

SUZANNE SNIDER

EST, WERNER ERHARD, AND THE CORPORATIZATION OF SELF-HELP

IT MAKES ONE YEAR
FOR THE DAYS WHEN WE
WERE ALL ASSHOLES

DISCUSSED: *Chuck Palahniuk, Moonies, Patty Hearst, Dream Catchers, Valerie Harper, Encyclopaedia Britannica, No-Piss Training, No Soap Radio, "Racket," NASA, John Denver, "Winning Formulas," Rats, Clarence Thomas, Pontiacs*

In 1989, a man named Chuck Palahniuk enrolled in a Landmark Forum workshop. He was twenty-six years old and, like many of his co-participants, struggling with his life and what to do with it. Despite his lack of vocational direction, Palahniuk had no problem navigating his way to the closest exit after the first forty-five minutes of the workshop, repelled by the program's cultiness and rigidity. Later that day, however, he returned to complete the training, and that night began writing what would eventually become his best-selling book, *Fight Club*—a sequence of events which suggests the Landmark Forum was more successful in helping Palahniuk redirect his life than a barrage of inconclusive



personality tests, forlorn meetings with career counselors, or years of expensive psychoanalysis.

For many graduates, it is. The Forum's boot camp approach to self-discovery and self-improvement is arduous yet brief, and its accelerated

results have garnered it a growing appeal not only among artists and writers, but also among more corporate types, from CEOs to personal assistants. Depending on your *métier*, graduation from the Landmark Forum might mean more best-selling novels, greater office efficiency, more one-person gallery shows, increased company productivity, improved profit margins, better movie deals, or heightened creative exchanges with co-workers. (Ross Grayson Bell, producer of the film

version of *Fight Club* and himself a Forum graduate, attributes his and Palahniuk's creative synchronicity to their shared Forum experience.) While such positive feedback is both convincing and hard to dismiss, few people recall that the Landmark Forum is not simply a career/self-help crash course—its “technologies” (as the Forum refers to them) are derived from Werner Erhard's controversial est workshop. est, for all its faults, was a major player in the well-meaning Human Potential Movement of the Seventies, a movement which put a premium on *human* possibility, with an emphasis on the spiritual side of humanity. Since est evolved into the Forum, so has the audience for such “technologies” evolved—from New Age hippies to CEOs to CEO-hippy hybrids—a transformation that provides a lesson not only about corporate identity re-branding and our culture's shifting standards of legitimacy; it also suggests what we dream about thirty years later, when we dream about our own potential.

est founder Werner Erhard emerged on the Human Potential scene in 1971. Erhard, a former encyclopedia salesman and executive, began a typical sixty-hour workshop with a variation on the following observation: “You're all complete assholes or you wouldn't be here.” est participants paid \$250 for Erhard's promise of radical personal change, a reward which came after a participant, in est-speak, “got it.”

By the time Erhard designed and executed his first est trainings in 1971, America had a burgeoning cult problem and a hearty cult fetish. Groups like Children of God and the Moonies emerged in the Sixties and Seventies and found joiners in abundance, especially among college-aged youths. Mind control came into general public awareness cumulatively: the stunning sight of deb-ish Patty Hearst robbing a bank at gunpoint in 1974; the news broadcasts of the deaths of 900 people at Jonestown in 1978; the first visions of “deprogrammed” American youths removed from cult compounds in beat-up vans. Though these examples left Americans preoccupied with the dangers of mind control, these instances also nudged us toward the cult phenomena's underlying implication, simple but profound, the good news and the bad news: *We can change.*

Despite the anti-cult zeitgeist, or perhaps because of it, change and personal growth became *de rigueur* in the Seventies, alongside an equally pervasive zeitgeist of epidemic ennui. People wanted to know, in lieu of these events: How can we expand our minds but expand them into something good, make them open for love (sigh), happiness, and positive change, but not for co-optation? These questions stuck. We have been sick of—or at least bored with—ourselves ever since the Sixties, and still believe we can do better, or rather *more.*

The Human Potential Movement—editor John Leonard of

Look magazine claimed to have coined the phrase in 1965—tried to answer this public demand for “more” by offering workshops, gurus, churches, and philosophies. More ways to live, to work, to eat, to love. The HPM emerged in the Sixties with more subtlety than its counterpart, the New Age Movement, and finally gained momentum in the early Seventies. While the two movements share severely mutated legacies, and though the HPM is often considered part of the NAM, the movements diverged philosophically when it came to attributing the source of human experience. The HPM (think Werner Erhard or L. Ron Hubbard) credited/blamed each individual as the sole determiner of his or her own experiences, whereas NAM (think Shirley MacLaine, but please think well of her) explored spiritual, metaphysical, and extra-terrestrial realms as forces guiding and even determining a person's life. Consequently, while New Agers wove dream catchers and learned energetic massage techniques, the HPMers engaged in far less soothing awareness-training sessions, filled with screaming and crying and verbal abuse. HPM groups such as Lifespring, Mind Dynamics, and est aimed (often in competition with one another) to goad us into more fully realized versions of ourselves. These groups disagreed, however, on which dimension(s) we lacked, and what exactly was wrong with us.

