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On Ecstasy, Education, and the End of Sex

GEORGE LEONARD AND THE HUMAN POTENTIAL MOVEMENT

What is the lexicology of ecstasy? There are no respectable words.

GEORGE LEONARD, Esalen catalog, January–March 1974

George Leonard was one of the greatest supporters of opening an Esalen branch in San Francisco. As the editor of *Look* magazine Leonard had opened a California office in 1956 to cover the world from what he called "this outpost on the edge of a continent" and "the California game."[1] In 1962, he was given control over the magazine's Los Angeles office as well. As things turned out, he was never as interested in movie stars as he was in human potential.

There are many different ways to think of Leonard's place in Esalen's history. Although some would disagree, it is difficult not to see George Leonard as a kind of "third founder," given his exceptionally close relationship to Michael Murphy and the long-term impact he has had on the place through forty years of writing, teaching, and leadership. In any case, Leonard quickly became a kind of spiritual brother to Murphy. While Price was now based full time at Esalen in Big Sur, Murphy found a kindred soul in George Leonard in the city of San Francisco.

Kindred, but not the same. These two men's differences, although often subtle and often unnoticed, are as important as their shared visions, particularly in the ways that these differences balance out their respective thoughts and worldviews. Leonard, for example, is generally much more critical of religion and its conservative influence in society than Murphy is. Granted, Murphy can be quietly radical when it comes to moving beyond religion to Spiegelberg's religion of no religion, and he can be wickedly

funny in private about the stupidities of both traditional religious belief and some of the more recent New Age excesses, but he remains a gentle revolutionary at heart, "overly bred" by his Salinas family, as he sometimes put it, so as not to give too much offense to the polite public.

Not so with George Leonard. Having grown up in the racist South of the 1940s, flown low-level bombing and strafing missions in the Pacific front of World War II as a young man, and witnessed firsthand as a journalist many of the central figures and events of the civil rights movement, Leonard is significantly less reserved. Indeed, with his deep, booming voice and towering six-four frame, he often sounds like a fiery southern preacher or prophet of social justice. In essence, he still flies low. As a critic and gadfly, he is especially important to the history of Esalen, particularly when this history is often misrepresented as devoid of a sharp critical social consciousness or a keen awareness of the dark sides of religion. Certainly there are uncritical moments in this history, but those involving George Leonard are not among them.

So too with the erotic. Whereas Murphy is relatively reticent about emphasizing the erotic dimensions of the mystical life in his published texts (even as he privately acknowledges them), Leonard writes and speaks often of sexuality and even penned three separate books on the subject. His book *The End of Sex,* for example, advances the spiritual and physical eroticization of all of life in the wake of the sexual revolution. Here too Leonard balances Murphy, even as Murphy's intellectual and religious influences on Leonard are equally obvious (Murphy's love of evolutionary mysticism, East-West integralism, and the *siddhis* or superpowers are omnipresent in Leonard's corpus). Leonard's language is most often that of education reform, social transformation, grand paradigm shifts, and the martial art of aikido (an Asian "spirituality as sport" to balance Murphy's "mysticism of golf"), but the same patterns are all here: from the controversial title of *Education and Ecstasy* (1968), through the orgasmic rhythms of *The Silent Pulse* (1978), to the polymorphous eroticization of *The End of Sex* (1983), Leonard's voice is permeated by a certain ecstatic quality that understands the body not as a container of a disembodied soul, but as a holographic microcosm of the entire cosmos and its mysterious and ultimately free creative energies, energies that manifest most easily in the West within the mystery of sexuality and the altered states of sexual arousal and orgasm. The enlightenment of the body.

Murphy and Leonard originally met in San Francisco on February 2, 1965. The meeting was memorable and life-changing for both men

(Leonard, for example, always quotes the date to me when our conversation drifts in this direction). To appreciate fully what happened on this date, however, it is important to back up a bit first and meet the man who met Murphy that winter day.

Early Life, Early Esalen

George Leonard was born in Macon, Georgia in 1923.[2] Three years later his family moved to Atlanta. His first memory, signaling his own later flying career, was of Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic. Particularly important to his early intellectual development were the three consecutive summers, from the ages of thirteen to fifteen, he spent with an older cousin, Ed Stephenson, who was in college and would later become a professor of English. Stephenson acted as Leonard's tutor, essentially teaching his charge in a single summer everything he had learned the previous year in the classroom. Together they read Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Swinburne, Keats, Shelley, Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, and William James. Leonard still remembers these childhood summers as the most intense reading and learning experience of his life.

