

## On est and the Human Potential Movement

Robert S. Griffin

[www.robertsgriffin.com](http://www.robertsgriffin.com)

A few weeks ago, I watched a DVD from Netflix of a 2007 documentary called "Transformation: The Life and Legacy of Werner Erhard." Werner Erhard (born Jack Rosenberg) had his fifteen minutes of fame (and infamy--is this guy a huckster, a con man?) back in the 1970s as a personal-growth mogul. In the early 1980s personal scandals involving him were reported in a "60 Minutes" segment and Erhard dropped out of sight. It turns out, according to the documentary, that he had gone to live in Europe and all these years later is alive and well in his mid-seventies doing pretty much the same kind of work he was doing back when he was young and in the limelight.

Werner Erhard's prominence was linked to a self-improvement training program he devised in the early 1970s called est (lower case). Erhard personally conducted est in the beginning and less frequently later on. It is commonly assumed that est stood for Erhard Seminars Training, but then again est is Latin for "it is" and it is a suffix for the most--highest, happiest. As far as I know, Erhard never clarified where the est title came from.

Est drew on ideas and practices Erhard had picked up here and there, including from Dale Carnegie courses, Zen Buddhism, Scientology, and his experiences as a Mind Dynamics seminar instructor. Mind Dynamics, developed by Alexander Everett, was a personal improvement program that operated over the span of two weekends--est followed that pattern. With est, two hundred or so people would pay \$250 each to congregate in a hotel meeting room in Los Angeles or Boston or Philadelphia, some large city, in the hope that by the end of the second weekend they would "get it": come to understand what's really going on with human beings, and therefore with them. The idea was that that knowledge, enlightenment, could be the basis for making their lives work. That prospect had great appeal, because, as the est training pointed out to them and which the participants already knew or they wouldn't have taken the training in the first place, their lives weren't working now.<sup>1</sup>

One trainer would lead the often confrontational and emotional process for the first weekend and another the second.

"Body catchers," barf bags at hand, were posted around the room, and it took a doctor's note to be allowed to go to the bathroom apart from the very infrequent scheduled toilet breaks. The trainer, Erhard or whoever it was--Erhard personally selected and trained all the trainers--would bluntly inform the seminar participants early the first Saturday that they "don't know your asses from a hole in the ground," but that if they kept their soles (shoe soles) in the room and took what they got, by the end of the time they would, indeed, get it, the big secret that would unlock life's mysteries and provide the basis for making their lives work.

Word got around that most people, or practically everybody, or everybody, somewhere in there, at least in their own estimations, did in fact get it, and that they felt great about that and personally transformed, and that they were living way better now than before. They felt themselves now, the person they truly are, and not the cardboard cutout going through the motions of living they had been before. People close to them were testifying that something indeed remarkable was going on with these people. Several formal studies seemed to bear all this out.<sup>2</sup> It wasn't long before tens of thousands of people were lining up, \$250 in hand, to take est.

Including me. This was in Los Angeles, and it was 1979. Erhard himself didn't lead my training, and--I don't know what this means, if anything--I have no recollection at all, zero, as to who did, no picture in my mind of either trainer. Two or three assistants, I don't remember the exact number, and again, I have no image in head of what they looked like, buzzed around the big hotel meeting room putting microphones in front of participants that had raised their hands to speak and handling any emergencies, people coming unglued, rebelling, walking out, and the like. The participants' offerings were about anything that was on their minds they wanted to share: critiques of the training itself (there was a lot of this early on), personal problems and secrets and hopes and fears, traumatic childhood experiences, anything. Not knowing what was going to come out of the mouth of the person just handed the microphone and the anticipation around that in itself helped keep interest up through the two weekends.

The trainer fielded participants' sharings in a way that got across the est teachings. Typically, an exchange between a participant and the trainer would go on for five minutes or so, and then the participant would receive applause from the other

participants and sit down. I never said a word in the two weekends, which was my public style in those years and, to just about that same extent, a tick less, still is. In my mind, and so I was taught from my earliest years forward, it's not my place to be center stage, ever. Anonymity is my lot in life. Whether anyone ever reads these words, writing them for public dissemination is a singular personal accomplishment in my eyes. If you have gotten the word that you are to spend your time over in the corner eating take-out and staying silent, I hope my achievement very late in life, minor as it is in the grand scheme of things but so incredibly important to me, will inspire you to come to the center of the room and eat gourmet and sing your song, even if you do it hesitantly and don't really pull it off very well. It's important to take pride in any movement forward in one's life, no matter how small, and to view it as evidence of what life could be like and, the best you can manage it, will be like in the future if you take one small step today and another tomorrow, and another the next day and the next and the next.