Though est began with a program of insults and accidental performance art, it eventually became

a trademarked (and financially successful) formula, which persists today, in slightly different form, as the Landmark Forum. est has had its band of advocates and enemies, and many of its celebrity graduates fit into the former category. Yoko Ono, Valerie Harper, and the late John Denver raved about est, but other est alums were less satisfied. Many people sued est in the Eighties; psychiatrists demonized est tactics in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. Still, enrollment never waned, and many people swear est enhanced if not saved their lives, once they got in touch with their inner asshole.

Born John Paul Rosenberg in 1935, Werner Erhard changed his name in 1960 and left his wife and three children in Philadelphia to fly West with his mistress June Bryde. The two cobbled together a conspicuously Teutonic moniker for the nice Jewish boy from Pennsylvania (inspired by two different people—German finance minister Ludwig Erhard and atomic scientist Werner Heisenberg—both mentioned in an in-flight article on Germany’s economic recovery). Erhard resumed his career in sales when he reached San Francisco, working for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *Parents* magazine, and *Great Books*, while experiencing a wide range of what the Human Potential Movement had to offer: Gestalt therapy, Zen Buddhism, Mind Dynamics, Dale Carnegie, Scientology, and a book by Napoleon Hill called *Think and Grow Rich*. In 1971, Erhard had his

infamous epiphany while driving over the Golden Gate Bridge. He said in his biography, “...after I realized that I knew nothing—I realized that I knew everything... everything was just the way that it is, and that I was already all right... I realized I was not my motions or thoughts. I was not my ideas, my intellect, my perceptions, my beliefs...*I became Self*.” His revelation became the basis for est workshops, his shrewdest business scheme to date.

Erhard’s new view on life, which treads a fine line between Zen Buddhism and mild psychosis, would appear a hard sell. It wasn’t lucid on an intellectual level, if at all, and other parties would have to comprehend it through means, admittedly, other than reason and logic. Nonetheless, est (which stands for Erhard Seminars Training, and also means “it is” in Latin) began in the ballroom of the Jack Tar Hotel in San Francisco, and became the singularly most influential group to emerge from the Human Potential Movement. Understandably, this strange new program, consisting of heady imagery, emotional confessions, est-specific jargon (“racket,” “asshole,” “barrier”) and aphorisms (“I know that you know that I love you, what I want you to know is that I know you love me” or “If God told you exactly what it was you were to do, you would be happy doing it no matter what it was. What you’re doing is what God wants you to do. Be happy.”), captured the imagination of men and women across the United States. Between 1971 and 1984, 700,000

people enrolled in the est workshop to “get it.” Participants who approached their est workshops and the elusive “it” with good sense and literalism were rebuffed. One est trainer responded to a participant’s thoughts with “Don’t give me your goddamn belief system, you dumb motherfucker.”

The insults were just the beginning of a regimen which most est graduates nevertheless reviewed in glowing terms. From 1971 to 1984, Erhard challenged participants to lay down their “winning formulas,” and take responsibility for their lives. Promotions, demotions, assault, and divorce were lumped together as the results of the will of the individual. Erhard and staff illustrated the est principles with sharing sessions, guided imagery, stare-downs, “trust” exercises and lectures/sermons filled with verbal abuse and expletives. These tough-love trainings usually took place in hotel ballrooms or conference centers across the United States, over a course of several highly-structured fifteen-hour sessions in which participants could not eat, urinate, defecate, talk, write, sit next to acquaintances, or take off their nametags. Stories circulated about est-ies fainting, peeing, vomiting and sobbing, a horrific scene that held its own inexplicable appeal. In her book, *est: 60 Hours That Transform Your Life*, author and psychotherapist Adelaide Bry writes that the sessions were known as the “no-piss training” among New Yorkers.

