The Class of 1984
(Now 5) Looks Ahead
A Trip to Esalen Institute—

Joy Is the Prize

By LEO E. LITWAK

BIG SUR is an 80-mile stretch of California coast below the Monterey Peninsula. It is approximately midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco and difficult of access from either direction. Before the coastal highway was completed in 1936, the shore was accessible only by boat. The Los Padres National Forest, one of the largest preserves in the country, extends 30 miles inland and is 200 miles long, it occupies most of the area. Not much land is available for private ownership. There are only 300 residents. The rugged terrain of Los Padres includes redwood canyons, barren mountain ranges, desert flora, thick forests. It is the province of mountain lions and wild boar.

Stone cliffs rise 2,000 feet above the ocean. Beyond a wedge of meadow, the steeply inclined hillside begins. For great distances there is no meadow at all and the serpentine coastal highway hangs on the cliffs. It is a two-lane road, sometimes impassable after heavy rains. The fog bank swells off shore. When it sweeps in, the traveler faces an uncanny trip, guided entirely by the few white dashes of the center line that are visible. With hairpin turns, sharp rises and declines, the road can be dangerous in bad weather. On clear days when the setting sun ignites dust particles on your windshield you are forced to drive blind for dangerous seconds.

Nonetheless, 4,000 people traveled this road last year, in disregard of weather, aimed toward the Esalen Institute, famous until a few years ago under a different name, Big Sur Hot Springs. These are unlikely adventurers. They are doctors, social workers, clinical psychologists, teachers, students, business executives, engineers, housewives—or just fun lovers who have come to take the baths.

Big Sur Hot Springs was originally renowned as the Eden discovered by Henry Miller and Jack Kerouac. Joan Baez once lived there. The springs were purchased in 1910 from a man named Slade by Dr. Henry C. Murphy of Salinas. It was Dr. Murphy’s intention to establish a health spa. In order to use the mineral waters he brought in two bathhouses by fishing sloop. They were hauled up the cliff and placed on a ledge at the source of the springs. But because of their inaccessibility, the springs did not flourish as a spa. Not until Dr. Murphy’s grandson, Michael, assumed operation of the property in the mid-sixties did the baths begin to receive attention—attention that has grown with the development of Esalen Institute.

MICHAEL MURPHY at 37 appears to be in his early 20’s. He is slender and boyish and has a marvelous smile. I took part in a panel discussion at Hot Springs some years ago and I was not impressed either by the topic, my performance or the audience. I did enjoy the baths. I had misgivings about Murphy’s program, yet none about him. He seemed to me generous, charming, innocent, credulous, enthusiastic and enormously sympathetic. A Stanford alumna who had done some graduate work in psychology and philosophy, he had recently returned from an 18-month study of the art of meditation at the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, India, and he devoted a considerable part of the day to meditation. I believe he had—and still has—in mind some great mission, based on his Indian experience. I am not quite sure what the scope of his mission is. A friend of his told me: “Mike wants to turn the world.” Esalen Institute is his instrument for doing so. It has come a long way from the shabby panels of a few years ago. Its spreading impact may seriously affect our methods of therapy and education.

In the course of a year, almost 1,000 professional persons—social workers, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists—enroll in Esalen workshops. Close to 700 psychotherapists have been trained to administer techniques devised by staff members: Frederick Perls, Virginia Satir, Bernard Gunther and William Schultz. These techniques have been demonstrated at hospitals, universities and medical schools. This year Esalen has opened a San Francisco extension which in the first two months of operation has attracted an attendance in excess of 10,000, offering the same workshops and seminars that are available at Big Sur. Esalen-type communities have begun to appear throughout the country, in Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Jolla. One has even appeared in Vancouver. Canada. Murphy offers ad

(Continued on Page 28)

For the Too Well-Adjusted

Esalen is the name of an Indian tribe that once dwelt along the California coast. Esalen Institute is a nonprofit, idealistic and controversial establishment dedicated to “devising ways to extend the human potential.” Its methods are varied, but are centered around group therapy, psychodrama, massage and Oriental philosophy.

