

# R.D. Laing

## IN THE 21ST CENTURY

August 30 through  
September 3, 2021

**ESALEN INSTITUTE**  
Big Sur, California

**SYMPOSIUM SPONSORED  
& ORGANIZED BY**

Free Association, Inc.,  
San Francisco, California

**WORKSHOP FACULTY**

Fritjof Capra, Ph.D.

Nita Gage

Michael Guy Thompson, Ph.D.

**INVITED GUESTS**

Daniel Charles Crosser

Will Hall

Michelle Anne Hobart

Douglas Kirsner, Ph.D. (ZOOM)

Heather LaFace, Ph.D.

James Norwood

Astrea Ribeiro

Rinat Tal, M.D.

Andrew Turkington, RN, LMFT

Scott Von, OMD, Ph.D.

**FOR INFORMATION OR INQUIRIES**

Michael Guy Thompson, Ph.D.  
michaelguythompson@mac.com

### WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

A FOUR-DAY SYMPOSIUM & WORKSHOP AT

*Esalen*

R. D. LAING wore many robes in his career including psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, philosopher, social critic, author, poet, and mystic, and at the peak of his fame in the 1970s, he was the most widely-read psychiatrist in the world. Arguably the most controversial psychoanalyst since Freud, Laing's meteoric rise in the 1960s was the result of his rare ability to make complex ideas accessible with such best-selling classics as *The Divided Self* (1960), *Sanity, Madness and Family* (1964), *The Politics of Experience* (1967), *Knots* (1970), and many others. Laing's impassioned plea for a more humane treatment of those in society who are most vulnerable catapulted him into the vanguard of intellectual and cultural debate about the nature of sanity and madness, and inspired a generation of psychology students, intellectuals, and artists to turn this disarming Scotsman into a social icon.

One of the most seminal aspects to Laing's approach to the human condition was his exploration into the meaning of life. Laing was psychoanalyst, philosopher, and existentialist, with a no-holds critique of both the dark side of the human condition, as well as its passions and glory. Our workshop this year is to explore what it means to be happy from the broadest possible perspective, including secular, religious, and philosophical approaches to this issue over the millennia, including the Greek Hellenistic era, Buddhism, and common wisdom.

This workshop, designed for those seeking answers to the meaning of life, is a continuation of our previous Esalen workshops that focused on Laing's take on the nature of sanity and madness, the therapeutic relationship, altered states, plus the nature of love, authenticity, and most recently, spirituality. This workshop is best suited for those who are familiar with Laing's work and who wish to explore it further. Our three workshop leaders will be joined by a dozen guest speakers, (many of whom worked intimately with Laing) to assess the question of happiness at the most fundamental level. The workshop will be comprised of theoretical presentations, panel discussions, and experiential exercises to demonstrate practical aspects of Laing's legacy.

Among the questions we will explore:

1. What is the relation between happiness and neurotic suffering?
2. What do our views about happiness tell us about the person we are, and our values?
3. Does achieving happiness immunize us from suffering?
4. Is happiness something we must strive for, or does it manifest indirectly, by chance?
5. How do we know when we are happy? And how can we obtain it?

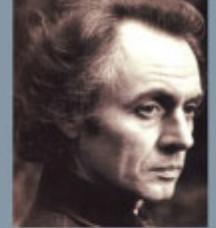
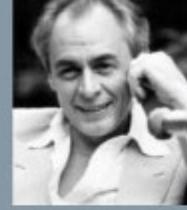
Join us for four breathtaking days at Esalen Institute on the Pacific Coast to explore how we can promote more humane and effective ways of helping those suffering from extreme states.

—MICHAEL GUY THOMPSON, NITA GAGE, FRITJOF CAPRA

For instructions on how to register & lodging details, please visit [www.esalen.org](http://www.esalen.org).