Along with the participant exchanges with the trainer were presentations by the trainer on the est theory using a blackboard and chalk--they reminded me of college lectures. Interspersed were activities, some of them exotic. One I remember after all this time involved participants lying on the floor with their eyes closed imagining they were very afraid of everyone in the room and everyone was equally afraid of them.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the est experience, did I get it? After doing a fair amount of thinking these past weeks prompted by the documentary on Erhard, if the answer has to be yes or no, one or the other, I'd say, yes, I got it. I missed some of the nuances and permutations I assume other participants picked up, but at a total, organic, physically felt, pre-articulate level the est message did get through to me. I remember being on a high for a couple of weeks following the training. I felt different, new, free, more myself, I sensed greater possibilities than before, I was lighter, somehow a weight was off my back. I don't remember being able to connect all that with anything particular in the est weekends, but that was the outcome, however it happened. And, so it seems, it has lasted. It's been buried beneath a lot of other inner, personal realities, but it's always been there, and it's here now, I'm better for taking est, and this was over thirty years ago. Whoever Werner Erhard really was, whatever he really did, good and bad, he made a positive and lasting difference in my

life. Later on in this writing, and for the first time, I'll attempt to put that difference into words, give it articulate meaning.

The est seminar was part of my fifteen-year encounter with what came to be known as the human potential movement, which rose to prominence in the 1960s and '70s and has since faded from the scene. The central purpose of this web site thought is to offer that there was something important and, at least potentially, valuable going on in this movement--for our time, not just back then, it has more than historical significance--and to invite you to look into it, or some aspects of it, and to say that I'm willing to give you some help with that.

I was a doctoral student during those years and beginning my career as a university professor in education. Prior to that I had been a secondary school teacher for five years. The doctoral studies were at the University of Minnesota, where I worked as an instructor while doing my course work and dissertation. Then, after a year as a visiting professor at Morris branch of the University of Minnesota, it was the University of Vermont, where I was hired as an assistant professor in 1974.

During this period, I was breaking out of the most thoughtless and pointless of existences, and my encounters with the human potential movement--those writings and people and experiences--was the biggest part of that process of personal liberation. I can't remember what pointed me in this direction; certainly none of my professors and or my fellow graduate students had the least interest in it. I wrote my dissertation, completed in 1973, in this area to the raised eyebrows and quizzical head-scratching of my doctoral advisor, Dr. William Gardner, who nevertheless was most supportive. I am so grateful now to Bill for his kindness and acceptance and support back then, and I wish I'd known to thank him at the time. I've lost touch with him. I don't even know if he is alive. He'd be very old now; I'm very old now. To this day, I draw on that doctoral study. It has informed my work, and my life generally, for almost forty years.

Names I associate with the human potential movement include, prominently, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Alan Watts, Fritz Perls, Michael Murphy, and George Leonard. (Erhard was more of an entrepreneur, a popularizer. Among his many ventures before he started est, he had sold child development materials for Parents

Magazine.) They came from varied professional backgrounds: Maslow, Rogers, and Perls were psychologists; Watts wrote about Zen Buddhism; Murphy founded the Esalen Institute, a center for experimentation with approaches to self-transformation; and Leonard was a journalist and aikido instructor. I provide a list of some of their writings in an endnote.<sup>4</sup> You can also Google them, check Amazon for their other writings, most of which are available inexpensively used, and/or contact me and I'll help any way I can.

What tied these individuals together was their conviction that human beings have enormous untapped possibilities. We can be way better than we are and life can be way better than it is, and that applies even to those who by conventional standards are physically healthy, personally well adjusted and content, and materially well off. We don't set our sights high enough, they insisted; that's our big problem. While the focus in the human potential movement tended to be on one person at a time, there was the tacit belief, sometimes explicit, that individual self-realization would be the foundation of positive social transformation.

I traveled from Minnesota to California twice during this period of my engagement with the human potential movement. The first trip, in the summer of 1971, was to La Jolla, a suburb of San Diego, to study with Carl Rogers, who among those associated with this movement had the biggest impact on me. After a distinguished academic career at Ohio State University, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of Chicago, Rogers, then sixty-eight, had become associated with the Center for the Study of the Person in La Jolla. I was impressed with Rogers' ideas about personal change and helping relationships generally, and particularly, given my focus on education, with his writings on teaching. Rogers' 1969 book, *Freedom to Learn*, has been the single most influential book in the whole of my career in the field of education. (See footnote 4.) While Rogers' reputation was as a psychologist and therapist, he had a degree from Columbia University's Teachers College and was very interested and informed about education. I felt privileged to discuss education with him during my time in La Jolla.