Perhaps the fear of incontinence was part of the allure of

groups like est, along with the promise of tools to navigate self-imposed mental roadblocks and get on with your life. Something happened within this experience that did not happen outside, and it was something strong and emotional, a transformation you could enact, without (depending where you lived) the cult stigma. The professional truth-seeker was compelled to imagine, from these descriptions, the scene of the swaying est-mass, like a sea anemone, with the sobbing-laughing-staring people as the anemone's phalanges.

Most maddening to an earnest est student in the past might be the goal of "getting it," a feat no less impressive than getting a "no-soap radio" joke.

Q: What did one elephant say to the other elephant in the bathtub?

A: No soap radio.

At this point in the delivery, the joke teller waits for the respondent to laugh, sometimes exerting additional pressure with "Get it? No soap radio?!" Anyone who learned the hard way knows it's a non-punchline, and the non-joke proved that if people were determined to "get it," they would, even if there was nothing to get. At the same time, Erhard offered a message of responsibility which thousands of est—and later, Landmark Forum participants—found empowering, and many of those participants gave the workshops rave reviews, taking their own revelations as "it" and leaving satisfied.

This estian notion of personal

responsibility goes back to the roots of the Human Potential Movement itself. Personal responsibility was first explored by humanist psychology in the Forties and Fifties, a school of thought that pleaded for a more holistic view of personhood that would encompass intellectual, creative, and spiritual realms, and emphasize the present as opposed to the past, psychological health as opposed to disturbance. est conducted some major variations on these important themes. Journalist Stephen Pressman writes in his exposé of Erhard, *Outrageous Betrayal*, "From illness and disease to auto accidents and street muggings, Erhard and his trainers drummed into the heads of est participants that they alone caused all the incidents and episodes in their lives to occur."¹ In one est seminar, Erhard suggested, according to Pressman, that even concentration camp victims of the Holocaust were responsible for their deaths. A concentration camp survivor present at one workshop protested, but Erhard later claimed she later "took responsibility for putting herself in. It's that goddamn simple."² Pressman reports that someone present asked Erhard how the woman could have been responsible for her imprisonment and Erhard responded enigmatically, "How could the light be off when it's turned on? The question

¹ Excerpted from Stephen Pressman's *Outrageous Betrayal* on web-site: www.rickross.com/reference/est/estpt1.html. *Outrageous Betrayal*, Stephen Pressman (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993).

² Pressman.

is completely stupid."³

With est's strong emphasis on personal responsibility and an equally strong deemphasis on events and issues in a person's own past ("Leave the past in the past"), est offered a troubling etiology of suffering. According to the est way of thought, we have made ourselves suffer, period. Our problems aren't real, or rather they are only as real as a psychosomatic illness which may be truly felt but not truly present. Those who have been molested or raped, according to est, were somehow responsible for these events. Most troubling is the inherent idea that we are completely and solely responsible for our destinies and all events therein. By further implication, these ideas more devastatingly propose that other people don't really affect us. Rather, we affect ourselves.

For many, this idea is liberating if for no other reason than it offers a radical paradigm shift, an excuse to reenvision one's life as something that can be controlled. The workshop may also work like a placebo sugar-pill, a hinge on which to pivot and make radical personal change. And why wouldn't we all want to believe in the sourcelessness of our unhappiness and problems, when we can't control the true sources, anyway? Maybe est works and isn't "true." est may be like a country song, toward which you can be a lover and critic at once; you can think the song's description of love is flat or faulty, and still be pleasantly carried away.

³ Pressman.

You can derive pleasure out of it and still know deep down that the singer may be a real abusive asshole, or not very smart, or as pure as the music, or something in between.

In 1985, Werner Erhard changed the name of est to the Landmark Forum, which he conceived of as a kinder, gentler version of est. Even the name, “Landmark Forum” projected more entitlement and bravado than the linguistically mousy “est” with its lower-case “e”; “Landmark Forum” sounded more like a real estate development board than a growth seminar. Erhard adapted the est principles to the new concerns of the Eighties, which, judging from the result, he gauged as a little more business-minded. The jargon remained the same, but in Erhard’s own words, the 1970s were about people “getting it together” while in the Eighties, people were “more interested in ‘making it happen.’”⁴ Whether he was responding to the public’s interest in “making it happen,” or his own interests in the company, may be moot. A company’s products can, of course, conform to public demand, but the public’s perception of “need” can likewise conform to a company’s product. People were convinced they needed est since it addressed happiness and satisfaction, a realm held in less esteem by traditional psychoanalysis, and even less by the workplace. Erhard’s own assessment of the evolving spirit of the Eighties confirms a sea change within his

⁴ Pressman.

workshops, as well as a hint of egotism, proposing that he could alter the landscape of the collective American psyche—which, to no small degree, he did.⁵

Erhard ran his Landmark Forum workshops until 1991, when he sold the patented ideas, what he called “technologies,” to his employees (among them, his brother, Harry Rosenberg). These employees officially incorporated into Landmark Education Corporation. In business terms, Erhard’s est and Landmark Forum left the new owners a perfect corporate shell. By shedding the overt Erhard association with the program (occasionally Erhard still consults, the Forum admits), the Forum moved toward establishing itself as a common passage for the upwardly mobile young (or even not-so-young) adult, as well as for the fringe element it had always succeeded in catching.