# R.D. Laing in the 21st Century



## WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

Esalen Institute, Big Sur, California • August 30 – September 3, 2021

Symposium Workshop Co-Organizers & Faculty: Fritjof Capra, PhD • Nita Gage • Michael Guy Thompson, PhD

### MONDAY – AUGUST 30

8:00 – 10:00 pm

**Michael Guy Thompson, PhD, Fritjof Capra, PhD, Nita Gage, DSPS**  
*Welcome! Let's Get Acquainted!*

We will spend this initial, breaking-in meeting to introduce ourselves to each other and give you an idea of what our four days together will be like. We will begin with introducing the three principal faculty and organizers of our Laing Workshop, then our guest speakers, and finally a chance for everyone attending this special week to introduce yourselves and what you are hoping to gain from this experience.

### TUESDAY – AUGUST 31

9:30 – 10:30 am

**Nita Gage, DSPS**

*The Heart of Happiness*

(moderated by Michael Guy Thompson)

Mystics have suggested that the heart is the seat of the soul. Modern science now shows that the heart, with its own neural pathway, communicates with the brain and impacts serenity and happiness. In her presentation, Nita will show that happiness is a state of presence that can be accessed regardless of external circumstances. This session will be both didactic and experiential.

10:40 – 11:30 pm

**Rinat Tal, MD**

*Happiness As A State of Change*

(moderated by Michael Guy Thompson)

Rinat will argue that happiness and fulfillment are embedded in one's internal developmental growth. In other words, in our evolution towards maturity.

11:40 am – 1:00 pm

**Michael Guy Thompson, PhD (with Fritjof Capra, PhD)**

*What Is Happiness? and why is it so elusive?*

(moderated by Nita Gage followed by a brief commentary)

Drawing on Nietzsche, Freud, and Plato, Michael will explore the most fundamental questions and misconceptions about the nature of happiness, why it is so elusive, and how to obtain it. Contrary to the conventional view that happiness can be reduced to pleasurable experiences, Michael will argue

that a genuine and lasting relationship with happiness can only be obtained by embracing the pain and anguish of everyday life.

1:00 – 4:00 pm

#### Lunch Break and Play Time

*Lunch at the Dining Hall and outside on the property. Enjoy the rest of the break to relax and smell the ocean. Please return to the afternoon portion of today's program promptly at 4:00 pm.*

4:00-5:00 pm

**Heather LaFace, PhD**

*The Tyranny of Happiness*

(moderated by Nita Gage)

The tyranny of the happiness industrial complex is fed by the individualism and white-identified psychology that results in an epistemology of violence. Heather will explore a communalist participatory systems method rooted in reciprocity and mutuality. Clinical case material and participatory self-reporting will be explored.

5:10-6:30 pm

**Douglas Kirsner, PhD**

*Laing on Happiness*

(moderated by Michael Guy Thompson)

Doug will explore Laing's approach to happiness within the context of Freud's CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS. While Freud was pessimistic and stoic, Laing was sometimes optimistic and hopeful. For Laing (as with Freud) neurosis is an inevitable outcome of society, which imposes inevitable limits to happiness for the sake of peace and security. We will explore Laing's thesis that love is the most ecstatic and reliable source of happiness in our lives.

6:30 – 8:00 pm

#### Dinner Break – followed by After Dinner Party and Soiree!

*Dinner in the Esalen Dining Hall and outdoors.*

*Feel free to join us at a welcome party after dinner, hosted by Katherine Rochlin in the historic Fritz House, for an evening of merriment and fun.*



## WEDNESDAY – SEPTEMBER 1

9:30 – 10:30 am

### **Nita Gage, Michelle Anne Hobart, Will Hall, and Workshop Participants!**

*All-Day Breath Workshop —*

*A Tribute to Laing's Famous Workshops from the 1970s.*

(moderated by Nita Gage)

#### **Part I: Breath Work as an Access to Happiness**

*Well Being and Breath Work in the Tradition of R. D. Laing*

Drawing from her own extensive experience moderating such workshops, Nita Gage will facilitate an opportunity for anyone who is interested in participating in this exercise to access mild altered states via guided imagery and deep breathing. This workshop is intended to simulate the kind of workshops Laing was famous for initiating in London among his students in order to gain greater awareness of the potential for expanded modes of consciousness readily accessible to us. This one-hour introduction will presage a two-hour morning session in which participants will participate in a breath work experiential exercise.