It was the experience of unimaginable racial injustice, however, that left the most indelible mark on George Leonard's soul. This realization made it impossible for him to look upon society or religion innocently. He knew how both subtle and gross the prejudice could be and how deep it ran through every social and religious institution of the land. Indeed, his autobiographical reflections on the 1960s, *Walking on the Edge of the World,* begin with the '40s and his experience of a racism he knew his own family supported. The turning point came for him at thirteen, when he looked into the eyes of a chained black man on the courthouse square of Monroe, Georgia: "What I experienced was a sense of utter horror, a sickness and despair that stayed with me for several days. I emerged with one unshakable certainty. They were all wrong—my father and my grandfather and all the ministers and doctors and teachers and politicians. My whole society was terribly, tragically wrong on a matter of immense importance."[3]

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Leonard enlisted in the air corps as soon as he was old enough, and in March 1944 graduated first in his class of 310 cadets. The top six candidates of this class were kept on to teach new recruits until they managed to convince their superiors to send them into combat. All six were then trained to fly the A-20, a

swift and low-level attack plane with six forward-facing machine guns and a gunner in the rear designed to support troops on the ground and "loosen up" resistance. In April of 1945, Leonard joined a combat squadron in the Philippines and flew twenty-two combat missions before he was sent to Okinawa in August to prepare to raid Japan itself. "I am one of those people the A-bomb might have saved, and I still don't think it was moral," Leonard admits. When the war ended with the holocausts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Leonard headed back home among those who would create the baby-boom generation and lay the social foundations for the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, that is, for the origin-era of Esalen and the American counterculture.

As a young man in the late 1940s, Leonard dreamed of becoming a novelist. He enrolled at Chapel Hill to study English literature and graduated in the summer of 1948. He worked for Sears and Roebuck just long enough to realize that the corporate world held little for his soul, and then re-enlisted in the air force, eventually landing a position as an intelligence analyst at the headquarters of Air Training Command at Scott Air Force Base. There he could make a living, support his wife and two young daughters, and finish his first novel, *Shoulder the Sky* (1959). He later started a glossy magazine for Air Training Command, producing sixteen issues before he landed a job at *Look* magazine in New York in 1953, when magazines were the major media, television was a little fuzzy screen, and something like the Internet could be imagined only in science fiction.

Leonard worked for *Look* for seventeen years until he resigned in 1970 to write and work within the human potential movement full-time. The magazine position, as he often describes it, was "the best job in the world." He was given long stretches of time to research and write feature stories and supervise special issues. He also had generous travel budgets and almost complete creative control of his projects, which included award-winning stories on the condition and reform of American education, the civil rights movement, the Iron Curtain, and, eventually, that ferment of American cultural experimentation and creativity—California.

When Leonard was assigned to open an office in San Francisco, he commuted from New York, logging twenty-four trips in 1961 alone as he memorized the American landscape below. Leonard's journalism was a kind of participant-observation, that is, he rejected distant objectivity and instead participated in whatever he was reporting on. When the desegregation riots broke out in Little Rock, for example, he returned to his native South and began covering the civil rights movement by meeting

with Martin Luther King, Jr., and by joining the Selma demonstration march. Similarly, when he reported on the educational system, he sat with children in schools for weeks at a time to get some sense for how they felt and thought about the schools.[4]

On Magazines and Movies

This New Journalism came to define his research for a June 28, 1966 special *Look* issue on California as what he called in the issue's opening pages "a window into the future." The issue was filled with dramatic photos of both the heaven and hell of the new California scene: the "cars gone mad" of hot rod legend and Kustom Kar King George Barris; the new sky-diving craze; angry black men staring at the reader from within the burned-out district of Watts after the riots; topless waitresses serving coffee (very carefully, no doubt); and an entire photo section on what Leonard was calling "the turned-on people," those cultural entrepreneurs who embodied best Thomas Wolfe's hymn to the American soul as seeker: "Go seeker, if you will, throughout the land, and you will find us burning in the night."[5]

It was this California spirit of "the seeker" that Leonard was interested in tracking here: "The game is no longer to explore and conquer your physical environment, nor to build empires on the face of the earth, but to explore and expand yourself, your institutions and all of human possibilities, to seek ever-receding frontiers in the infinitely rich and varied common countryside of humanity."[6] A long photo-series called "The Turned-On People" began immediately after Leonard's opening editorial comments. The series in fact began with none other than Michael Murphy, announced here as "the prophet of joy" (years later, the *New Yorker* would change the title to the more accurate "mystic of joy").

The piece included a brief synopsis of the Esalen Institute at Big Sur Hot Springs and a large photo of an ecstatic Murphy in a bright red sweater, arms upraised, grinning into the sky. The photo captured well Murphy's famous exuberance, but it was hardly a spontaneous shot. Indeed, Murphy recounts with his usual grin how difficult it was to pose in such a way for shot after shot until the photographer was finally happy with what he got—spontaneity is hard work. But Esalen had in fact already appeared on a previous page of the same issue, this time within the gentle silhouette of a nude female bather in quiet contemplation at the baths.[7] These images of Esalen from the summer of 1966 were probably the earliest the general American public saw.

FIGURE 18. *Look* magazine feature photo of Michael Murphy (June 28, 1966). Photo by Paul Fusco, used with permission.