Though est’s popularity expanded far beyond San Francisco, the Bay Area remained the major hub of est and all Human Potential Movement activity. In addition to the est movement’s saturation of San Francisco, the Esalen institute, located in Big Sur, also took hold of many Californians. The Esalen Institute was established in 1962 by Michael Murphy, and the Institute initially centered around experimental psychology and science. The proximity of the

⁵ But to his credit, he did, and his word spread beyond the United States, as far as Moscow. Reportedly, the Mexican Police Force once used the Landmark Forum workshop as part of their job training.

state to the continent’s coast may have primed Californians with a sense of mortality, especially those who believed their home was destined to fall into the ocean. Hunter S. Thompson once said, “when the going gets weird, the weird go pro,” which may pertain to Erhard, who built an empire from his vague revelation while traversing the Golden Gate Bridge.

est and the Forum did eventually spread East, even though neither incarnation of Erhard’s enterprise advertised its workshops. Instead, they relied solely on recruitment by est and Forum graduates, who pulled people into the Forum fold via a quasi-pyramid scheme. Each student was, and is still, encouraged to bring friends and family to the last workshop “session,” where the students are encouraged to share their experiences with their invited guests. The guests may hear Erhard-speak from their intimates at these sharing sessions, lessons such as “If you put the truth into the system in which you cradled the lie, the truth becomes a lie. A very simple way of saying the truth believed is a lie. If you go around telling the truth you are lying. The horrible part about it is that the truth is so darn believable, people believe it a lot.”⁶ Clearly, if a guest wants to understand his or her newly thinking or newly confused loved one, the guest may have to enroll in the workshop as well.

Such was the choice faced

⁶ *est: 60 Hours That Transform Your Life*, Adelaide Bry (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) p 178.

three years ago by Tatiana⁷, a healthcare professional in New York City, who wanted to be able to relate to her new boss, himself a Forum graduate. Tatiana initially resisted the Landmark Forum training, but opened up to it on her third day. She offered a few of the Forum's better points. "It's very focused on action, which I like," she said, "and I like the idea of personal responsibility, separating your story of reality from reality." She didn't remember feeling confined by bathroom and eating rules, but admitted she furtively ate a bag of nuts through part of the training. The final session, though, a sales pitch, left a bad taste in her mouth.

Tatiana's boss took great stock in the Forum message and its benefits in the workplace, even though he refused to foot the bill for her training. "He basically said, 'This is what I'm into and how I communicate. If you're going to work with me, this is the way we communicate here.'" She said she didn't want to pay the money (presently \$375 for a 36-hour workshop), but she understood his point. "He was avoiding future conflict. He didn't want us to blame him for things that went wrong. He wanted us to take personal responsibility, and not put our shit on him," she explained. And it did, in fact, seem to work at first. All of her colleagues took the Landmark Forum workshop at the boss's request, or had already taken it on their own incentive. "But," Tatiana finally admitted, "my boss

didn't really want to take on anything, even when he should. He has a problem with responsibility. And with conflict."

When asked how the Landmark Forum differs from Erhard's est training, a Landmark spokesperson claimed that, put simply, the Forum is a completely different program than est. When pressed about terminology such as "racket," the same spokesperson said he did not believe "racket" was ever used in est training, but conceded to using Erhard "technologies," which were legally purchased by the corporation in 1991. An explanation of key Forum terminology in their media package contains this notable disclaimer: "The distinctions 'Racket' and 'Winning Formulas' are the copyrighted products of Landmark Education Corporation." The same media package did, indirectly, address the question about the difference between est and the Forum, when stating that est's drama matched the drama of its era. By implication, the LEC considers the Forum more era-appropriate for us.