While in La Jolla, I participated in an encounter group, as it was called, and went through a training program to lead encounter groups and co-lead one. The encounter group, which was based on Rogers' ideas, involved twenty or so strangers who would spend a weekend together in a smallish room and let it fly and see what

happened. Quite the eye-opener for me: "Oh, *this* is who people really are beneath the façade of their self-assured public personae!" I thought to myself. I'd always believed people's acts, as it were. For the first time, I saw their self-doubts and fears and vulnerabilities. I remember thinking: "I've got it together more than these people, what am I feeling less about? I don't need to defer to these kinds of people. I'm smarter, more capable, and mentally healthier than anybody in this room. Where did I get that idea that I'm lower on the totem pole than people like this (middle class types--I'm from a low income background) and am supposed to take a back seat to them? Those days are over." I was in my late twenties at this time, and this lesson, this realization--I'm nobody's inferior--has stuck with me. I must say that it took me a long, long time, many years, to actually live in alignment with that understanding, but that was the beginning of a very healthy process that has continued to this day. The encounter group experience, which as far as I know doesn't exist any longer, contributed enormously to my self-development.

I was highly impressed with Rogers personally--he was a strong, grounded, kind man. He was the first public figure I'd ever been around, and I remember thinking, or better, feeling, it wasn't totally articulate, "Hey, Rogers is like me! He and I aren't in completely different realms of existence. He's a human being, just I am. He is flawed, just as I am. He's still OK for all his flaws, and I'm still OK for all of mine. I don't have to be perfect to live on this planet with dignity and respect." I had spent the first three decades of my life thinking I was nobody and bad. This contact with greatness--Rogers was a major figure on a Freud-Jung scale--only to realize that we're all in it together, all of us human beings, nobody is different in kind from everybody else, and the glimmer of the realization that I'm in the mix along with the rest of humankind, was, I realize now, a very significant, and very positive, formative experience for me.

After my return to the Minnesota from La Jolla, I conceptualized my doctoral dissertation grounded in the theoretical formulations of University of Chicago psychology professor Eugene Gendlin, who had keyed off of Rogers' work. I had learned about Gendlin in La Jolla. Gendlin was concerned with the way an individual gives personal meaning to external and internal, or subjective,

phenomena. He explored the interplay between language and one's kinesthetic, organic, physically felt, internal or subjective reality--another way to put it, one's inner flow of experience, one's literal feeling, or sense, of being alive at a particular moment in time. Gendlin wrote about a process of self-exploration he called experiential focusing. My dissertation applied Gendlin's ideas to my field of study, education. Gendlin was very helpful to me when I traveled to Chicago to discuss his ideas with him. I recommend a consideration of Gendlin's writing to anyone interested in the inner workings of human beings, including themselves.<sup>5</sup>

I never felt confident enough in the dissertation to try to publish anything based on it. However, time and again, year after year, that investigation and what resulted from it has helped me make sense of things and given me direction both professionally and personally. That dissertation permeates this web site. However it happened, I'm so grateful I wrote my dissertation on this topic rather than followed Dr. Gardner's so-well-intended advice, "Couldn't you maybe do the dissertation on political socialization or something like that?" When I, in my diverted-eyes way, softly said no, he said "OK." That is what I needed to hear.

When I was hired as an assistant professor of education at the University of Vermont in 1974, I began the tenure process that ultimately resulted in becoming a tenured full professor, and here I am just down the hall from the office I shared that first year with Professor Charles Letteri thirty-seven years later. Charley couldn't have been brighter, or kinder to me--another of the many people with whom I've lost contact and to whom I failed to thank at the time.

I spent my first sabbatical leave from the university work, the 1979-1980 academic year, in California, the first months in Los Angeles and then to the San Francisco area, to continue my explorations of the human potential movement. I lived in a house in central Los Angeles, where I spent most of the year, with five or six people, none of whom I remember. It was owned by a psychotherapist prominent in this general area, who lived in the house, although I can't picture him or recall his name. Living there was another eye-opening experience. The house, this therapist, who worked with both individuals and groups, attracted people from near and far testing the boundaries with therapies, drugs, sex, you

name it. It hit me that there are people who really push against the limits of human existence.