10:30 am – 1:00 pm

#### **Part II: Breath Work Experiential Session**

*Experiential Exercise*

(moderated by Nita Gage)

Nita will facilitate the chance to experience states of expanded consciousness elicited via deep breathing and other Shamanic exercises, followed by the opportunity to process these experiences in a warm and safe environment. We will repeat this exercise in the afternoon portion of this all-day experiential exercise.

1:00 – 4:00 pm

#### **Lunch Break and Play Time**

*Lunch at the Dining Hall. Enjoy the rest of the break to relax and smell the ocean. Please return to the afternoon portion of today's program promptly at 4:00 pm.*

4:00 – 5:00 pm

#### **Part III: Breath Work Experiential Session (continued)**

*Experiential Exercise*

(moderated by Nita Gage)

In this two-hour session Nita will continue to facilitate the chance to experience states of expanded consciousness elicited via deep breathing exercises, followed by opportunities to process these experiences in a warm and safe environment.

5:00 – 6:30 pm

#### **Part IV: Break up into small groups for processing today's experience**

*Breath Work Group Process Session*

(moderated by Nita Gage)

6:30 – 8:00 pm

#### **Dinner Break – followed by a Free Evening!**

*Dinner in the Esalen Dining Hall and outdoors.*

*Please enjoy the evening by the Fire Pit, the Terrace off the Dining Hall, or Esalen's legendary Hot Tubs!*

## THURSDAY – SEPTEMBER 2

9:30 – 10:30 am

### **Astrea Ribeiro**

*Constructing an "I" As a Source of Joy*

(moderated by Nita Gage)

Astrea will present a clinical case where a patient is diagnosed with schizophrenia. Astrea will suggest that 'sharing' is a principal source of happiness. But to share something with someone an "I" (not ego) is essential because it elicits a sense of confidence which helps us open ourselves up.

10:40 – 11:40 am

### **Scott Von, OMD, PhD**

*Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness*

(moderated by Michael Guy Thompson)

Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is the foundation of the American way. Happiness is the place where the sacred enters the profane. Happiness is the moment when God enters the public sphere of human exchange. Happiness is the point where desire love and faith converge.

11:50 – 1:00 pm

### **James Norwood, PhD**

*Happiness and the Romantic-Tragic View of Life*

(moderated by Michael Guy Thompson)

Drawing from the work of Roy Schafer, James will outline four conceptions of life: the comic, romantic, tragic, and ironic. Bolstered by illustrations from poets, mystics, and playwrights, he will explore how the romantic and tragic, in particular, are essential and mutually supportive features of a happy life.

1:00 – 4:00 pm

#### **Lunch Break and Play Time**

*Lunch at the Dining Hall. Enjoy the rest of the break to relax and smell the ocean. Please return to the afternoon portion of today's program promptly at 4:00.*

# HAPPINESS

SPECIAL THANKS TO ESELEN INSTITUTE & FREE ASSOCIATION, INC.

For more information and inquiries, contact Michael Guy Thompson, PhD: [michaelguythompson@mac.com](mailto:michaelguythompson@mac.com)

4:00 – 4:45 pm

**Will Hall**

*Therapy and Power: Does Happiness Matter?*

(moderated by Nita Gage)

Laing's authentic meeting of two humans envisions therapy as an antidote to the alienation and normalized violence of social adaptation. Can inflicting suffering, paradox, and "abstinence" on clients teach these lessons of personal growth and awakened authenticity? Or does therapeutic power routinely harm clients in the name of help? Is happiness important, now, or does it really have to get worse before it gets better?

4:50 – 5:35 pm

**Andrew Turkington, LMFT**

*The Fear of Happiness*

(moderated by Michael Guy Thompson)

Lau Tzu admonishes us to "Seek not happiness to greedily, and be not fearful of happiness. While allowing that greed seems inconsistent with the notion of happiness, the fear of happiness would seem to be less obviously a problem? We will explore this conundrum and see where it leads.