These same press materials boast of the Forum's association with many Fortune 100 companies, proposing these associations as standards of legitimacy and success. This is not mere PR posturing; in 2001 alone, the Forum cleared \$58 million in revenue. Approximately 100,000 people attend Forum workshops each year. When the Forum cast its net, it caught CEOs, corporate executives, doctors, politicians, lawyers, psychotherapists, artists, prisoners and ex-con-

victs, children, Russian diplomats, even NASA. (In 1984, NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center paid \$45,000 for Erhard's training.) Landmark's own pie chart reports that 40% of Forum participants are from professional/technical fields, 20% are managerial/self-employed, 12% are in sales, 16% are administrative, 6% are students and 6% are "other." Traditionally, the est and Forum audiences, along with the larger HPM movement, have been mostly white. Outside of the United States, however, the Forum has been enthusiastically attended by the citizens of Japan, Israel, India, Australia, South Africa, the Phillipines, Mexico, and most European countries. The Forum is also popular among celebrities, including Oprah Winfrey, Stephen Spielberg, Barbra Streisand, Cher, and Elizabeth Taylor.

The distinction between the celebrity Forum students and the celebrity est students is notable. With the exception of diva Diana Ross, the est celebs were a little more humble, or at least less successful than the Forum celebs. Whereas John Denver may have been wistful, and Valerie Harper may have been contemplative, the new Forum celebrities are "with it." Self-improvement is no longer for lost souls or losers; it's for those who want to expand their potential, like unzipping the sides of vacation luggage, to bring twice as much home. In other words, it's also for the proud, the ambitious, and possibly the greedy.

⁷ Name changed to protect source's anonymity.

Several things facilitated the Forum's shift from spiritual into productivity-in-the-workplace movements. Erhard was always a business leader. Early on, he showed his determination when he hand-wrote 62,824 personal Christmas cards in 1975, a feat for which he's now listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* (1999 ed.). est and the Forum lured corporations with a promise that makes business weak in the knees—success—earning corporate trust through its own example of market domination. Even Erhard's terminology was ready-made for the boardroom; “to get it” in est language means “someone realizes the meaning or significance of a communication or experience.”⁸ est and the Forum easily convinced corporations that their psychology was necessary to effectively run a business. The Landmark Education Corporation soon formed Landmark Education Business Development to, in their own words, “serve its corporate customers.” The LEC makes a clear distinction between LEBD programs and the Forum programs. “It's two totally different things,” the Landmark spokesperson repeated. Even so, some of the same goals are addressed—namely, success in the workplace, efficiency, and communication.

It's hard to find fault with a little humanity in the workplace—learning more about yourself and noting your “winning formulas” (which, by the way, are what's mak-

ing you lose)—unless it's based in an ulterior motive endemic to the corporate world's use of these skills. If workplaces were truly concerned with everyone's well-being, they might have initiated more personal chats instead of mandatory workshops where employees are taught an “effective” way to live, work, and communicate. “Effective,” in business terms, means efficient. Additionally, this idea of greasing the corporate wheels with human potential—figuring out who you really are so you can do your job better—is anathema to some of the original ideas behind human potentiality. Humanist Psychology (the movement from which the HPM arose) privileged open-ended growth of the individual rather than “reshaping individuals to fit society's needs.”⁹

Humanist thinkers formally addressed the role of technology in human potential as early as the Seventies. Forty years earlier, Buckminster Fuller roused a significant but less resonant curiosity with Dymaxion House, and his elaborate proposition that geometry (the geodesic dome) could save us, blowing the proverbial roof off the house. The “Humanist Manifesto II” of 1973, signed by Betty Friedan, Isaac Asimov, and B.F. Skinner, among others, agreed that the objective disciplines of science and math would ultimately enhance the subjective realms of thought and feeling. They included this statement in the manifesto:

⁹ Rebecca Frey, www.principalhealthnews.com/topic/topic100586958

“Technology is a vital key to human progress and development.”¹⁰ Computers were seen as dream-machines, an extension of our own capacity to go beyond imaginable feats, and do the unimaginable, like walking on the moon. From this perspective, computers were considered within the humanist scope of interest, but perhaps this early loyalty to the computer also explains, in small part, the easy relations enjoyed today between the HPM (especially the Forum) and the corporate world. To some degree, the original HPM and many capitalist ventures want the same thing—progress and invention—but for different reasons. For the former, progress is a reflection on our capacity (yes, our human potential), and for the latter, progress is a reflection on earning sales potential.

