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In Murphy's Kingdom

Since the 1960s, the Esalen Institute has been at the forefront of the human potential movement. Now co-founder Michael Murphy, an ardent golfer and former frat boy, is reaching a new generation with his books on spirituality.

by Jackie Krentzman

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In April of 1950, sophomore Michael Murphy wandered into the wrong classroom. An hour later his life -- and possibly yours -- had changed.

Murphy, '52, had mistakenly stumbled into a lecture on comparative religions by Frederic Spiegelberg, one of the most popular professors on campus. A scholar of Eastern religions, Spiegelberg articulated that day a spellbinding vision of the intersection of Eastern and Western thought -- ideas Murphy had been grappling with himself. The 20-year-old was hooked: He signed up for the course and subsequently dropped out of the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity, left the pre-med program and embarked on years of introspection. That journey led him to an ashram in India and eventually to becoming the head of one of the century's most influential cultural movements.

Murphy did not create a philosophy so much as a synthesis that allowed the marriage of Western action and Eastern contemplation and laid the basis for what became known as the human potential movement. "The internal world is the last frontier," Murphy says, sitting in an Italian restaurant down the road from his Victorian in San Rafael, a town in Marin County, Calif. "We all know about

exploring outer space, but the human race is not fully acquainted with the stupendous nature of this inner frontier. We have no idea of our limits."

Murphy has made it his life's work to explore those limits. Perhaps more important, he created a safe place where others could explore them: the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, Calif.

Murphy co-founded Esalen with fellow Stanford graduate Richard Price, '52, in 1962. (Price was killed in 1985 by a falling boulder during a mountain hike near Esalen.) Together they introduced Americans to the staples of the personal-growth movement: meditation, encounter groups, gestalt therapy -- not to mention hot-tub nudity. Once dismissed as far-out hokum, today these techniques are gaining respect in U.S. medical circles as well as society at large. Even Stanford Medical School has a research program and a clinic devoted to alternative medicine (see sidebar, page 69). "My god!" Murphy says. "Today, every YMCA and every church has a program like Esalen's, teaching meditation, tai chi, massage, whatever. Esalen had a catalytic role, and we invented a new social form. I see Esalen as a meme, a cultural gene that was passed on."

Esalen succeeded because of Murphy. This Stanford graduate with a yen for internal exploration was the perfect salesman for presenting Esalen to a mainstream culture that was fearful and even hostile toward the counterculture and the personal growth movement. On the surface, he seems to be a man of paradoxes: a frat boy who spent 18 months studying meditation in India; a convivial host and terrific athlete (a four-handicap golfer) who meditates three times a day; an ascetic who founded a center that was synonymous with free love. But his genius was in being able to tie all those disparate elements together.

"In many ways, Michael was a bridge," says his lifelong friend Grant Spaeth, '54, a Palo Alto attorney and former president of the United States Golf Association. "He was an agent connecting two different worlds."

The arc of Murphy's life tracks the evolution of American culture over the last 40 years. This poster boy for '50s America transformed himself into one of the leading figures of the '60s counterculture. Then he transformed himself again, into an author of philosophical and reflective New Age books (including two golf novels), a father, and a proponent of integrating physical, mental and spiritual exercise into our daily lives. The first of these

novels, *Golf in the Kingdom* (Penguin), which he wrote in 1971, became a cult classic, selling more than 750,000 copies. Clint Eastwood has bought the movie rights, and Sean Connery wants to play one of the lead roles. The sequel, *The Kingdom of Shivas Irons* (Broadway Books), hit stores in September.

Murphy still ricochets among many different worlds. In our interview, he pinballs from his status as a golfing yogi to his latest books and projects, to musings on the works of C.S. Lewis, Teilhard de Chardin and William James, to his eight acid trips, to quarterback John Brodie, to Leland Stanford's brother Thomas Walton, who founded a psychical research center at Stanford, to his wife, Dulce (they're "amicably separated") and 13-year-old son, Mackenzie, to parapsychology, to his theory of evolution, to the Upanishads.

