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M A G A Z I N E

My Weekend at Esalen

The author learns that self-knowledge doesn't necessarily require manipulating her chakra.

by Jackie Krentzman

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I arrive at Esalen on a warm and hazy Friday afternoon in March for a weekend workshop but find myself reluctant to strip off my clothes and jump into the famed hot tubs. I've come to the celebrated human-potential retreat at Big Sur to bare my heart and soul, not my backside. So I procrastinate.

I head off through a stand of Monterey cypress, walk through a lush garden and gaze offshore for whales. But the moment of truth can be avoided for only so long. I'm here to experience Esalen -- all of it, clothed or not. I make my way down to the tubs, perched on a bluff overlooking the crashing Pacific surf. An East Indian man with flowing hair sits in a lotus position, meditating in a tub, a few bubbles away from a man sporting only a thick gold chain and a pinkie ring the size of a walnut. Although the hot tubs are billed as clothing optional, I see no one taking the option of clothes, so I quickly shuck mine off and join the group.

It turns out that sitting naked with strangers is a great icebreaker. To mask our nervousness and vulnerability, we chatter endlessly as we keep our eyes assiduously fastened at a point well above the neck. Thus am I initiated.

I've signed up for a weekend sampler course, "Experiencing Esalen." Several seminars run concurrently, and on the first evening our group of 14 -- seven women and seven men -- gathers with others in the spacious dining room for vegetarian Szechuan eggplant, salads, date cake and mounds of whole-wheat bread. We range from our mid-20s to our mid-50s. Among us are two doctors, a Hollywood entertainment consultant, a midwife, the owner of a preschool and an executive of a water-filtration company.

At Esalen, there is a premium placed on honesty and openness. I'm encouraged to explain why I want to see the whales, why I'm so tense that I need to learn yoga and why I'm resistant to exploring my subconscious. We learn that understanding those whys can be fun and doesn't necessarily require manipulating our chakras.

After dinner, we meet at the "Big House" for our first session. We leave our shoes by the door and enter the meeting room, furnished with pillows instead of chairs. Deborah Medow, our leader, instructs us to walk slowly around the room making full eye contact, something I find painfully difficult. We then pair off and try to express our emotions and thoughts using our eyes, hands, shoulders, facial muscles -- anything but our vocal cords.

When we reconvene Saturday morning, I'm surprised to note my critical faculties are malfunctioning. I usually feel frustrated by the slow pace of groups; I form judgments and dismiss people. Instead, I'm merely happy to see everybody.

I worry about brainwashing.

That evening, we assemble for art therapy. My third-grade anxieties resurface as I eye my blank canvas. But this is only the beginning. Not only do my classmates laugh at my artistic ineptitude, they also gleefully psychoanalyze my splatterings.

Our program concludes Sunday morning with a "trust walk." We pair off, blindfold our partners with scarves and lead them around the property for 20 minutes. Afterward, we revel in the fact that no one fell off a cliff, literally or figuratively.

The weekend is over, but I find I'm not ready to leave. I wonder if I'll be able to bring the spirit or magic of Esalen home. I don't have to wait long to find out. An hour later, I run smack into a traffic jam north of Monterey. As I sit surrounded by fuming cars and people, I feel that familiar tension creeping into my chest. But

then I remember Esalen: I close my eyes and breathe deeply. It's not quite nirvana, but the road of life has gotten a little easier to travel.

Jackie Krentzman is the managing editor for the custom publishing division of Diablo Publications and a frequent contributor to Stanford.