Today, CEOs in companies including Reebok and Microsoft are fluent in the Landmark Forum teachings and its jargon. Beyond the abstract conflation of Forum-thought and corporate culture is a more formalized relationship between the two. Just as the corporate world has been able to bring the Human Potential Movement into its fold, so have the vital institutions of the HPM been able to bring the marks of corporate culture into their fold. Michael Murphy grew famous for *Golf In the Kingdom* (1972), a metaphysical novel that combines Zen Mysticism with golf (the epitome of corporate past-times). Most telling of

¹⁰ site Hill article, website.

⁸ Bry.

Murphy's audience, and likewise of the HPM today, are the diversified authors who blurb Murphy's book—John Updike provides a plug, as does Alan Watts.

est and Forum concepts have become so embedded in management language and strategy that they are no longer recognized or even credited for some of these appearances. One of the most famous est parables involved a story which demonstrated the difference between a rat and a human. In short, a rat in a maze of four tunnels will always find the hidden cheese in the maze. If the cheese is moved from its usual spot, the rat will eventually change its approach and try a different tunnel. A human, Erhard challenged, will continue to go down the same tunnel where the cheese used to be, over and over again, and come back disappointed. Videotapes and textbooks featuring the rat and cheese story show up in management curriculums and offices all over the country, but few people know the story's origins.

In addition to the thousands of companies who have formally sought Forum training for staff are those companies subjected to New Age training, or "management training" influenced by Forum thinking or one of the Forum's many spin-offs. On February 22, 1988, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) issued a ruling against New Age Training programs in the workplace. Clarence Thomas approved the EEOC notice N-915.022 on September 9, 1988.

The policy cites several hypothetical examples of "New Age training" violations in the workplace. The introduction also points out real-life infractions: "1. a large utility company requires its employees to attend seminars based on the teachings of a mystic, George Gurdjieff [Fourth Way], which the company claims has helped improve communications among employees. 2. Another corporation provides its employees with workshops in stress management using so-called "faith healers" who read the "auras" of employees and contact with the body's "fields of energy" to improve the health of the employees...4. The [personal growth] programs [hired by government agencies and corporations] utilize a wide variety of techniques: meditation, guided visualization, self-hypnosis, therapeutic touch, biofeedback, yoga, walking on fire, and inducing altered states of consciousness."

The utility company named in the first example was Pacific Bell. In a *New York Times* article (Robert Lindsay, April 17, 1987) one Pacific Bell official reported the company was spending \$100 million a year on this kind of training, a cost which would come, in turn, out of customers' pockets. In defense of these trainings, a spokesperson from Transformational Technologies (the Erhard corporation that ran est) said in the same 1987 article, "The traditional approach to bringing about change is less than effective, because traditional change takes a long time. We are looking for ways to speed up

change." At one Pontiac car dealership, the Pacific Institute ran a management course with a title containing the following blatant incentive: "New Age Thinking to Increase Dealership Profitability."

In 1964, when John Leonard was still working on his article for *Look* titled "The Human Potential," he traveled the country interviewing radical thinkers. A mutual friend suggested he meet Michael Murphy of the Esalen Institute. Together, Leonard, Murphy, and brain researcher Lois DeLattre discussed the need for behaviorism and humanism to merge, specifically, Leonard writes on his website, to "unlock the enormous potential of the human organism." The three joked about turning these ideas into a movement, and promptly held a conference at the Esalen Institute under this name. One year later, Leonard made this statement as part of a Proclamation for Human Potential, at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco:

We envision no mass movement, for we do not see people in the mass; we look instead to revolution through constant interplay between individual and group, each changing the other. The revolution has begun. Human life will be transformed. How it will be transformed is up to us.

est claimed to give people the tools to *look out*, which was its alibi when charged with significantly contributing to the “Me Generation.” (The “Me Generation” consisted of baby-boomers who engaged in tireless pursuits to know thyself, rather than others, mostly through many of the workshops which fueled the HPM as well as the NAM.) Even so, est failed the Human Potential Movement for the same reason many other groups did. The HPM, as argued convincingly by Geoffrey Hill (“The Failure of the Human Potential Movement: From Self-Actualization to Experimentalism”¹⁴), was meant to be a *humanity* potential movement, a belief in what we could do collectively, not a technique to maximize our output individually. The central thread running through the groups and ideas was the exploration of, and some say obsession with, one’s self.

Still, the original goal was noble. It’s a movement that began with a beating heart, and a notion of celebrating our potential, with “potential” meaning what we have not yet done but still can do. HPM groups have distinguished themselves, favorably, from other psychological schools or models, by focusing on health instead of pathology. This optimism, historically, has inspired everything from Erhard’s est and Landmark Forum,

to manic singing groups like “Up With People.” But the movement itself was not digestible for some factions, and when Erhard adapted his philosophy to the people, instead of bringing the people to his philosophy, est/Forum (along with all the spin-offs and copycat groups) became enablers of our worst qualities, instead of respite from them. They merely made us better business people.

