

R. D. LAING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Sanity, Therapy, Love

M. GUY THOMPSON, FRITJOF CAPRA AND
DOUGLAS KIRSNER



Philosophy and Psychoanalysis



“How can there be a more relevant voice in our contemporary world than R. D. Laing? Is there anything to be more grateful for than sanity amidst this insanity, of healing amidst this suffering, of the altered states of psychosis amidst this lunacy, of love amidst this hatred? Laing was crucial to the founding of the human potential movement in the early 1960s. He is just as relevant today. Thompson, Capra, and Kirsner have brought us a series of essays, presented at **Esalen** over the past ten years, to remind us of this key legacy and why we should listen, intensely and carefully.”

Jeffrey J. Kripal, *author of Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*

“An authentic and scholarly work which greatly enriches the legacy of R. D. Laing’s contribution to the experience-orientated philosophy of madness.”

Adrian C. Laing, *Lawyer, author, son of R. D. Laing and author of R. D. Laing: A life (Amazon Kindle), President: The R. D. Laing Estate: www.rdlaingofficial.com*

“This fascinating book illuminates the influential work of the psychoanalyst and anti-psychiatrist R. D. Laing – a synthesizer of psychoanalysis with existentialist thought, Buddhism, family-systems theory, and cultural critique. Each essay in this volume was written by a thinker who knew Laing personally, knows his ideas intimately, and writes with clarity, sophistication, and verve. Laing was a crucial figure of the late 20th century. These erudite essays reveal his continuing relevance for our understanding of sanity and madness, of love and authenticity, of healing and altered states.”

Louis Sass, *author of Madness and Modernism and The Paradoxes of Delusion.*

“*R. D. Laing in the 21st Century* is essential reading for anyone concerned about the deeper levels of human freedom and community. The authors of this volume beautifully unpack Laing’s “live and let live” philosophy for a new generation mystified by, and too often suffering from, ever widening forms of social coercion. While Thompson and his colleagues do not offer pat answers to this monumental plight, their Laing-inspired insights provide hope for a more loving, honesty-based world.”

Kirk Schneider, *author of The Psychology of Existence (with Rollo May), The Polarized Mind, and Life-Enhancing Anxiety: Key to a Sane World.*

“The three authors, who knew and worked intimately with Laing, offer unique, illuminating understandings of his groundbreaking work. Importantly, they bring Laing into the 21st century to include our – hopefully not too late – ecological concerns of our interconnectedness, and such competing ideals as community and individual freedom. Through revisiting and contextually updating Laing’s seminal writings, this stimulating and engaging book can help us come more to our senses with and through others, in our otherwise increasingly lonely and alienating world.”

Del Loewenthal, *Emeritus Professor of Psychotherapy and Counselling, University of Roehampton, U.K., Chair of Existential Analytic Psychotherapy Training at the Southern Association for Psychotherapy and Counselling (SAFPAC) U.K., author of Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling after Postmodernism (Routledge, 2018). www.delloewenthal.com.*

R. D. Laing in the Twenty-First Century

In this remarkable review of the seminal contribution of the Scottish psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, R. D. Laing, the three authors, each intimately acquainted with the subject matter, explore Laing's intellectual and clinical legacy.

Written from the perspective of a psychoanalyst, a scientist, and a philosopher, this unique book thoroughly addresses the three principal themes that defined Laing's work: his views about sanity and madness, the use of therapy with those suffering from psychotic disturbance, and the vicissitudes of love relationships. They also explore authenticity, altered states, and healing. The authors bring a broad range of viewpoints in assessing Laing's seminal contribution to contemporary thought, from both a scholarly and personal assessment rooted in each of their diverse relationships with him, both professional and personal.

This volume will be of interest to those in the worlds of psychoanalysis, philosophy, science, and anyone with an interest in the work of R. D. Laing.

M. Guy Thompson, PhD, received his psychoanalytic training from R. D. Laing and colleagues at the Philadelphia Association in London and is the founder and director of the New School for Existential Psychoanalysis, a virtual certificate-based training program in existential psychoanalysis. He is the author of *The Legacy of R. D. Laing: An Appraisal of His Contemporary Relevance* [Ed.] (2015); *The Death of Desire: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (2017; 2nd edition); and most recently, *Essays in Existential Psychoanalysis: On the Primacy of Authenticity* (2024), all published by Routledge. He lives in Berkeley, California.