A Los Angeles contact that had a significant positive impact on me was a woman I remember well named Anastas Harris, who at the time was working with an educational concept she called holistic education. Anastas, yet another person I've lost touch with, was a very talented, committed, sincere, warm, kind, and supportive person, who for whatever reason reached out to me. I don't think she realized she was doing it, but she was a great teacher to me, and she affirmed me personally and professionally.

One of Anastas' colleagues at the time was Jack Canfield, whose background had been in education--again, this was late 1979-early 1980. Canfield at the time was conducting personal growth workshops for someone who went by the name of John-Roger, one of which I participated in and found very useful. Canfield, whom I only met briefly, went on to singular success as the co-creator of the "chicken soup" inspirational books. He recently wrote a self-help book I recommend called *The Success Principles: How to Get from Where You Are to Where You Want to Go*.<sup>6</sup> Anastas published a journal at the time to which both Canfield and I contributed articles, which included photographs of us. Just now, I looked through it and can't believe that either Canfield or I ever looked that young.

Big in Los Angeles at that time were the theories and writings of a couple of Ph.Ds named John Grinder and Richard Bandler, who devised an approach to dealing with unwanted behavioral patterns called Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP).<sup>7</sup> The television infomercial personality Anthony Robbins is a high school graduate with no formal credentials that I know about and primarily a salesman, and he has had some personal problems lately, but nevertheless he has done a superb job of popularizing NLP principles along with a lot of other things going on in the human potential movement in those years. His 1991 book, *Awake the Giant Within*, is as good a self-help book as I know about, and at this writing you can get a used copy for a penny plus postage from Amazon.<sup>8</sup>

In about February of 1980, I traveled to Marin County just north of San Francisco to be around George Leonard, whose books I had read and found most impressive (see footnote 4). At the time, Leonard was president of the Association for Humanistic Psychology and headed the Esalen Institute in the Big Sur area of California (I

never went there). I believe Leonard coined the term human potential movement. As it turned out, my contact with Leonard was limited. I took some aikido classes at the martial arts center he operated, went to a few of his presentations, spoke to him briefly, and played softball with him and his followers on Sundays. My closest contacts during that period were with two young Leonard devotees, the sport psychologist Joel Kirsch and his wife Susan--wonderful people, so gracious and kind to me. (This writing is bringing to mind the many people who reached out to me in those years. It also underscores the contrast between my many connections back then and my isolation now.) I have stayed in contact with the Kirsches over the years since.

Leonard, who died in 2010, was a Georgia native with a Southern patrician manner and could be stand-offish and somewhat grand, but nevertheless his compassion and concern and validation of me came through to me even though my time with him wasn't extensive, and it really mattered to me back then. Just being recognized by name by someone of this prominence and accomplishment was affirming to me: "Someone of this caliber finds it worth his time to attend to me." As it did with Rogers, being around Leonard and seeing what he did day to day led me to conclude: "I can operate at this level."

Leonard emphasized the role of the body and movement in personal transformation. I remember being amazed at his aikido demonstrations at his martial arts center. The concern for how the body and movement and sport can contribute to overall development has been part of my personal and professional life since those years. Some examples: I helped the Kirsches conceptualize the PASS program, which helps high school athletes do better in school.<sup>9</sup> This orientation shows up extensively in my book on sports and kids.<sup>10</sup> It's all over this web site. One example, the thought "On Yukio Mishima." This orientation is also strongly reflected in the university course I instruct on sport and society.

Leonard's daughter Mimi was married at the time to Jerry Rubin, who gained fame in those years a political radical. Among his many activities, Rubin was a founding member of the Youth International Party, or Yippies, and was one of eight defendants known as the Chicago Eight tried for conspiracy and incitement to riot in connection with the anti-war protests at the 1968 Democratic convention. It wasn't Rubin's political activities that interested me

at the time but rather his published accounts of his development into the person he was, how that happened. He, as did I, came from modest roots, and here he was, regardless of what one thinks about his politics and strategies, front and center in American life at the time. I was especially taken with his book *Growing Up at Thirty-Seven*, which I had read before I went to California the second time.<sup>11</sup>

While I was in Marin County I attended a small workshop, around the topic of sexuality that Rubin and Mimi led. Mimi was the most beautiful person I had ever seen in person and, speaking of sexuality, the sexiest human being I'd ever been around. Rubin was delightfully bright and human and available and funny and free. As usual, I didn't say anything during the workshop, but I remember thinking, "These people are really alive! It's possible to live at this level of, well, just being alive. And I'm picking up that sex can be far better than what I've experienced, a *really* good time." Soon after the workshop, I read and profited from Jerry and Mimi's book on sexuality, *The War Between the Sheets*.<sup>12</sup>

You should be able to get all these books I'm mentioning used at Amazon and from libraries. If a library doesn't have something, they can get it for you through interlibrary loan. You can Google any of these people and organizations, and if they are still alive, some aren't, contact them. I sincerely believe positive outcomes could result from it personally for you, and these explorations could be the bases for papers or articles or theses or dissertations, that sort of thing. This is really old material, and it's been dropped down the intellectual memory hole and forgotten, but I think it speaks to our individual lives and this time in our history. I'll be of any help I can in your investigations if you contact me through this site.