Historically speaking, however, this particular *Look* issue represented more than the liberal California dream that was sweeping the nation. More personally for Leonard, it embodied his new friendship with Murphy. It also expressed something of the American seeker's inner frontier that these two men had already named one evening in 1965 as the human potential movement.[8] It happened in a kind of brainstorming session that involved the two free associating with various ideas, jotting them down on little slips of paper, and then tossing the slips on the floor. At some point, surrounded by a kind of paper snow, Leonard kept coming back to a set of associations hovering around the civil rights movement. Certainly this set well with his own fierce memories of the South and the dramatic ways that the civil rights movement was able to change the legal landscape, almost overnight. There had been a civil rights movement and a free speech movement. Why not, then, also a human potential movement? Leonard jotted the phrase down and tossed it on the floor with all the others: "Neither Mike nor I had any idea I had just labeled a 'movement' that over the next five years would be interpreted and misinterpreted in hundreds of articles, that eventually, in one way or the other, would affect the lives of millions

of people, and that ultimately would be taken for something that neither of us had intended."[9]

Historically speaking, the term encoded Murphy's abiding commitments to Huxley's human potentialities, psychical research, and meditative experience, as well as Leonard's fierce memories of Martin Luther King, Jr., the desegregation of the schools, and the Berkeley free speech movement's battle with censorship. The phrase coded, in other words, a literary influenced, profoundly ethical, socially engaged American mysticism. The dream would be misinterpreted in a hundred different ways. But the intentions of the original dreamers were certainly clear enough.

This same human potential vision was announced in the fall 1966 Esalen catalog as From Dream to Reality: A Call to Action: "The era of the human potential is already upon us. All of us—aware of it or not—have roles to play in a human drama involving basic shifts in the aims and expectations of life on this planet. The seminar leaders will celebrate the new era, make explicit the hopeful and ever-evolving goals of Esalen Institute and engage in dialogue with seminar participants about the part that each can play in changing the world."

Shortly before this workshop and just after the *Look* magazine issue had appeared, Esalen decided to introduce its new vision of the human potential to Hollywood. No one quite knew what the specific goal was, but it seemed worth trying anyway. Actually, the casual connections between Hollywood and Esalen were intimate ones from the beginning. When he left Big Sur in the early '60s, Dennis Murphy became a Hollywood screenwriter, and stars and pop singers routinely show up at the baths to this day. No one was quite this positive about the summer party of 1966, though. Indeed, the event turned out to be more humorous than meaningful. It became known, after all, not as "The Night Hollywood Embraced Esalen," but as "The Night Fritz Perls Spanked Natalie Wood."

On July 29, 1966, the Hollywood actress Jennifer Jones gave a party in her Hollywood home in an effort to bring Esalen figures and Hollywood personalities together. When Leonard arrived, Jones immediately introduced him to Rock Hudson, Glenn Ford, and Eddie Albert. Leonard noticed that Shirley MacLaine was charming Mike Murphy. Later, he would dine with Dennis Hopper and talk shop with James Coburn. The guest list was indeed impressive.

Fritz made his entrance later that night, dressed not in his usual jumpsuit (which is what he always wore at Esalen), nor in the more casual attire like the other guests, but in a formal tuxedo. After dinner and a viewing of an amateurish film on encounter groups, Carl Rogers offered to

lead an encounter group. Midnight came, and the crowd became more and more boisterous. Leonard ventured outdoors and discovered that Fritz was leading a gestalt session near the pool. Natalie Wood was in the hot seat.

> It was another part for her to play, and she was enjoying herself immensely. Fritz tried to get her to admit she was acting. She skillfully slipped out of his verbal traps. Then Fritz let her have it.
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> "You're nothing but a little spoiled brat," he said in a voice harsh enough to stop time, "who always wants to get her own way."
>
> She gasped and her mouth fell open. A moment later Fritz somehow had her over his knee, spanking her. It was a brief episode, hard for the senses to register or credit. Natalie flounced away, and her friend Roddy McDowell offered to fight Fritz. Fritz ignored this offer. About two minutes later, Natalie marched out of the party with no goodbyes, her nose angled sharply upward.
>
> Not long after that, Tuesday Weld sat in the hot seat, with approximately the same results, minus the spanking. She too stormed out, her long blond hair streaming.

Leonard finally left around 2:00 a.m. Dennis Murphy showed up at 3:00 a.m. and, with his brother Mike, helped charm the party to sunrise. Not much came of the event in terms of actual relationships between Hollywood and Esalen, except perhaps for two movies. *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* with Natalie Wood satirized something called "the Institute" (the directors wanted to do the filming on the grounds of Esalen but were turned down). Tuesday Weld would also later star in *The Serial,* which also poked fun at the human potential movement.[10] No one was spanked in either movie, though.

Education and Ecstasy *(1968)*

To this date, George Leonard has published over a dozen works of fiction and nonfiction and literally hundreds of magazine essays toward the actualization of this same human potential. A full study of this corpus would require a long trip through his journalism years with *Look* from 1953 to 1970 and on into his career as a freelance author within the human potential movement from the 1970s to the present. For the sake of space, I will approach Leonard's early vision through just four of his early books: *Education and Ecstasy, The Transformation, The Silent Pulse,* and *The*

End of Sex. It is certainly no accident that such a list begins with ecstasy and ends with sex. Such is the nature and spirit of Leonard's writing style, metaphysical sensibilities, and moral message.