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M. Guy Thompson, Fritjof Capra
and Douglas Kirsner

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Preface

Themes From the Esalen Lectures

R. D. Laing wore many robes in his career, including psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, philosopher, social critic, author, poet, and mystic. At the peak of his fame and popularity in the 1970s he was the most widely read psychiatrist in the world. Renown of that magnitude is dependent on the happy coincidence of a multitude of factors, including the right message at the most opportune time. This was no doubt true for Laing, when the student unrest of the Vietnam War intersected with his devastating critique of a society, he argued, that was intent on subverting the minds of its youth for undisclosed purposes. At a time when authority figures of every persuasion were suspect, the counterculture embraced this hip, disarming Scotsman to explain how they were being mystified and why. Arguably the most controversial psychoanalyst since Freud, Laing's meteoric rise in the 1960s and 1970s was the result of his rare ability to make complex ideas accessible with such best-selling classics as *The Divided Self* (1960 [1969]); *Sanity, Madness and Family* (with Aaron Esterson, 1964 [1970]); *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 Laing into a cultural icon. His impact on the youth of the 1970s was especially pronounced in the United States, where his renown rivaled even that of the Indian gurus that were the rage among the college crowd's cognoscenti.

Laing's extraordinary reach into the American zeitgeist was based almost entirely on his devastating critique of conventional psychiatric practices, which he believed were often more sinister than the mental illness they presumed to treat. The (albeit reluctant) father of anti-psychiatry, Laing developed a daring alternative to conventional psychiatric treatment in 1965 at Kingsley Hall, the therapy center in London where he conceived the notion of a community where therapists and patients alike could live without clearly defined roles. This controversial treatment regimen was so successful that it continues to operate more than fifty years later and is even funded by the Local Council in London. Kingsley Hall also

inspired numerous residential treatment communities in North America (Soteria House, Diabasis, Birch House, Shadows) that eventually led to a sea change in contemporary attitudes about the involuntary incarceration of the mentally ill.

But Laing not only innovated a unique approach to the residential treatment of the severely mentally ill. He also conceived a novel approach to psychoanalytic training, integrating Freud, Klein, and the Middle School with existential philosophy (Sartre, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty, and others) and Buddhism, especially the Zen and Chan traditions. (I founded Free Association, Inc., in 1988 in San Francisco, California, a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization to further Laing's legacy, for the purpose of training a new generation of existential psychoanalysts in California, modeled on my training with Laing in London.)

Laing, who had studied philosophy as rigorously as he had the history and practice of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, sought to integrate existential philosophy and psychoanalysis after founding the Philadelphia Association in 1965. Much earlier, a group of European psychoanalytically trained psychiatrists, mostly German and French, in the post-World War II era of the 1940s and 1950s sought to integrate Martin Heidegger's existential philosophy into Freud's early conception of psychoanalysis – at that time, the only conception of psychoanalysis – with mixed results. Those psychoanalysts among us who were already schooled in existential philosophy and were trying our best to integrate it with Freudian psychoanalysis were thrilled with the publication of the American translations of many of these existential psychiatrists and analysts, titled *Existence* (1958), edited by Rollo May, and others appeared, introducing these writings into English for the first time. However, as interesting as these writings were, they were also virtually useless as an aid to learning how to practice a genuinely existential approach to psychoanalysis. After a decade or two of avid interest among American therapists who had been schooled or were just interested in existential philosophy and appearing in American journals devoted to existential psychology, the movement petered out around the time Laing's notoriety peaked. It was Laing's renown in the early 1970s that inspired me to abandon my doctoral studies in San Francisco to study with Laing in 1973.

Of course, it was Laing's books that made him world famous, many of which continue to sell at an impressive rate. *The Divided Self*; *Sanity, Madness and the Family*; *The Politics of Experience*; and *Knots* are now considered classics and continue to serve as the foundation of Laing's unique and disconcerting message. They are just as relevant today, and just as radical, as when they were first published in the 1960s and 1970s.