That said, people *do* learn things at these workshops. Forum graduates have become teachers, healers, comedians—all impulses which may have been previously present but muted—after the hard-hitting workshop. Based on several reports, people can also learn to make more money at Forum workshops. LEC recruited Harris Interactive, a worldwide market research and consulting firm, “best known for the Harris Poll,” to conduct a participant survey of Landmark Forum graduates. The report concluded that within one year, 61% of respondents had a substantial increase in income (25% or more), with an average \$7,400 per year increase two years after taking the workshop.

I have nothing against CEOs getting their freaks on, bringing tarot cards into the boardroom (real story) or tuning into alpha waves, but I feel somewhat saddened by our pragmatism. That’s right: The Forum makes me nostalgic for the good old days of est. At least est-ies were reaching their arms out into the dark, truly lost, unlike those who are “found,” relatively speaking, but want to finesse their inter-

personal skills for the purpose of increasing sales. est was absurd enough to take a stand and make strong friends and enemies. The Forum is practically mainstream; it points to our most cowardly moderate tendencies and our current priority—to be productive. If you purchase a seat in one of the many Landmark Forum trainings available in New York City today (available several times a month), you will *not* be called an asshole by anyone officially tied to the Landmark Forum. Where we once had a movement to change humanity, we now have workshops about changing the workplace. There’s no vomiting here, no sobbing or peeing on the floor. And while this more moderate and sanitized version may appeal to the corporate world, as well as to artists, doctors, and students, it can create a longing, oddly enough, for the days of est, when we were still assholes, when a human growth seminar was deeper than a spiritual version of “What Color is Your Parachute?”

And while God and the workplace should not forcibly meet, humanism should not make an enforced appearance, either. Human Potential management strategies and seminars that encourage people to sell better under the guise of spiritual growth—to “increase dealership profitability”—remain more cowardly than their predecessor est workshops, which never quite committed to specific material incentives. They played it less safe and more weird by only promising “it.” We are a centrist society and est, which once

¹⁴ <http://www.pacificnet.net/~cmoore/ghill/esalen2.htm>. This was the first chapter of the book Hill was working on when he died in 1999.

worked from the fringe, is now working from the inside, and has taken on the inside's character, or at least made concessions to it. The Human Potential Movement has created a sort of chimeric species of communicative tigers and tigresses, touchy-feely predators who have been assured it's okay to go after what they want, and they should feel empowered to do so, and any problem some person may have about it—well, that's their "racket."

And yet, it's difficult to dismiss the HPM. Who, in principle, is against human potential? Is there anything wrong with positive thinking and personal breakthroughs? Is there anything wrong with more productivity and efficiency (and more time to play golf)? Underneath the HPM project of figuring one's self out (and presumably figuring out how to work the rest of the world out) is the project of becoming happy. Erhard started his trainings by challenging participants to remember the last time they were happy, watching people remember that it may have been a while ago. We supposedly find ourselves by connecting dots, discovering what brings us delight through those memories of joyful moments. Yet, it might be faulty to conclude that we find ourselves only when we find happiness; in fact, this idea of happiness is the least radical aspect of the HPM, and of est, and maybe of the Forum.

As a guiding principle, happiness could justify a host of unsavory behavior, if unchecked. Ideally, knowing what makes you happy

might lead to greater satisfaction, greater honesty, better communication, more success in the workplace. But what if you discover in your own soul-search that lots and lots of money makes you happy? And you concede you are willing to take responsibility for your behavior, in fact, you *create* the reality that surrounds you, the events that happen to you, and any resistance you get from your colleagues, your friends, your family? Well that's *their* racket. Happiness is one of the many places we pass through, and the idea that we are supposed to stay there all the time imposes a false standard of happiness as the norm, as a state of equilibrium rather than a rare state of grace.

Between 1984 and 1991, scandal followed Erhard. The general reading on Erhard from the mainstream press extended far beyond the actual facts, and amounted to an aggressive smear campaign, which damaged his credibility and his name-brand status. From the beginning, est and the Landmark Forum found friends in every field, except in journalism. Despite this pervasive coalition of allies, Erhard still made enemies, and eventually faced mounting accusations of molestation (by his daughter Celeste), tax fraud (by the IRS¹²), unreasonable employer practices (by employee Charlene Afremow), among others.