"I talk a lot, don't I?" Murphy apologizes, as he pauses to take a sip of cappuccino.

Like his meandering thought process, Murphy's life hasn't followed a linear path. Beginning with his 18 months in India in the 1950s through the founding of Esalen, and most recently in his books The Kingdom of Shivas Irons and The Life We Are Given (Tarcher-Putnam), Murphy has explored the transformation of self, examining how people use their "metanormal" (his word, meaning extraordinary) capabilities to transcend perceived physical and mental limitations and experience a fuller life.

Murphy certainly has no idea of his -- mentally or physically. Start with aging. He looks at least 15 years younger than his 67 years, moves with the grace of an ex-athlete, lifts weights three times a week and has competed at a high level in master track and field races. About 5-foot-11, powerfully built, with thinning gray hair, Murphy has an expansive, welcoming face that looks even younger when he latches onto a subject.

Born and raised in Salinas, Calif., Murphy is the son of an Irish father and Basque mother. His father, an attorney, boxed professionally while at Stanford. His physician grandfather delivered John Steinbeck and became a close friend. According to legend, Murphy and his younger, wilder brother Dennis, '55, were the models for Aaron and Cal in Steinbeck's 1952 East of Eden.

He found it with Spiegelberg, who believed that the highest form of religion taps into the fundamental spiritual tenets that underlie all religions. "The connection was at one level directly spiritual,"

Murphy says. "At another level, that course gave me an intellectual framework to account for my experiences. It was because of that class that I began to meditate."

On the afternoon of January 15, 1951, in Murphy's junior year, he was sitting by Lake Lagunita meditating well past sunset when he had what he calls "an experience." "If there was one hinge moment in my life, that was it," he says. "Sitting there, I knew what I had to do. I knew I wanted to give the rest of my life to this vision of things and all it implied. I just didn't know how yet."

Murphy came down from his mount, quit his frat and dropped out of the pre-med program. His family, naturally, was concerned. A family friend even sent a psychologist to determine Murphy's sanity. The doctor came away satisfied that this was a sane but unusual young man.

Murphy did graduate, earning his B.A. in psychology by doing a series of directed readings. He spent the next two years in the army, stationed in Puerto Rico, administering psychological assessments to ferret out malingerers. He returned to Stanford and spent two quarters in the graduate philosophy program. But in 1956, he quit and went to India to live at Sri Aurobindo's ashram. Aurobindo, who died in 1950, had developed a theory of evolution and human consciousness that resonated with Murphy's burgeoning philosophy. Unlike most Eastern philosophers, Aurobindo believed that enlightenment and maximizing human potential do not come through withdrawal from the world, but through participation in it, along with yoga and meditation.

Eighteen months later, Murphy returned to California. He meditated eight hours a day and supported himself working two days a week as a bellhop at Rickey's Hyatt House in Palo Alto. In 1960, he moved to San Francisco to join a group that was studying and meditating with one of Aurobindo's disciples. There, Murphy first met Price (although they had attended Stanford at the same time).

The two had an almost immediate empathy for each other's philosophical and spiritual quests. They drove down to a 375-acre property in Big Sur, land Murphy's family had owned since his paternal grandparents bought it in 1910. Murphy's grandmother was renting out the property, a motel-resort, whose main draw was the natural hot springs baths on one-time Esselen Indian tribal land. It was a gathering place for local bohemians during the week and for gay men from San Francisco on the weekend. The

caretaker was 22-year-old Hunter Thompson, the future gonzo journalist. When Price and Murphy first arrived, they found Thompson running around firing automatic weapons. "The place was coming apart at the seams," Murphy says.

Murphy saw the opportunity to develop an idea he'd been incubating -- to open a retreat center on the property. Murphy's grandmother gave him a low-cost, long-term lease and permission to kick out the motley types and shape Esalen in his vision. (Today, Esalen owns 52 acres of the property, while the rest is held in a Murphy family trust.) "Of course, first she said, 'I won't just give you the property because I know you'll just give it away to some Hindu'," Murphy says, laughing.