5:40 – 6:30 pm

**Michelle Anne Hobart and Daniel Charles Crosser**

*Happiness as Radical Interbecoming: Authentic Relating and Consensual Somatic Telepathy*

(moderated by Nita Gage)

Join Michelle and Daniel for an exploration into what it means to connect deeply in shared reality, to extend more when it feels it isn't possible, and to evolve ourselves to meet the edges and continue to show up. When we not only understand, but feel one another, entirely new horizons are available, and a new level of joy, peace, and reSourcing is upon us.

6:30 – 8:00 pm **Dinner Break followed by our Workshop Party!**

*Dinner in the Esalen Dining Hall. Please join us on the lawn after dinner for our Circle of Joy to celebrate our Esalen workshop with song and good cheer! Following our Circle feel free to join us for our closing party after dinner, hosted by Katherine Rochlin in the historic Fritz House, for an evening of merriment and fun.*

**FRIDAY – SEPTEMBER 3**

9:30 am – 12:00 noon

**Michael Guy Thompson, Fritjof Capra, Nita Gage, DSPS**

*Closing Comments and Audience Discussion!*

We want to spend this last block of time together to review our four days at Esalen and what it has meant to you.

How can we stay in touch and help make the connections we made with one another this week endure?

We also want to look ahead to next year, when we will host another five-day experience of R. D. Laing in the Twenty-First Century.

We hope you will be able to join us again next year for another exciting time together at Esalen!

*Good-bye!*

**DON'T FORGET: Check-out is 9:30 am (BEFORE our Friday morning wrap-up).**



**Fritjof Capra, PhD**, physicist and systems theorist, is a founding director of the Center for Ecoliteracy in Berkeley, CA. He serves on the faculty of the Amana-Key executive education program in Sao Paulo, Brazil, is a Fellow of Schumacher College (U.K.), and serves on the Council of Earth Charter International. Dr. Capra is the author of several international bestsellers, including *The Tao of Physics* (1975), *The Web of Life* (1996), and *The Science of Leonardo* (2007). He is coauthor, with Pier Luigi Luisi, of the multidisciplinary textbook, *The Systems View of Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). His new online course ([www.capracourse.net](http://www.capracourse.net)) is based on his textbook. He lives in Berkeley, CA.

**Daniel Charles Crosser** is an Enneagram Coach, Authentic Relating Facilitator, and Kundalini Breathwork practitioner and guide. He helps his clients return to embodiment and reclaim their birthright to accessing their vital energy in a safe way, and to honor the rich inner world through Circling. He offers breathwork and cacao ceremony, embodied enneagram tri-typing, and authentic relating circles in Austin, TX and online.

**Nita Gage, DSPS**, trained with R.D. Laing and his associates at the Philadelphia Association from 1974–1980. She left London and returned to America in 1980 and pursued post-graduate education in psychology and psycho-spiritual studies. She trained and studied with shamanic teachers and specializes in integrative psycho-spiritual healing. Nita is co-founder of the NeuroImaginal™ Institute, [www.neuroimaginalinstitute.com](http://www.neuroimaginalinstitute.com); Director of Healer Within Retreats, [www.healerwithinretreats.com](http://www.healerwithinretreats.com), teaching medical and addiction professionals NeuroImaginal Practices for health and well being. She is the author (with Linda Star Wolf) of *Soul Whispering: The Art of Awakening Shamanic Consciousness*, and lives in Vallejo, California.

**Will Hall, MA, DiplPW**, is a schizophrenia diagnosis survivor, therapist, psychiatric survivor movement advocate, and international trainer on altered states of consciousness labeled psychosis. A PhD candidate at Maastricht University School for Mental Health and Neuroscience, he authored the “Harm Reduction Guide to Coming Off Psychiatric Drugs” and “Outside Mental Health”; hosts Madness Radio; and is part of the Bay Area Mandala Project. He has written for the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* and *Journal of Best Practices in Mental Health*, and appeared in *Newsweek*, *New York Times*, *Forbes*, and the films *Crazywise* and *Healing Voices*.

**Michelle Anne Hobart, MA, SEC**, is a Certified Spiritual Emergence Coach who works with Psychic Opening, Near-Death Experience, and Entheogenic integration. She supports her clients and their loved ones in honoring the reality and bringing back the meaning and gifts from the transformational crisis. You can find out more about her lived experience and Spiritual Emergence advocacy and support in her new book *Holding Sacred Space*.