Back to est. I'll use it as a case study to give you a feel of the human potential movement. Included will be what I got out of the training. This will be the first time I've put that into words.

Part of the mythology of Werner Erhard was a life-transforming revelation he had in March of 1971 driving to work one day between his home in Corte Madera north of San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge. As his biographer put it, "The man in the car on the freeway was transformed: the individual who emerged from the Mustang in San Francisco a half hour later was a

different kind of being. Werner had had an extraordinary experience, and found what he had been searching for, in one discipline after another, for eight years."<sup>13</sup> This is a portion of what Erhard recounted to his biographer about that time:

What happened had no form. It was timeless, unbounded, ineffable, beyond language. There were no words attached to it, no emotions, no attitudes, no bodily sensations. What came from it, of course, formed itself into feelings and emotions and words, and finally into an altered process of life itself. But that is like saying that the hole in the sand looks like the stick that you made the hole with. Holes in the sand and sticks are worlds apart. To put what happened into language would be like trying to describe a stick by telling you about the hole in the sand.

Part of it was the realization that I knew nothing. I was aghast at that. For I had spent most of my life trying to learn things. I was sure that there was some one thing I didn't know, and that if I could find it out, I would be all right. I was sure that there was a secret, and I was determined to find it.

Then this happened—and I realized that I knew nothing. I realized that everything I knew was skewed toward some end. I saw that the fundamental skew of all knowledge, and to unenlightened mind, is survival, or, as I put it, success. All my knowledge up to then had been skewed toward success, toward making it, toward self-realization, toward all the goals, from material to mystical.

In the next instant—after I realized I knew nothing—I realized I knew everything. All the things I had ever heard, and read, and all those hours of practice, suddenly fell into place. It was all so stupidly, blindingly simple that I could not believe it. I saw that there were no hidden meanings, that everything was just the way that it is, and that I was already all right. All that knowledge that I had amassed just obscured the simplicity, the truth, the suchness, the thusness of it all.

I saw that everything was going to be all right. It was all right; it always had been all right; it always would be all right—no matter what happened. I didn't just think this—suddenly I *knew* it. Not only was I no longer concerned about success, I was no longer concerned about achieving satisfaction. *I was satisfied.* I was no longer concerned with my reputation. I was concerned only with the truth.

I realized that I was not my emotions or thoughts. I was not my ideas, my intellect, my perceptions, my beliefs. I was not what I accomplished or achieved. Or hadn't achieved. I was not what I had done right, or what I had done wrong. I was not what I had been labeled, by myself or others. All these identifications cut me off from experience, from living. I was none of these.

I was simply the space, the creator, the source of all that stuff. I experienced Self as Self in a direct and unmediated way. I *became* Self. Suddenly I held all that information, the content, in my life in a new way, from a new mode, a new context. I knew it from my experience and not from having learned it. It was an unmistakable recognition that I was, am, and always will be the source of my experience.

Experience is simply evidence that I am here. It is not who I am. I am. *I am*. Before the transformation, I could only recognize myself by seeing the movie [of my life]. Now I saw that I am prior to, or transcendent to, all that. I no longer thought of myself as the person who did all that stuff. I was no longer the one who had all those experiences I had as a kid. I was not identified by my past and current identity. All identities are false. I saw that everything is just the way it is, and the way it isn't. I saw that I was whole and complete as I was. I found my true Self. I had reached the end. It was all over for Werner Erhard.<sup>14</sup>

One major consequence of this experience for Erhard was the realization that he needed to "clean up," as he put it, his wanting others to be different from the way they are. "When you don't have any real identity of your own," he said, "when you don't know who you really are, you will fault the identity of others. You won't grant beingness to others as they are."<sup>15</sup> A second major consequence, he realized he wanted to share what had happened to him, what he had become, with others, and the result was the est program.

What did I get out of est? After reflecting on what happened to me way be then and what I became and what happened afterward, the five major outcomes are as follows. Especially after thinking through these outcomes these past few weeks, I'm convinced they have been crucially important to me in the way I have lived my life.