He is very much present in these subjects. Once one has met him in person, one quickly realizes that the pages and the person express the same presence. A hint of jazz. An occasional war story. A method of argument that resembles the "blending" of an aikido throw. An ecstatic quality to the writing that turns to the body for its deepest intuitions and creative impulses. A fearless condemnation of social injustice in all its forms. And a careful suspicion of all things religious or dogmatic. These are the rhythms of George Leonard as text, as body, and as personal presence.

Leonard's assignment to report on public education for *Look* turned out to be life-changing. After months of in-depth reporting, Leonard produced an impressive sixteen-page feature for the February 1956 issue that was very well received. The National Education Association ordered a million and a half off-prints, numerous state education associations reprinted Leonard's "A Magna Carta for Teachers," and at the end of the year the piece was given the top award for education coverage from both the NEA and the Education Writers' Association. Over the next decade and a half, Leonard won a total of eleven awards on education reporting. It was this writing and experience that he summarized in his first major monograph, *Education and Ecstasy,* which was first published as a book in 1968 and then serialized in three consecutive issues of *Look.* The book went on to sell over 300,000 copies.

Leonard's popular but controversial thesis was as simple as it was radical. Modeling his education theory on the human potential movement, Leonard proposed that education as it was currently being practiced in the United States was largely about restricting or damning up the immense human potentials of the mind, spirit, and body, and that the true purpose of education should be about the removal of what William Blake had called the "mind-forg'd manacles" of society, so that America can work toward a more integral cultivation of ecstasy.

Leonard was quite serious about that word "ecstasy." He had to fight hard with his publisher to keep it in the title. Well within the Freudian Left, he also refused to surrender the word to the materialism of a purely mundane sexuality. Thus he did not hesitate to turn to mystical language to explicate its deepest meanings: such a term evoked for him at least, "not simply pleasure as in the equation of Bentham and Mill, not the libido pleasure of Freud, but ecstasy, *ananda,* the ultimate delight."[11]

The Sanskrit metaphysical reference was hardly accidental. After all, Leonard will later use another Sanskrit/Tantric term, *sadhana,* to describe Michael Murphy's spiritual practice.[12] Leonard, however, insisted that what was needed for real human flourishing was not more Asian spirituality per se, but rather a more integral understanding of cultural accomplishment that could move beyond the limited visions of both the West and the East, both of which have produced "massive human unhappiness" by focusing all of their best energies on only one aspect of the human being (the West on technological control, India on the attainment of ecstasy). In the freedom they give us from practical concerns and the day-to-day running of society, modern science and technology, and particularly what Leonard imagined as the telecommunications miracle of the computer, offered a way out of this impasse, that is, a place "where the successful control of practical matters and the attainment of ecstasy can safely coexist; where each reinforces the other; and quite possibly, where neither can long exist *without* the other."[13]

"The times," Leonard insisted, "demand that we choose delight."[14] Here he was certainly not writing simply about personal emotions. He was convinced rather that ontological delight had real social pay-offs, that it could offer humanity a positive vision of what cultures could be in the future rather than what they have been in the past. For Leonard, the cultivation of joy as the deepest secret of human nature was the only long-term solution to the engrossing interests and horrors of war that he understood firsthand.[15] He suspected, moreover, that any serious pursuit of a technology of ecstasy would eventually lead individuals to the human potential, that is, to what has traditionally been labeled the "psychic," the "mystical," even the "fantastic."[16] Noting the human ability to harness through technology what were previously undreamed of electromagnetic energies, he insists that education can now dream of harnessing the invisible energies of that "vast, unknown realm that we call (pending the time we learn to manipulate each of its specifics) the 'mystical.'"[17] There is, in other words, a future science of mysticism, a technology of ecstasy, that lies at the heart of the evolving human potential, and Leonard was out to propose it as the very heart of the future of American education.

In a chapter appropriately entitled "The Rogue as Teacher," Leonard offers three figures as heralds or models of this vision of the future: the radical technologist, the mystic, and the artist. Prometheus-like, the technologist represents that figure who knows that "*any radical change in the technology within an established order will surely bring that order*

down."[18] To establish his point, Leonard cites historical examples of cultures that feared innovation, all ultimately in vain: the Greek Daedalus warning Icarus not to fly too high, the Israelites fearful of the Babylonians' tower as somehow "against God," the traditional Arabic condemnation of *bid'a* or "novelty" as "heresy," and Mary Shelley's 1818 prophecy of modernity, *Frankenstein.* As for the mystic, perhaps "the most dangerous of all," Leonard is fully aware that his or her practices often perpetuates conservative and essentially oppressive social structures (India is his example here again),[19] but he also knows that such practices carry within themselves other fundamentally transgressive and deconstructive possibilities: "*But beware.* At any moment, the mystical impulse can bring the structure down. For mysticism admits no boundaries whatever, not even the minimal interface between self and other."[20]

