiologically and anatomically, we are pretty much the same as we were twenty thousand years ago and that we are using fundamentally the same equipment as the Aurignacean man to produce incredibly different results. We have in the course of these twenty thousand years actualized an immense number of things which at that time and

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for many, many centuries thereafter were wholly potential and latent in man.

This, I think, gives us reason for tempered optimism that there are still a great many potentialities—for rationality, for affection and kindness, for creativity—still lying latent in man; and, since everything has speeded up so enormously in recent years, that we shall find methods for going almost as far beyond the point we have reached now within a few hundred years as we have succeeded in going beyond our Aurignacean ancestors in twenty thousand years. I think this is not an entirely fantastic belief. The neurologists have shown us that no human being has ever made use of as much as ten percent of all the neurons in his brain. And perhaps, if we set about it in the right way, we might be able to produce extraordinary things out of this strange piece of work that a man is.¹

Huxley had several ideas about how these latent human potentialities might be actualized. He was a man of immense curiosity, forever exploring. He had been following recent research in pharmacology, and thought it possible that science might develop chemicals that would increase people's ability to think, feel, and create. He was also fascinated by new trends in education and psychotherapy. He had read about an obscure form of psychotherapy called gestalt, which proposed to treat neurosis by turning the patient's attention to events in the here-and-now instead of having him or her search through the past for causes. Huxley thought this kind of therapy, developed by a man named Frederick Perls, offered a practical way of following the ancient precept "Know thyself."

There were also paths of physical development that fascinated him. An Australian, F. Matthias Alexander, had developed a technique of physical re-education, a way of discovering more about the self by developing greater awareness of how the body moves and feels. Other people, most of them influenced by the writings of Wilhelm Reich, were working with the problem of anger and finding effective ways to express it in intense physical activity.

Huxley thought it would be good if some institution, perhaps one of the great foundations, would launch a program of research into all the methods for actualizing human potentialities that had been discovered so far. The methods would be studied, evaluated, and then put to use by society in a program of lifelong education. Such an undertaking, he thought, might be "quite revolutionary."

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Huxley's proposal was not quite the same as the project Murphy and Price were now trying to put together, but it was close, and they liked the sound of "human potentialities." They had written Huxley, telling him what they hoped to do and asking for his advice. He had replied that he was going to be away from his Hollywood Hills home the month they were going south, but suggested they look over Rancho La Puerta, a place in Mexico that he and his wife often visited, and that he thought might give them some ideas. It was a resort that featured health foods, yoga classes, and evening self-improvement lectures—a precursor, in its way, of what would later be called a growth center, although most of Rancho La Puerta's clients were interested mainly in growing thin. And Huxley suggested that they really ought to stop off in Santa Monica and visit his friend Gerald Heard.

Heard, an energetic red-bearded Irishman, had been a close friend of Aldous Huxley's since 1929 and had immigrated to the United States with the Huxley family in 1937. The two had gone on lecture tours together, the shortish Heard and the willowy Huxley making a rather oddly matched pair. Huxley's wife, Maria, called them Mutt and Jeff, and noted the difference not only in their heights, but also in their speaking styles: "Aldous so slow and calm and passive, Gerald vehement and busy and coercive."

That difference was strikingly apparent when Murphy and Price went to see Heard in his Santa Monica cottage. Huxley had so diffidently advocated a research project, had so hesitantly suggested its revolutionary possibilities. He thought something of that sort *might* happen. Heard thought it *had* to happen. Mankind, he believed, was at the turning point and could be saved from destruction only by a great leap, a new vision. There would have to be a psychological revolution, and, yes, there would have to be institutions to serve it. He had written of the need for "gymnasia for the mind" and in the 1940s had launched his own version in Southern California, a spiritual / educational center called Trabuco College. It had failed, but Heard remained irrepressibly optimistic about the prospects for new undertakings, new horizons, vast evolutionary transformations. He was a man of limitless energies, a brilliant and tireless talker. He welcomed the two young visitors, and they had a long conversation, a stunning four-hour exploration of evolutionary theory, biology, theology, philosophy. They spoke of many things, all connected to Heard's vision of a huge transformation of the human species that was, he was sure, trying to take place.

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Murphy and Price came away from the meeting feeling—as people who entered into conversation with Gerald Heard often felt—a slight buzzing in the head, a certain overloading of the mental circuits. Yet it had been an invigorating and positive experience. Until then their project had been tinged with uncertainty, with a maybe-it-will-work-out-and-maybe-it-won't sort of doubtfulness that naturally accompanies thoughts of risky new ventures into the unknown. But Heard's enthusiasm, his sense of a cosmic mandate, changed all that. Murphy and Price were now both filled with a new sense of urgent conviction about their project: it *would* happen. It seemed to them, that day, that it had to happen.