On a broader cultural level Laing's ideas spread far beyond matters concerning psychotherapy and the treatment of the mentally ill. Nearly every American college student in the early 1970s was reading *The Politics of Experience*, a campus best-seller that seemed to encapsulate the undercurrent of social malaise that so many young people were then feeling. When the pot-smoking, acid-dropping counter-culture intersected with the radical anti-Vietnam War protest movement, Laing's critique of how people in power were systematically mystifying them transformed

him into a social phenomenon and quasi-spiritual leader. So what was his message and why was its impact so palpable?

Laing died in 1989 at the age of 62. As we were approaching the 25th anniversary of Laing's death in 2013, I decided to organize a symposium in New York City to honor Laing's legacy. I invited a number of therapists, academics, and thinkers who had all known Laing personally, either in the UK or the United States, to convene for a weekend at Wagner College on Staten Island to share lectures on Laing's enduring impact on contemporary culture. Fritjof Capra and Douglas Kirsner, the other two contributors to this volume, were featured speakers among many others. The papers presented there were subsequently published by Routledge under the title, *The Legacy of R. D. Laing: An Appraisal of His Contemporary Relevance* (2015). The book you are now reading effectively serves as a sequel to that publication.

After the intense interest that followed this highly successful symposium, I decided to host more symposia devoted to Laing's legacy, but on an annual basis, and to move the venue for these meetings from New York to California, at the renowned Esalen Institute in Big Sur. Esalen's relationship with Laing is of historic importance due to Laing's frequent visits there, beginning in the mid-1960s and culminating toward the end of the 1980s with Laing's death. In 1968, Richard Price and Michael Murphy, two Stanford dropout psychologists who were profoundly unhappy with conventional psychiatry, convened a summer-long series of symposia under the title, "The Value of Psychotic Experience" at Esalen, a retreat center on the Pacific Ocean owned by the Murphy family. These meetings were designed to explore the meaning of sanity and madness, altered states of consciousness, and humane alternatives to conventional psychiatric treatment for those suffering from extreme states. Participants in addition to Laing included Aldous Huxley, Gregory Bateson, Abraham Maslow, Fritz Perls, John Perry, Stan Grof, Julian Silverman, Alan Watts, and others. All participants shared their respective experiences and thoughts about psychotic states and altered states of consciousness.

It was on this occasion that Laing first shared his groundbreaking work at Kingsley Hall in London (founded in 1965). Laing's experiences at Kingsley Hall helped inspire Julian Silverman to initiate the Agnews Project in San Jose, out of which evolved Loren Mosher's residential treatment center at Soteria House, loosely modeled on Kingsley Hall. A few years later two San Francisco Jungian analysts, John Perry and Howard Levine, initiated a similar project, Diabasis, in San Francisco. Esalen's role in bringing all of these extraordinary thinkers together for the first time was instrumental in creating opportunities for alternative treatment modalities to flourish all over America. What all of these projects shared in common was seeking alternative ways of understanding extreme forms of consciousness that were opposed to the medicalization of madness, so-called "mental illness." This was essential to Laing's perspective and carried over in the Soteria and Diabasis projects. Neither of these projects necessarily saw themselves as "treating mental illness," but rather in helping people who had lost their way come to their senses, in time, but with little or no conventional "treatment" of any kind.

A considerable amount of time has passed since the experimental 1960s and 1970s, but Esalen continues to host workshops and symposia that are now identified with the human potential movement. Though Richard Price passed away decades ago, Michael Murphy lives on (he is in his 90s) and continues to host his research-oriented Center for Theory and Research (CTR), also housed at Esalen. Despite Esalen's current focus on workshops devoted to yoga, dance, spirituality, and the like, I envisioned Esalen as the perfect home for furthering Laing's legacy due to its history of innovating new forms of therapy, including gestalt, encounter groups, and symposia on psychosis and alternative modes of healing.

With this brief history, I now want to turn our attention to the lectures contained in this volume, all of which were given by the authors of this collection of essays. All of them occurred at our annual Esalen Symposia between 2015 and 2023. The purpose of the annual R. D. Laing in the Twenty-First Century symposia was to bring a taste of what it was like to study and train with Laing at his Philadelphia Association in London and to keep alive his legacy as an icon for alternatives to conventional psychiatry. What was most remarkable about participating in Laing's study center was the uncommon informality and Laing's explicitly non-academic approach to exploring the most fundamental aspects of the human condition. In the spirit of Martin Heidegger, Laing brought to bear in his teaching a manner of questioning – and questing – into topics as fundamental as sanity and madness, authenticity, healing, love, altered states, and so on. These meetings were personal in the extreme, and though the thinkers under study were the most important philosophers in the Western canon, you wouldn't get what Laing and his cohorts were saying about them and how relevant they are to healing at any university!