So too with the artist, who "must destroy the forms and perceptions of his time" in order to "journey beyond the conscience of his race."[21] Great art, like great technology or mysticism, always goes beyond what is acceptable. It is in its deepest nature essentially new, heretical, offensive, that is, ecstatically creative. The world is now filled with such rogues by the hundreds of millions, ready, like Blake, like X-Men, to burst the shackles of the past and open minds to the future evolution of the human potential. And indeed, Leonard even claims to meet a psychically gifted young woman, an eroticized witch, in a high school classroom at the very beginning of *Education and Ecstasy.*

The Confluent Education Program (1967–1968)

Leonard's interests in "education and ecstasy" were hardly tangential to the social and intellectual life of Esalen, which was for Leonard a central exemplar of what education could be in America. Of course, some of the institute's earliest inspirations were derived from Aldous Huxley's call for a more rounded education and for something the writer called "the non-verbal humanities."

Beginning in 1967, Esalen attempted to institutionalize something of this vision through a joint program it undertook with Professor George I. Brown of the department of education at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Brown first came to Esalen to participate in its early workshops on creativity. There he and his wife Judith became involved with Perls's gestalt workshops. Impressed with her natural psychological

abilities, Fritz asked Judith to be a cotherapist with him. From these creative and gestalt beginnings, the Browns helped initiate the Confluent Education Program. The project consisted of bringing elementary and high school teachers to Esalen over approximately a dozen weekends in order to introduce them to encounter group dynamics, to sensory awareness, and to various other emotional or affective modes of learning. The idea was a simple but effective one. Once introduced to these new confluent methods, the teachers could then take them back to their schools and integrate them, in their own ways, into their individual classrooms.

The program received two healthy grants from the Ford Foundation ($35,000 to Esalen in 1967, and $350,000 to Santa Barbara in 1968). Over the years, it helped produce over one hundred MAs and over thirty PhDs in Confluent Education through the university for over twenty countries, with Norway and Japan producing some of the most notable numbers.[22] This general Esalen concern over education also produced three books for the Esalen Viking series, including Janet Lederman's *Anger and the Rocking Chair,* which actually led off the series, and George Brown's *Human Teaching for Human Learning.*

Becoming Conscious of Culture: The Transformation *(1972)*

Leonard left *Look* two years after *Education and Ecstasy* appeared. He was becoming increasingly frustrated with the East Coast establishment's dismissal of the human potential movement and its almost complete inability to appreciate what was happening in California. In truth, however, Leonard's resignation was simply the final act of a long intellectual, emotional, and spiritual transformation that had been going on inside him for years. He was no longer an East Coast journalist. He was one of a handful of writers and leaders imagining the human potential into existence. Very much in pursuit of this developing vision, Leonard signed a contract with an advance of $50,000 to write his second monograph, *The Transformation.*

In *Education and Ecstasy,* Leonard had imagined a radically liberal education of the future that could assist the evolutionary process by liberating, nurturing, and developing the natural psychical mutations of gifted individuals. He had also speculated about how American society might learn to produce a new type of human being who could learn and mutate individually instead of having to wait for the much slower changes

of society and conservative tradition.[23] *The Transformation* picks up on these same themes through two central categories: Civilization and Transformation. For Leonard, Civilization is "that mode of social organization marked in general by political states, markets, legal sanctions and social hierarchies, wherever in the world it occurs." Transformation stands for "both the process that spells the end of Civilization and the period during which the process takes place."[24]

Leonard's thesis was that we are now living through the most radical change in human social practices since the invention of agriculture (about five thousand years ago), and that to the extent that we are becoming conscious of how Civilization constructs and so limits our experience of the world and ourselves, we are effectively waking up from culture and so ending the long spell of Civilization. In other words, we can no longer be individually duped by *any* culture, mythology, or religion (especially our own), for we now know that all such systems are constructed by us and, as such, are expressions of human nature.

The downside of such an insight into the religion of no religion and the culture of no culture is the troubling realization that we are all being duped (and occasionally literally killed) by the literalisms and logic of our own creations. The upside is that, if we can accept this enlightenment, it is in our power now to deconstruct and reconstruct these visions toward greater and greater returns of delight, creativity, and transfiguration. Put simply, we now recognize myth for what it has been all along, that is, *myth.* And to the extent an individual or a culture becomes conscious of its own mythology, it has transcended that mythology for some future life or mode of being.