- *One: Reality is what it is, and I need to connect with it.*

What is, is, and what isn't isn't. Reality isn't what I think something is. Or what I or anybody else calls it. Or what it used to be. Or what I'd like it to be or hope it is or think it ought to be. And it isn't what it will be. Or what somebody tells me it is. Or what my ideology or philosophy or belief system says it is. It isn't my or someone else's assessment of its merits. It isn't what will get me along better if I believe it is. It isn't my, or anybody's, prediction of what it will become. It's not what a story or narrative says it is. It is simply whatever it is right now, this instant. And, the corollary: it's not every other thing. Reality is what it actually is, and life is going to go better for me in the long run (sometimes it works in the short run if I con myself) if I discern as objectively as I can what is real at this moment in time and acknowledge and accept that and go from there informed by that.

As a practical matter, when I confront the fact that the world is as it is regardless of what I or anyone thinks it is or wants it to be, I experience peacefulness, tranquility: it's OK, I'm OK. It results in a sense of personal freedom and possibility: I'm not tied the past. I'm not tethered to it. I don't have to keep some story or self-definition going. I don't have to fix anybody or turn anything around or manage anything. I don't need anybody's acknowledgment or approval or permission. Each moment is new. I can't change this moment--things are as they are in this instant of time--and I can't change all the moments that have gone before. But I can change the moments coming up. Let's see, what do I want to do with them? I don't *have* to do anything with them, but I can if I choose. I'm free. And really, no matter what the world has told me and no matter what I have done, I was just fine as I was and I'm just fine as I am and I'll always be fine. I'm all right, really. Really.

- *Two: Find my Self and live from there.*

The key to this one is defining what Self means in this context.

Right now, ask yourself: Who is looking at the words on this computer screen (or page, whatever it is)? Experience the answer to your question; feel it, live with it. It's a consciousness, an awareness, a buzz of aliveness. It's *you*.

Now imagine yourself at ten years old looking in a mirror; put yourself there. Again ask: Who is looking into the mirror? and again

experience the answer. It's you again. And it is the *very same you* that is looking at the words on this screen or page.

That you, that consciousness, now and back when you were ten, is your Self. Everything else about you has changed, but that core you, Self, is the same now as it was then. You certainly don't look the same now as you did when you were ten. You aren't wearing the same clothes. You know different things. Your thoughts are different. You aren't doing the same things with the same people. You probably aren't living in the same place. You don't feel the same way: you might be sad now when you were happy then or the reverse, confident now and self-doubting then or the reverse, scared then and unafraid now or the reverse, and so on. Yet it's still you, and it will always be you--ten years from now, twenty, thirty--until the day you die. The Self--the person looking out at the world and walking down the street--is the one constant in our lives.

A message I took away from est is the need to separate out my Self from everything else about me: my body, my physical sensations, my mind, my thoughts and ideas and the pictures in my head and my memories and plans and hopes and fears, my activities and possessions and status in the world and relationships, the story, the narrative, and conceptions I have used to make sense of my life and where I fit in the scheme of things--all of those other components of my being. The challenge is to experience myself, my Self, and to *be* my Self, each moment, fully, completely. Another way to say it, I need to get off automatic pilot and become awake, alive, present, here and now . . . and now, and now, and now . . .

The message of est to me was an invitation to is put my Self in charge of my life. All the rest of me works for my Self: my rational mind, my body, my feelings, my memories, my ideas about this and that, my concepts of what is and isn't a good idea, all of it. They give me data to work with. I (my Self) direct and nurture, enhance, these components (nutrition, exercise, study, enhancing experiences and people, etc.) so that they are able to give me the best data possible. But, the key point: I--Self--make the call of what I will do now and later today and tomorrow and next month and next year. I, Self, direct my life. My habits and impulses and the story I have been playing out, what happened in the past, what I have been conditioned to think and do, doesn't direct my life. The current situation, expectations, what other people believe and do with

reference to me, don't direct my life. I'm in charge; my Self has the reins. If I don't take charge I have nobody and nothing to hold responsible for that but myself. I am what I am, now. I am valuable just as I am. I am not omniscient or omnipotent, but I am most certainly volitional. And what I do is what I do. I am until I am not. I *am*.

- *Three: I create my experience.*

To get at this point, I need to define experience. Experience has two meanings.

One is what we did: what is your work experience. I worked in sales and then I opened up a clothing store, etc.

The other refers to what is happening or has happened with our being in reference to something: what is, or was, your experience? You are/were happy or sad, or uplifted or deflated; this or that idea is/was running through your head, that sort of thing.