It offers to public weekend seminars (attracting an average of 75 participants at $60, including room and board) and five-day workshops ($155 to $175, with an average attendance of 25). In addition, there are 22 resident fellows enrolled in a nine-month course ($3,000) in Esalen techniques.

Esalen does not advertise. It mails a quarterly brochure that includes a schedule of offerings to those who have attended in the past or who subscribe for $2 a year.

For the future, Esalen has plans to implement a new approach to psychosis developed by, among others, the British psychiatrist R. D. Laing and Dr. Julian Silberman of the British Institute for Mental Health at Bethesda, Md. Dr. Silberman will visit Esalen next summer to establish a “blowout center” for the treatment of certain nonparanoid psychoses by conducting the patient through his illness in the expectation that he may significantly profit from allowing it to run its course.

But therapy is not Esalen’s primary function. As Dr. John Downing, a psychiatrist and director of the San Mateo County Mental Health Services, explains: “It is the concern of psychiatry to adjust people to the social environment. Esalen, rather, is concerned with those who are too well-adjusted, too tight and controlled. It attempts to release them for growth and greater integration.”

Photographs by MICHAEL ALEXANDER
EYE-OPENER—An "expanded capacity to learn, to love, to feel deeply ... [to know] the joys of the senses, the immediacy of unpostponed life" is what the Esalen Institute offers participants in its workshop sessions at Big Sur. The girl at left, one of Esalen's resident fellows, leads a group, eyes shut and hands extended, in an ancient Chinese meditative exercise. Right, one member of a group is tapped, patted, thumped and slapped, in varying tempos, the better to experience "sensory awareness." Below, couples in an Esalen "encounter workshop" practice "nonverbal communication."
Joy Is the Prize (Cont.)

(From Page 8)

vice and help, and permits use of his mailing list.

Consider some offerings of the Esalen winter brochure. Seminars led by Alan Watts, the Zen interpreter, and by Stan Sontag, the camp interpreter. Workshops for professional therapists conducted by Frederick D. Dillingham, an early associate of Freud and Wilhelm Reich and a founder of Gestalt therapy. A lecture panel including the psychologist Carl Rogers and Herman Kahn, the "thinking about the unthinkable" man. Some of the titles are "Kinetic Theater," "Psycho-technics," "Do You Do It? Or Does It Do You?", "Dante's Way to the Stars," "Creativity and the Daimonic," "On Deepening the Marriage Encounter," "Tibetan Book of the Dead," "Anxiety and Tension Control," "Racial Confrontation as a Transcendental Experience."

What principle guides a mélangé that consists of dance workshops, therapy workshops, sensory awareness experiments, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Herman Kahn, Carl Rogers, Frederick Dillingham, and Stan Sontag?

Esalen's vice president, George B. Leonard, has written a general statement of purpose. He says: "We believe that all men somehow possess a divine potentiality; that ways may be worked out systematically to release this potentiality; that through many of the"... a vastly expanded capacity to learn, to love, to feel deeply, to create. We regard this as a basic truth that seeks God and human potentialities by denying the joys of the senses, the immediacy of an unpostponed life."

I had signed up for a workshop led by Dr. William Schutz, a group therapist who has taught at Harvard and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, among other institutions. Schutz works on the staff of the National Training Laboratories Interne Training Program at Bethel, Me. His latest book, "Joy," was published in 1967 by Grove Press.

In the brochure description of Dr. Schutz's workshop I read a warning that the experience would be something that would not be an encounter workshop with body movements, sensory awareness, fantasy experiments, psychodrama. Developing the ability to experience joy is the workshop's guiding theme. Joy as the prize of a five-day workshop.

"How can we speak of joy," Leonard has written, "on this dark and suffering planet? How can we speak of anything else? We have heard enough of despair."

It was easy enough to dismiss the language. It seemed naive to promise so great a reward for so small an investment. Joy for $175 seemed cheap at the price, especially since the New York Times was paying. I did have considerable anxieties that some of those "body movements" might be humiliating. And what precisely was meant by "sensory awareness?"