Fish are the last creatures one would expect to discover, analyze, and wake up from water, Leonard had already pointed out in *Education and Ecstasy*.[25] Similarly here, religious believers, politicians, and patriots are hardly our best hope to wake up from culture and Civilization, and we are only now beginning to emerge from our long watery existence: "We are evolutionary creatures. Like our ancestors in the late Devonian Period some 400 million years ago, we have just pulled ourselves out of the waters in which we have lived for millennia." And "the first thing we notice is the water itself, Civilization. While we were in it, we had no way of knowing how it shaped our existence. Now we are beginning to understand."[26]

There is something fundamentally Freudian about this Transformation. This becomes particularly obvious in "The Gift," a chapter that reflects on and critiques Freud's famous analysis of the impossibility of true happiness in his *Civilization and Its Discontents.* Leonard is obviously

deeply appreciative of Freud's insights into the necessary repressions and inherent pathology of any stable society, but he ultimately rejects Freud's pessimism for the brighter hopes and future of the human potential. What if, Leonard asks, the human being was not "the born monster that Freud paints him?"[27] What if Civilization itself creates the aggression and frustration from which human beings suffer? "Freud's first great insight holds. Clear conscious awareness of how a particular dis-ease is inculcated is likely to make that particular dis-ease leave us."[28] So what if we were to now become consciously aware that our most basic dis-ease is caused not by some inborn original sin or genetic flaw but by Civilization, that is, by our very own societies and religions? Can we be healed from *them?* Can we become conscious of our own cultures and so wake up from their spells without sacrificing the gifts that they also so clearly bestow?

What Leonard is suggesting is that Freud's id, literally "the it," may not be the dark dangerous force of unconscious instinct that orthodox psychoanalysis holds it to be, and that it is repressive society, not human nature, that distorts and mangles life and so produces neurosis. Here, of course, Leonard writes solidly in the lineage of the Freudian Left that we have already identified as one of the central streams of Esalen.

There is something fundamentally sexual about the social and spiritual Transformation Leonard imagines. Within three particularly suggestive pages, for example, he moves from reflections on the sexual maturation of twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls in a southern church in the 1930s—"Lust rises and falls around them like the cicada's song while the minister's voice extracts only dust and dry bones from the bloodless body of Christ"[29]—to the seemingly impossible social transformations of the civil rights movement. With respect to race, "the greatest danger lies in the fact that the awakening doesn't happen to everyone at the same time. When some people begin to see things that other people don't see, the resulting crisis may strain at every stone in the social edifice." What he calls "the revelation of the secret" that the emperor of racist America is naked has infuriated many "who find security and identity only in the sleep of the senses."[30] Thus, the sexual ignorance and prudery of the churches and the structural violence of American racism are very much connected, and, as Leonard will develop the idea further in *The End of Sex,* society, erotic love, and the body are all related, so to change one is necessarily to change the others. Little wonder, then, that the greatest threat to a racist society is always and everywhere intermarriage, that is, sex and love toward the genetic fusion of "black" and "white."

In Tune with the Universe: The Silent Pulse *(1978)*

The Silent Pulse shows a significant shift in style and content from Leonard's earlier work. We move from the social concerns of race relations, education, and social change to the personal practices of an American mysticism that is at once scientific and artistic in its metaphors, democratic and individualist in its orientation, and socially conscious in its moral conclusions.

Leonard never really leaves social criticism behind, however. Indeed, much of *The Silent Pulse* is concerned explicitly with developing a worldview that can synthesize both the social or ethical and the personal or mystical dimensions of human reality into a greater integral whole. The text actually ends with practical instructions on how to get in tune with the silent pulse or "elemental vibrancy" of the universe, which Leonard draws from his teaching experience with over 20,000 students. By 1978, in other words, George Leonard himself has clearly experienced a rather dramatic transformation from a national journalist and educational theorist identified with (and rewarded by) the East Coast establishment to a popular international teacher of the human potential both at Esalen and in Mill Valley on the West Coast. And this pattern will only intensify over the next two decades. By 1978, Leonard had already developed Leonard Energy Training (LET) from his aikido and energy awareness training with the martial arts master, Robert Nadeau. He transformed this teaching practice again in the early 1990s, this time with Michael Murphy, to create something called Integral Transformative Practice (ITP). Leonard's three most practice-oriented books also appeared in that decade: *Mastery* (1991), *The Life We Are Given* (with Murphy) (1995), and *The Way of Aikido* (1999).

Practice, however, had always been a part of Leonard's life. His mastery of music as a young man and aikido later in life allowed him to access new levels of awareness and new forms of energy. In *The Silent Pulse,* Leonard's understanding of mastery through practice connect with the metaphorical patterns in science to create a new musical-mystical vision. And this underlying beat of all things takes him well beyond both practice and science into the elemental vibrancy, a metaphysical pulse that connects sexuality, mystical experience, and social reform.