¹² These tax fraud allegations, the LEC informed me, were never, in fact, made by the IRS. The LEC's spokesperson also informed me I could be sued for libel if I claimed the allegations were ever made.

This adversity came to a head in 1991 when CBS's "60 Minutes" aired an eighteen-minute segment on Werner Erhard, est, and the Forum, incorporating conversations with Erhard, and his daughter Celeste, along with disclosure of the tax allegations.

It wasn't hard to paint Erhard as a sleazeball. He was confident, tan, rich, irreverent, a salesman by trade, he owned his own airplane, drove a black Mercedes with a vanity plate that said "SO WUT?"¹³, and he lived on a yacht. Despite the strong ego Erhard projected, he ironically became a victim of his own success—though according to his own philosophy, no one did him in but himself.

A more simple view of Erhard's growing problems point to several people responsible for accusations that were, as it turns out, false. Well after the "60 Minutes" segment aired, his daughter Celeste confessed that she'd been offered a half-million dollar share in a pending book contract in exchange for the allegations, and the IRS, too, later retracted their claim, and paid Erhard \$200,000 in a lawsuit he initiated. The "60 Minutes" segment was filled with so many factual discrepancies that the transcript was made unavailable with this disclaimer: "This segment has been deleted at the request of CBS News for legal or copyright reasons."

Erhard's personal hardships did

¹³ This expression might be lifted from his own aphorism: "If God meant man to fly, he would have given him wings. Obviously, the truth is what's so. Not so obviously, it's also so what."

not, ultimately, destroy his empire. In the mid-Nineties, Larry King interviewed Erhard via satellite from Moscow, where Erhard was working. Erhard said he'd eventually like to come back to the United States and clear his name.¹⁴ In the meantime, he can reflect on his accomplishments. He created what now constitutes an entire subculture if not culture, and he received the Mahatma Gandhi Humanitarian Award in 1988 for the Hunger Project, the Breakthrough Foundation, the Holiday Project, The CareGivers Project, the Education Network, Prison Possibilities, Inc., the Mastery Foundation, and others. In typical Erhard fashion, he did not raise any money to actually feed people with the Hunger Project, but rather spent all of the funds raising awareness about hunger.

Still, Erhard did change many people's lives—a fact that should not be discounted. The LEC spokesperson, when sharing his own sympathy for Erhard's subjugation, actually referenced Martin Luther King as another oppressed, visionary American. Erhard has lived in self-imposed exile in an

¹⁴ Oddly enough, the driving force behind Erhard's fall from grace, was most likely the Church of Scientology. Erhard went through 70 hours of what is called "auditing" in the Scientology world, and though he left with good feelings toward Hubbard and Scientology, those feelings weren't mutual. According to several accounts, Scientologists conspired to squash his empire, placing what they called a "fair game" policy on him, a sort of Scientologic fatwah, and according to Erhard, they tried to kill him. His paranoia was justified based on evidence at Scientology headquarters, including five file cabinets filled with information tracking Erhard's life and business.

unknown location since 1991, though rumors occasionally placed him in Costa Rica and Puerto Vallarta. He is still in hiding.★

FURTHER READING:

Most books written about est are written defensively—either strongly supporting or vehemently lambasting est and Erhard. Still, the following are not without their critical merits, and provide a fascinating firsthand participant account.

est: 60 hours that transform your life, by Adelaide Bry (Harper & Row, 1976).

Outrageous Betrayal: The Dark Journey of Werner Erhard from est to Exile, by Stephen Pressman. The name says it all.

Erhard hagiographies

60 Minutes and the Assassination of Werner Erhard, by Jane Self. Self assures you she's a PhD right on the cover. (Breakthru Publications)

Werner Erhard: the Transformation of a Man, the Founding of est, by William Warren Bartley (Potter 1978).

The Forum

Few books focus on the Landmark Forum. To learn more, visit Landmark's own website:

www.landmarkeducation.com

LEC can also make a media package available to journalists. The package includes several reports on

the demographics of participants, and the positive effects of the workshops on their lives.

CARS FEATURED IN THE WORK OF MARY ROBISON

1. Firecat
2. A sedan
3. A cab
4. 881 Seeger-Z hatchback automatic, the color of smoke
5. Green car
6. Mazda compact
7. His fathers Dodge
8. A beige Ford
9. Powder blue Pontiac
10. Rental cars
11. Honda Civic
12. Green sportscar
13. M.G.
14. Truck on my tail
15. New mercury station wagon
16. Buick
17. Motorcycle

Compiled by Maggie Behle