It is the second meaning of experience--what is going on with someone at a particular time--that is the referent in this context.

The est message is that something happened, and it was whatever it was; what was, was. What I made of it, my experience of it, the meaning I gave it, the emotions that I felt in conjunction with it, the thoughts that ran through my head in response to it, all of that, *I did that*.

She said she'd be here at 4:00 and it's now 4:45 and I'm in a stew, my heart's pounding, bad thoughts are racing through my head, I'm all upset. Of course I'm experiencing all this churning, I tell myself. She said she'd be here and she isn't here! What else could I expect to be going through? It's her fault. She's responsible for it.

The est message, and indeed it is counterintuitive, is that actually I created the whole thing. Not only did I create the stewing and fuming in response to her being late, I created the circumstance that led up to me standing on a street corner waiting for her in the first place. I set the whole thing up. I'm not a helpless victim of circumstances. I produced the whole business. And if I'd calm down and look at the situation carefully, I'd see how I did that.

Est blows a hole in the immensely compelling story I tell myself about why things are as they are with me and how things will only be better when *they* see the light and change their ways or apologize or be nice to me, whatever it is. My wellbeing is in their

hands. According to est, it will be better for me when I (my Self) take responsibility for enlisting my rational mind in figuring out what is going on in my life--what exactly the *is* is--including how I created that circumstance and how I created my experience in light of it. And then go forward informed by that reality.

- *Four: I'm responsible for making my life work.*

If I'm going to make my life work--operate well, function as it ought to, realize its possibilities--I'm going to be the one that does it. I can't wait around for fate or a winning lottery ticket or the cavalry to ride in and rescue me. *It* isn't going to do it; *they* aren't going to do; *she* isn't going to do it. I'm the one that has to do it. And I have to take on that job with my circumstance as it is and with me as I am. Whether I realize it or not, I have created the life I have that works as well as it does. I start there--or better, I continue from there.

What will it look like when my life works? Back to the first insight: it will look like what it looks like. And, here's where things get a bit complicated: a life that works for me might well be very different from what a life that works for someone else. It would be a lot easier if there were a formula for lives that work, but there isn't one. To illustrate my point, a recent book on the sixteenth century essayist Michel Montaigne entitled *How to Live* quoted an Austrian writer by the name of Stefan Zweig who had extracted general rules for living from Montaigne's essays:

Be free from vanity and pride.

Be free from belief, disbelief, convictions, and parties.

Be free from habit.

Be free from ambition and greed.

Be free from family and surroundings.

Be free from fanaticism.

Be free from fate; be master of your own life.

Be free from death; life depends on the will of others, but death on our own will.<sup>16</sup>

On first glance, those sounded good to me, but as I thought about them it struck me that you could make a good case for the opposite of every one of them. For some people, what they need to make their lives work in *more* vanity and pride, not less. Vanity

and pride can be an spur to taking yourself seriously, setting higher standards, demanding more of life, shooting higher. And so on down the list: what someone may in fact need are strong beliefs, higher ambition, connection to family and place, and intense commitments, subordination and service to others; and to live in constant touch with the reality of death and our helplessness in the face of it, which ironically can be personally liberating. There is even the question of whether Montaigne's list worked for Montaigne. Just because Zweig said it didn't mean it really did, and perhaps Zweig misinterpreted Montaigne. Montaigne's life worked if it worked, that's all we can say definitively. And your and my life will work if they work. And I have faith that you and I will know whether our lives work if they do. We'll experience it with a level of certainty that is good enough for me.

The British literary critic Terry Eagleton wrote a book called *The Meaning of Life*.<sup>17</sup> My take on where Eagleton ended up is that life is about loving and being loved and self-expression and happiness. Here again, that sounded good, even unimpeachable. But as I thought about it, it struck me that these elements may not characterize me when my life works, and they may characterize you when yours does. Even more, they may be impossible for us. As a matter of fact, love may not be out there as a possibility in our world. What is, is. There may be nobody to love us and nobody for us to love. Mutual love may simply not be in the cards for us. And self-expression may not be possible, won't happen no matter what. And it may not be our lot to be happy, to experience a pervasive satisfaction and gratification with how our lives are going. If we are hooked to all of that having to be there for our lives to work, we doom ourselves to failure if the world of reality--the one we have to live in; we don't live in the world of Eagleton's language--doesn't contain that possibility.