Like all things, the text begins with sex: "The sperm cell swims with rhythmic strokes and joins the egg. Molecules of DNA dance together. Pulselike concentrations of fields interact, multiply, differentiate. A singular pattern emerges, something unique in the universe: a new being."[31]

He then moves immediately to state his central thesis: "*At the heart of each of us, whatever our imperfections, there exists a silent pulse of perfect rhythm, a complex of wave forms and resonances, which is absolutely individual and unique, and yet which connects us to everything in the universe. The act of getting in touch with this pulse can transform our personal experience and in some way alter the world around us.*"[32] This is not a set of ancient beliefs to take on faith. It is a kind of modern gnosis based on the equally fantastic realms of biology and quantum physics. Science imitates mysticism, as with so many other texts that have flowed out of the Esalen orbit. Hence we are told that Pythagoras instructed his followers two and a half millennia ago "that a stone is frozen music, an intuition fully validated by modern science; we now know that every particle in the physical universe takes its characteristics from the pitch and pattern and overtones of its particular frequencies, its singing."[33] Modern science, then, does not simply imitate mysticism: it advances and deepens it.

As for the body, Leonard is fully aware of how sharply his views contrast with all those ascetic views of the body, found in both the West and Asia. He even names the rejection of the world and the body in its Indian guise, that of *samsara* (literally, the "round" of birth and death). But he hardly accepts the usual moral conclusions. Rather, he simply reads this round as a natural function of biology: "In the kingdom of the corpuscles, there is transfiguration and there is *samsara,* the endless round of birth and death. Every passing second, some two and a half million red cells are born; every second, the same number die." Moreover, there is something deeper and more mysterious at work "beneath" or "below" this *samsara* of the flesh. He imagines a microscope looking further and further into the mysteries:

> As the magnification increases, the flesh does begin to dissolve. Muscle fiber now takes on a fully crystalline aspect. We can see that it is made of long, spiral molecules in orderly array. And all these molecules are swaying like wheat in the wind, connected with one another and held in place by invisible waves that pulse many trillions of times a second. What are the molecules made of? As we move close we see atoms, tiny shadowy balls dancing around their fixed locations in the molecules, sometimes changing position with their partners in perfect rhythm. . . . We come closer, increasing the magnification. The shell dissolves and we go on inside to find . . . *nothing.*[34]

Hence Leonard's final enlightenment and the answer to his original question: "Of what is the body made? It is made of emptiness and rhythm. At the ultimate heart of the body, at the heart of the world, there is no solidity. Once again, there is only the dance."[35]

So what, then, of the mind or soul? The individual is a series of energies and patterns that can be summed up as a single wave function or inner pulse, and that manifest simultaneously through fingerprint patterns, memory traces, the personality, even the mystical fields of the subtle or astral bodies: "Thus, separating mind and body is theoretically as well as practically impossible. Indeed, in terms of this speculation, it is the inner pulse that is stable and persistent at the most fundamental level: the unitary identity that explodes out into the world as a multiplicity of identifying characteristics."[36] Along similar lines, Leonard is clear that a person's identity should not be confused with the ego or with normal consciousness; such an identity rather resides in that deep and unique inner pulse that vibrates, for example, in the rhythm of words and thought of a good writer or in the deep intentionality, again often unconscious, of a person's life.[37]

Winged Thoughts toward an Explosion of Spirit: The End of Sex *(1983)*

In *Education and Ecstasy,* Leonard had described an ecstatic education in which the solving of a complex mathematical problem shares in the same delight-filled dynamics as sexual intercourse. *The Transformation* pointed to an "elemental vibrancy" or "ecstatic impulse" and had linked this life force to both the erotic and to new forms of social consciousness and hence to actual social and political reform.[38] In the very first chapter he recounts a mystical event he once knew with a lover "in the deepest hours before dawn, after a night of love, when consciousness itself began to change," here into a radical state of reciprocity: "But I must tell you that the moment did come when our own once separate and private emotions began to appear on each other's faces. Just that. . . . There was nothing metaphorical about this merging. In the faint light from another room, each of us could see our actual selves embodied in another—and we were terrified."[39]

Sex then contains within it the possibility for transformation. "Sex remains one of the most readily available ways of sampling the primal consciousness," Leonard writes, "the knowledge contained in the full orgasm is considerable."[40] At times, this orgasmic gnosis takes on a psychical form:

a similar erotic encounter in *The Silent Pulse,* for example, manifested itself in precognitive and synchronistic events in the external world.[41] To be "in tune" with the elemental vibrancy of sexuality is also, sometimes, to be in tune with the silent pulse of reality itself.

This radical claim is developed in much fuller fashion in *The End of Sex,* a text that attempts to complete or fulfill the sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s by moving beyond all the cathartic releases and Kinsey-like obsessions with mechanics and number of orgasms to a more sublimated, all-encompassing eroticization of society and indeed the cosmos itself. "The end of sex," then, is not really the end of sex—it is the end of the gross materialism and common selfishness of the sexual revolution and the annunciation of a full-bodied and more relational erotic mysticism. It is both a refusal to reduce the erotic to the simply sexual and a call to raise the sexual to the mystical through a personal encounter with another human being as other and lover.