Esalen has changed considerably since my previous visit. Rows of new cabins are ranged along terraces on the hillside. The lodge is perched at the bottom of a steep incline, in a meadow. It is a meadow probably is 200 yards deep and wide at the cliff edge. The Pacific Ocean is 150 feet below. A staff of 50 operates the kitchen, supervises the baths, cleans the cabins and gardens and works on construction.

I passed hippy laborers, stripped to the waist, long hair flowing. "New Morning" with pick and shovel. Dreamy girls in long gowns played flutes near the pool.

I was somewhat put off by what I considered to be an excessive show of affection. Men hugged men. Men hugged women. Women hugged women. These were not hippies. They are also other sorts, like myself, who come for the work shop. People flew into one another's arms, and I wasn't my style at all.

After dinner, 30 of us met in the gallery for our first session. We began our excursion toward joy at 9 P.M. of a Sunday in a woolen room on a bouncy, starry night.

Dr. Schutz, solidly built, with bald head and muddle beard, began by telling us that in the course of the workshop we would come to dangerous ground. At many times we ought not to resist entering, for in this area lay our greatest prospect for self-transcendence. He told us to avoid verbal manipulations and to concentrate on our feelings.

We began with exercises. A fat lady in leotards directed us to be absurd. We touched our noses with our tongues. We jumped. We ran. We clutched one another, made faces at one another. Afterward, we gathered in groups of five and were given an ambiguous instruction to discover one another by touching in any way we found agreeable. I came across a strange-looking young man with an underslung jaw and powerful shoulders. I tried unlocking his legs and he glared at me.

When Schutz asked each group of five to select one couple that seemed least close, the young man with the underslung jaw selected me. The hostile pairs were then requested to stand at opposite diagonals of the room and approach each other. They were to do whatever they felt like doing when they met in the center of the room. A bulky middle-aged man marched toward a petite lady. They met, they paused, stared, then suddenly embraced. The next couple, two bulky men, both frozen rigid, confronted each other, stared, then also embraced. The young man and his partner started straight toward opposite diagonals. We met in the center of the room. I found myself looking into the meanest, coldest eyes I had ever seen. He pressed his hands to his sides, and it was clear to me that we were not going to embrace. I reached for his hand to shake it. He jerked free. I put my hand on his shoulder; he shrugged me off. We continued staring and finally returned to our group.

There was a general discussion of this encounter. Some feared we might start fighting. Nothing of course, was farther from my mind. I had gone out, intending to play their game and suddenly found myself staring at a lunatic. He had very mean, cold eyes, a crazy shape to his jaw, lips so grim that his ill-feeling was unmistakable. Back in our group he said to me, in a raspy, shrill voice: "You thought I was going to bat yer in the face? That's why you turned away." There was a slurred quality to his speech, and it occurred to me that I might have triggered off a madman. I denied that I had turned away and I was challenged to stare him down. I was annoyed that I had been asked into something so silly.

We proceeded, on the basis of our first impressions, to give another names, which we kept for the duration of the workshop. My nemesis accepted the name of Rebell. There was a plump, lovely girl we called Kate. A silent, powerful man with spectacles we named Clark. Our fat group leader received the name of Brigitte. A lumpy, solemn man with thick spectacles we named Gary. An elegant, trim middle-aged woman we named Shirley. A buxom, mournful woman with long hair became Joan. A jovial middle-aged pipe smoker with a Jean Hersholt manner we named Lionel. A fierce, mustached swaggerer in Bermuda shorts was Daniel. A quiet man with a little boy's face we named Victor. I was named Lionel. We were addressed by these names at all times.

I considered this renaming of ourselves a naive attempt to create an atmosphere free of any outside reference. Many of the techniques impressed me as naive. It seemed tacit and obvious to ask so blunt and vague a question as, "What are you feeling?" Yet what happened in the course of five days was that the obvious became clarified. Chlichés became significa nt.

I found myself discovering what had always been under my nose. I had not known how my body fell under conditions of tension or fear or grief. I discovered that I was numb. I had all sorts of tricks for avoiding encounter. I didn't particularly like to be..."
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