Similarly, at our Esalen symposia we wanted to provide a forum where such ideas could be explored openly and openheartedly, not pedantically. The emphasis was on discussing ideas with everyone present, on an equal basis. These were not messages from “on high.” Our intention was not to pretend that we had all the answers to the questions we posed. The most essential questions about the human condition offer no easy or universal answers. As you will see, even the title of the themes we selected for each symposium are posed as questions.

The symposia were originally organized by myself (M. Guy Thompson), Nita Gage (who also trained as a therapist with Laing), and Fritjof Capra (who engaged with Laing in many inspiring and challenging discussions during the last ten years of Laing's life).

We decided that each year the three of us would select a theme that we believed was close to Laing's heart and about which guided much of Laing's thinking, sourced from publications, non-published materials, and personal conversations with Laing. Though there are usually a dozen speakers or so who participate at each of our symposia, the three of us were assigned the task of explicitly exploring Laing's ideas and articulating them as accessibly as possible. We did not have the space to include every single paper we gave at each symposium in this volume, so what you see here, outlined in the Table of Contents, is a selection of the symposia we believe are most representative of what we were able to accomplish.

I will now go over the themes we decided to include and the papers that each of us presented.

In our inaugural Esalen symposium in July 2015 the theme of our meeting was What Is Sanity? What Is Madness? Our aim was to explore the most seminal question at the heart of nearly every book Laing published, including *The Divided Self*; *Self and Others*; *Sanity, Madness and the Family*; *The Politics of Experience*; *Knots*; *The Politics of the Family*; and so on. In Chapter 1, I explore the healing element of Portland Road, the post-Kingsley Hall residential healing residence that I lived in for four years in the 1970s. In Chapter 2, Douglas Kirsner reviews the gist of Laing's views on sanity and madness from both published and unpublished books and lectures given by Laing. In Chapter 3, Fritjof Capra explores contemporary examples of everyday madness that often go unnoticed because they are so common. (Everyday madness was a favorite theme of Laing's.)

In 2016, the theme of our symposium was What Is Therapeutic? In Chapter 4, I chose to explore the nature of sympathy and its relation to empathy in the therapeutic process, a favorite theme of Laing's that was inspired by his reading of Max Scheler's philosophical work, *The Nature of Sympathy* (1954). Next, In Chapter 5, Douglas Kirsner explores Laing's surprisingly scant publications as well as unpublished lectures on this topic. And finally, in Chapter 6, Fritjof Capra chose to explore the relation between science and spirituality, focusing on the therapeutic element of spirituality.

In 2017, the theme of our symposium was What Are Altered States? Though this term is often associated with psychedelic drugs, such as LSD, we wanted to address the concept in its widest application, including mindfulness, meditation, yoga, extraordinary feeling states, and the like. In Chapter 7, Fritjof Capra explores the concept of reality in its scientific, spiritual, and philosophical aspects. In Chapter 8, I chose to explore how falling in love manifests a very special example of altered states, in this case initiated by emotions. In Chapter 9, Douglas Kirsner explored Laing's use of LSD in a therapeutic context at Kingsley Hall, drawing on an unpublished lecture that Laing gave at the William Alanson White Institute in New York.

In 2018, we turned our attention to the seminal question, What Is Love?, a critical theme in all of Laing's writings. In Chapter 10, I chose to explore the relation between eros and agapé, the erotic and spiritual dimensions of love, initiated by the Greeks (Eros and Agapé were deities in Greek folklore). Whereas eros comes to us primarily from Plato's dialogue, *The Symposium*, and influenced both Sigmund Freud's and Laing's respective applications of erotic love to their understanding of madness, agapé became a central element in Christianity, in both Catholic and Protestant editions. Next, in Chapter 11, Fritjof Capra focuses on the biology of love, grounded in life's pervasive tendency to interconnect and interrelate. Finally, in Chapter 12, Douglas Kirsner reviews Laing's many references to love in both his published work and unpublished lectures.