**Douglas Kirsner, PhD**, holds a Chair in Philosophy and Psychoanalytic Studies at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He is the author of *The Schizoid World of Jean-Paul Sartre and R. D. Laing* (2003), and *Unfree Associations: Inside Psychoanalytic Institutes* (2009). He lived in one of the post-Kingsley Hall, Philadelphia Association households during the 1970s and has retained a special research interest in Laing's work. His 1980 interview with Laing has recently been published in *The Psychoanalytic Review* (April, 2013). He lives in Melbourne.

**Heather LaFace, PhD**, is on the adjunct faculty at Antioch University Santa Barbara as well as at Pacific Graduate Institute. She is in private practice in Los Angeles and Orange County where she works within a framework of attachment and relational theory. Her current writing and research interests explore paradigm-shifting connections between neuroscience, philosophy, and social theory, with a special interest in approaching extreme states from a developmental systems orientation. She lives in Los Angeles.

**James Norwood, PhD**, is a graduate of the California Institute for Integral Studies (San Francisco), PsyD program in Clinical Psychology. James has been studying existential psychoanalysis with Michael Guy Thompson for the past six years and practices psychotherapy in San Francisco. He has also been one of the primary people involved in Gnosis Retreat Center, a residential project to provide respite for people experiencing extreme states.

**Astrea Issler Ribeiro** is a psychoanalyst in Sao Paulo, Brazil and in addition to a private practice she conducts outdoor sessions with people on the streets. She also has been working at the public psychiatric day hospital and coordinates therapeutic groups. She is also an artist and philosopher.

**Rinat Tal, MD**, is a psychiatrist and psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles. Her work focuses on minimizing medication management with clients with various conditions, including extreme states, incorporating a variety of influences that focus on the transformative aspects of the client-practitioner relationship. She has an abiding interest in alternatives to conventional psychiatry.

**Michael Guy Thompson, PhD**, received his psychoanalytic training from R. D. Laing and Hugh Crawford at the Philadelphia Association in London, and served as the organization's administrator from 1973–1980. He is Personal and Supervising Analyst and Faculty Member, Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California, San Francisco, and Adjunct Professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, in San Francisco. He is the author of numerous journal articles, book chapters, and reviews, as well as five books, *The Death of Desire: A Study in Psychopathology* (1985), *The Truth About Freud's Technique* (1994), *The Ethic of Honesty* (2004), *The Legacy of R. D. Laing: An Appraisal of His Contemporary Relevance* (2015), and most recently, *The Death of Desire: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (2016), an extensively revised and expanded edition of the original, published by Routledge. Michael is founder and director of **Gnosis Retreat Center**, a refuge for people in crisis, modeled on his work with R. D. Laing in London, and lives in Berkeley, California. His current project is a book on the relation between love and happiness: *The Heart of the Matter: The Trials and Tribulations of Love Relationships*.

**Andrew Turkington** was a psychiatric nurse in the U.K. and later moved to the U.S. where he received his psychoanalytic training from Michael Guy Thompson and associates at Free Association, Inc. He is currently a psychotherapist practicing in Alameda, California.

**Scott Von, OMD PhD**, is a physician, psychoanalyst, philosopher, poet, and artist. He is Director of the New Clinic for Integral Medicine & Psychiatry ([newclinic.org](http://newclinic.org)) and Director of Analytica psychoanalytic institute ([analytica.org](http://analytica.org)), both based in New York and Los Angeles. He completed his Doctor of Medicine specializing in Neuropsychiatry at ACTCM-Shanghai University and his PhD in Psychoanalysis at LSE-University of London, and served as a professor and supervisor at NYU, CUNY, CIIS, and Pacific College. He is author of the four-volume book and multi-modal artwork *Autopoiesis* which he has exhibited and performed internationally, and author of the clinical books *Schizoanalysis: Chaos & Complexity in Clinical Practice* and *Orgonomy: Integral Medicine & Psychiatry*. ([drscottvon.com](http://drscottvon.com))