In the fall of 1962, Murphy and Price presented their first seminar series, "The Human Potentiality," based on an Aldous Huxley lecture. Within two years, they had hosted conferences led by such luminaries as LSD guru Timothy Leary, Buddhist teacher Alan Watts and behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner.

Esalen's spring-fed hot baths and "do your own thing" ethic attracted hordes of young people looking to lounge about in the nude, experiment with drugs and make love. "You hear a lot about the summer of love," Murphy says. "Well, the whole decade of the '60s was the summer of love at Esalen. It was like the gold rush -- full of outlaws and saints, madmen and great professors."

Unlike many causes and institutions forged in the heat of the '60s, Esalen didn't collapse under the weight of drug burnout, hedonism and charismatic leaders who became cult figures. According to Murphy's friends and colleagues, Esalen flourished because Murphy and Price insisted that it serve as a site for ecumenical, open-minded inquiry in which no one discipline or belief system dominated.

And there was no danger of making Murphy a guru. "I was perceived at Esalen as being very, very straight -- and I was!" he says. "First off, very early I developed a powerful allergy to hallucinogens. Secondly, I was too fond of cashmere sweaters. And thirdly, I didn't buy into the enthusiasms for a lot of these techniques. I was constantly skeptical about what was being tried. I was kind of an in-house critic."

Esalen had its share of outside critics as well. The media derided it for fostering the "Me Generation" and blamed it for being the fountainhead for many of the kooky ideas fomented in the '60s,

from crystal worship to tarot cards. New York Times columnist William Safire recently wrote that the term "touchy-feely" had its genesis at Esalen. "But that criticism was unfair because the intellectual caliber of people it attracted was a lot higher than at the other New Age centers," Smoley says. Indeed, Newsweek once labeled Esalen the "Harvard of the human potential movement."

In a sense, Murphy reflects a classic American, can-do optimism. He has a Jeffersonian belief in the perfectibility of man and a Norman Vincent Peale-like confidence in the individual's ability to improve. Murphy not only created an environment in which others could learn and explore, but he also continued to refine his own philosophy. In the 1970s, he moved from Big Sur to San Francisco to begin writing books, all of which centered around his theory that we use only a small percentage of our physical, mental and even paranormal capabilities.

Murphy retired from running Esalen in 1972 (he still serves as chair of its board) to write full time. Golf in the Kingdom and The Kingdom of the Shivas Irons are arguably the most accessible of his works. In *The Future of the Body: Explorations into the Further Evolution of Human Nature* (Putnam), Murphy compiled thousands of case studies of paranormal and metanormal functioning, such as telepathy, clairvoyance, healing through meditation and feats of extraordinary strength. Murphy contends that our potential for self-discovery and growth is vastly underdeveloped, but he argues that we are on the brink of an evolutionary leap into greater human functioning in all areas, from athletic exploits to extrasensory perception to our ability to love.

The culmination of Murphy's work to date is *The Life We Are Given*, written with longtime friend and collaborator George Leonard. It describes their development of Integral Transformative Practice (ITP), a long-term regimen of study, meditation, exercise and diet aimed at maximizing our potential for physical, mental and spiritual health. Murphy and Leonard plan to open an ITP center in Marin County.

Murphy's interest in the paranormal and metanormal neatly dovetails with both his scientific bent and his fascination with the workings and mysteries of the inner mind, and while he no longer believes that fundamental social and personal transformation is right around the corner, he has no doubt it's coming. "Where we are now in relation to the possibility for radical advancement in the development of human nature is analogous to where natural

science was in the early 17th century," he says. And Murphy is content to patiently rebut the naysayers and doubters as he offers his radically sanguine view of the world.

"People always ask me how can I be so positive," he says. "The older you get, if you're halfway intelligent, you become more aware of what's wrong in the world. But there is so extraordinarily much that is right. To me, to be positive is to be a realist."

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