As with all of Leonard's books, there are clear biographical trajectories at work in *The End of Sex.* Indeed, the author tells us matter-of-factly that a great deal of this book is based on his own erotic experience.[42] Some of this, it turns out, dates back to Leonard's adolescence and the total repression and successful sublimation of his own budding sexuality. Schooled by the Victorian South and his own well-meaning father in the evils of "self-abuse" (that is, masturbation), Leonard's sexual repression was more or less total. It was not that he struggled against sexuality at puberty. It was that he felt no explicit or conscious sexuality at all. Subsequently, the entire natural world became erotic for the young boy. He could barely make out the boundaries between self and world. And he found himself passionately involved in an impressive array of hobbies, from snake-collecting (the Freudian can only smile here) to radio electronics and band music.

He also distinctly remembers a type of intense sublimated love—clearly erotic, even mystical,[43] but never quite sexual—for his slightly younger sister, who would bounce around in the hot southern house wearing as little as possible on her beautiful body, parts of which, Leonard writes, "drew my hands as if with a powerful magnet." In a chapter called "Familial Love," Leonard bravely explores his incestuous desires for his sister, his paradoxical realization that, "I would never be able to join with what was closest to me, what I most loved," and the complete disappearance of that illicit desire at age seventeen. Leonard, in other words, believed in the mysterious powers (and costs) of repression and sublimation, the sexual dynamics of the family, the power of *eros* to bind

social groups together, and the potential beauties of a kind of mystical eroticism beyond any kind of simple genital sexuality. "I became aware of Eros early in life," he writes. "It was the mysterious force that was more powerful than my powerful father, that drew me toward my beloved sister, that imbued all of nature with an almost painful wonder."[44] No one could tell him Freud was wrong. Limited perhaps, but also dead-on.

What Leonard is really after here with what he calls "the end of sex," then, is analogous to what he was after with "the end of Civilization," that is, a kind of transfiguration of the world through a calling up of another kind of human potential and another kind of physical transformation, here expressed in the gorging and morphing of the sexual organs and the dramatic chemical, cellular, and even atomic transformations of the body during sexual arousal and orgasm. *This* is the enlightenment of the body for Leonard.

Little wonder, then, that the religious and mythical imagination from prehistoric shamanism to ancient India and medieval Europe has imagined the penis, in Leonard's phrase now, as a "winged thought,"[45] or that the narrative structure of every story, play, or tale (excitement, plateau, climax, resolution) follows "the primordial story" of erotic arousal and consummation.[46] Certainly, such bold extensions of sexual forces into every facet of life is not some simple Freudian fantasy or imaginary projection for Leonard. Rather, it is simply good metaphysics, for the universe itself is erotic through and through—*everything* is a silent pulse, a rhythm, a dance, a musical score, an orgasm. Leonard thus wants to re-conceive the erotic beyond genital sexuality and reunite it with creativity, with society, with nature, "and perhaps with the stars." Moreover, he wants a kind of full-bodied eroticism that can embody a radical democratic politics, much like that announced by Blake in his little humorous and irreverent ditty: "Embraces are Cominglings from the head even to the feet, / And not a pompous High Priest entering by a Secret Place."[47]

As with *The Transformation,* there is also a certain social radicalism in *The End of Sex,* for Leonard, like Reich, whom he draws on explicitly here, believes that society, sexual love, and the body are all intimately woven together, and so to tinker with or change any one of these is to change the others. What Leonard wants ultimately is a nonrepressive society that is bound together by the sublimated forces of sexuality and that can imagine erotic forms of being beyond the merely genital, a way of living that encourages and nurtures ecstasy and delight and so renders violence and war unnecessary and distracting. He also wants to heal the primordial split or "war" between the sexes. *Sexus,* we are told, is derived

from the Latin *secare,* to separate or sever. The mystical life here, in other words, is fundamentally about the restoration of a primordial unity that is temporarily lost in the biology of sexual differentiation and the social injustices of gender construction and inequity.

Finally, Leonard is after a kind of sexual sacrament, a pure reciprocity imagined as a divine encounter. A world "in which your erotic partner is thought of or treated not as an object but as a *person,* a sacred being encompassing the universe." Thus in an early imaginative description of a sexual encounter with clear Tantric undertones in chapter 3—appropriately entitled "An Explosion of Spirit"—a man discovers in and through his lover's body that no discrimination is possible between body and spirit or between pain and pleasure, and that penetration and orgasm might propel them both into a dimension "beyond his body and hers, beyond the universe," into a kind of "ultimate, shining darkness."[48]

This encounter often bears within its furious ecstasy the "shining affirmation" of new human life; sexuality and procreation cannot ever be fully separated. For Leonard, there is violence and darkness in sexuality as well, and the spiritual forces of evolution are driven by the bumping, grinding hips of hard sex and real sexual desire and selection.

In this way, every mystical tendency toward unity must be balanced by the equally true and important truths of identity and individuality. Indeed, throughout his entire corpus, Leonard continually warns his readers to beware skewed preferences for pure transcendence or prudish spirituality. The world is not to be ascetically denied. It is to be erotically embraced and transformed through the pure reciprocity and delight most commonly known in full orgasm, that "explosion of spirit," that enlightenment of the body.