In 2019, our theme was What Is Authenticity? Next to sanity and madness, there is likely no other theme closer to Laing's heart than the explicitly existential

and philosophical exploration of the importance of honesty in our human relationships, both in our relations with others and with ourselves. In Chapter 13, Douglas Kirsner reviews Laing's many references to the concept of authenticity in both published work and unpublished lectures, manifested primarily in Laing's notion of true and false self-phenomena, a preoccupation Laing shared with D. W. Winnicott, the renowned British psychoanalyst who was also Laing's supervisor in his psychoanalytic training in London. In Chapter 14, I chose to explore the dark side of Laing's personal relationship with authenticity, supposedly due to the controversial nature of Laing's way of seizing on every opportunity in his relationships with friends, students, and confidants to demonstrate aspects of how authenticity shows up in everyday life; not always to their pleasure! Finally, in Chapter 15, Fritjof Capra explores the relationship between authenticity and community, drawing heavily from Capra's many publications on a new systemic understanding of life which has emerged at the forefront of science over the past 30 years.

Skipping ahead to 2023, the theme of our annual symposium that year was What Is Healing? We believed it was fitting to open our selection of themes in this volume with exploring sanity and madness and to close with what is entailed in healing. I open with an exploration of the etymology of the word "heal," which is cognate with the word "sane," or sanity, and argue that healing and sanity come from similar roots but in a non-medicalized context. Next, in Chapter 17, Fritjof Capra explores the concept of a "systems view of health," examining in particular the relation between health and regeneration, a principal aspect of maintaining healthy living. And finally, in Chapter 18, our final chapter, Douglas Kirsner explores Laing's thoughts about the human condition, drawing primarily on a seminal interview that Kirsner conducted with Laing in 1980, as well as Laing's crucial relationship with the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, perhaps the most famous of all the existential philosophers.

What all these lectures have in common is that they were written by three thinkers who knew Laing personally and who were profoundly influenced by both his person and his ideas. In this, these lectures and the book they contain are unique. They are based on the premise that only those who knew Laing, both personally and professionally, truly understood him and his unique meditation on the human condition. We hope that you will enjoy reading them as much as we have enjoyed sharing our explorations of Laing's legacy over the past ten years. It has been a work of love for all of us, and we sincerely hope that this decade of devoting ourselves to the question who was R. D. Laing will bear fruit.

M. Guy Thompson, PhD

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I

What Is Sanity? What
Is Madness?



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Sanity and Friendship

The Therapeutic Feature of Communal Living

M. Guy Thompson, PhD

In the early 1970s I became acquainted with the work of R. D. Laing, and in 1973 I decided to relocate from California to London to work with him. I thought I would stay there a year and then return to my graduate studies in San Francisco. Instead I stayed for seven years, seven remarkable years that changed my life. During that time I trained as a psychoanalyst, and for four of those years I lived in one of Laing's post-Kingsley Hall communities, Portland Road. While there, I met my future wife, and our two sons were born in London before we eventually returned to the United States.

Laing had become internationally famous for his radical experiment with alternative ways of treating schizophrenia. In fact, in 1973, the year I went to work with him, Laing was the most famous psychiatrist in the world. He was brilliant and charismatic and the prolific author of numerous best-selling works, including *The Divided Self* (1960[1969]) and *The Politics of Experience* (1967). In 1965 Laing established Kingsley Hall, a residential household for people who wanted an alternative to mental hospitals. There were no paid staff, and no one had an assigned role, yet many therapists also lived there, including Laing. It was, as he put it, a "melting pot where preconceptions were melted down in the nitty-gritty of living together." Laing obviously had a way with words!

As no formal treatment was provided for the residents living there, many of whom had been diagnosed as schizophrenic when previously in hospital, the question I want to pose here is: What was the healing or therapeutic agent of living in such a community if no ostensible treatment was provided? If we decide to abandon psychiatric nomenclature and the very concept of "treatment," even group therapy, then how can healing ostensibly occur? My talk will make reference to both Kingsley Hall and Portland Road – Kingsley Hall because that is where Laing conceived this model, and Portland Road because that is the community I was involved with and the one that I believe perfected this approach.

Part I

Both Kingsley Hall and Portland Road were informed by Laing's depiction of the schizoid personality, as illustrated in *The Divided Self* as a distinctive form of