Personally, I have chosen to value the Eagleton list--love, self-expression, and happiness--while at the same time not being dogmatically wedded to it. Because if I am, I may sell my soul to achieve it. Or I may achieve it and find that, really, as good as it feels at times and as good as it looks from the outside, it isn't a life that works for me, not really. Perhaps my list will be honor, integrity, decency, diligence, service, or some other qualities that don't come to mind at the moment. All I can do is assume responsibility for making my life work and take the next step in that

direction the best I know how, today, tonight, tomorrow, this month, this year, with the faith that if I attain it, and I may not, my life isn't a scripted film with the ending preordained, I will know it. It will be right, true, yes, and on my deathbed I will feel gratification and peace.

- *Five: I need to keep agreements with myself.*

A powerful message of est that came through to me is there is one big rule I have to play by if my life going to work: if I tell myself I am going to do something, I have to stick with that agreement. Period. *Period.* No excuses. No reasons. No explanations. No cop-outs. No procrastination. I have to be able to count on myself to keep the agreements I have made with myself, no matter what. *No matter what.* I may not get the results I want or expect when I do what I told myself I would do; I'm not all-knowing and all-powerful. But dammit, I can take the action I told myself I would. Est said to me that indeed I may die without my life ever working; I'll write that story in the time I have left to me on this earth. But my life is *certain* not to work if I don't keep agreements with myself.

It's 4:38 p.m. on a Thursday in August and I just have a bit more to do and I'm done with this writing. I told myself that I wasn't going to spend from 8:00 to 10:00 tonight channel surfing cable news shows and ballgames. In the grand scheme of things, whether I keep that agreement with myself is of no significance. What I have to realize, however, is that to my life, it has great significance. Seemingly little things add up to big things. It's important to see it all as big. Everything contributes to a life that works or a life that doesn't work. What I have for dinner is big. Whether I was responsible to writing this paragraph the best I can is big. Whether I clean the kitchen counter as I told myself this morning I would is big. Whether I carefully check out bike possibilities at Target for my daughter's birthday present on the way home as I told myself I would is big. It's not big to you, and shouldn't be big to you; you have your own agreements to keep. But I have to value my life, honor my life, cherish it enough, for it to really, really matter whether I do what I said I would with the rest of my day on this Thursday in August.

So that's est, and that's the human potential movement as I experienced it. Think all this over in terms of yourself. Check out

the endnotes below and Google and Amazon. Get in touch with me about any way I might be helpful. Good luck.

Now to Target.

### Endnotes

1. A good biography of Erhard, by a professor of philosophy, is William Warren Bartley III, *The Transformation of a Man: The Founding of est* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. Publishers, 1978).
2. Bartley III, pp. 259-267.
3. For a fictionalized account of what went in the est training, see Luke Rhinehart, *The Book of est* (self-published, available at Amazon.com, 2010; original publication, 1976).
4. These are books I read back then. In most cases, the list here are reprints and updates. You can check Amazon for other books by these writers. Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (Wilder Publications, 1968). Carl Rogers, *The Carl Rogers Reader* (Mariner Books, 1989). Carl Rogers and H. Jerome Freiberg, *Freedom to Learn*, 3rd edition (Prentice Hall, 1994). Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (Vintage, 1999). Michael Murphy, *Golf in the Kingdom* (Viking, 1972). George Leonard, *Education and Ecstasy* (North Atlantic Books, 1995). George Leonard, *The Ultimate Athlete* (North Atlantic Books, 2001).
5. Eugene Gendlin, *Focusing* (Bantam Books, 2nd edition, 1982).
6. Jack Canfield and Janet Switzer, *The Success Principles: How to Get from Where You Are to Where You Want to Go* (Harper, 2006). Also see, Jack Canfield, *Key to Living the Law of Attraction: A Simple Guide to Living the Life of Your Dreams* (HCI, 2007).
7. John Grinder and Richard Bandler, *Frogs into Princes: Neuro-Linguistic Programming* (Real People Press, 1989).
8. Anthony Robbins, *Awake the Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical, and Financial Destiny* (Free Press, 1992).
9. For information on the PASS program, go to the web site of Joel Kirshes' organization, The American Sports Institute.  
<http://www.amersports.org/home.html>
10. Robert Griffin, *Sports in the Lives of Children and Adolescents: Success on the Field and in Life* (Praeger, 1998).
11. Jerry Rubin, *Growing Up at Thirty-Seven* (M. Evans, 1976).

12. Jerry Rubin and Mimi Leonard, *The War Between the Sheets* (Marek, 1980).
13. Bartley III, p. 166.
14. Ibid., pp. 166-168.
15. Ibid., p. 169.
16. Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live, Or a Life of Montaigne: In One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* (Other Press, 2010).
17. Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2008).