

*A Road Less Traveled:
The Hidden Sources of R. D. Laing's
Enigmatic Relationship With Authenticity*

M. Guy Thompson, Ph.D.

The following paper was presented on the occasion of the Philadelphia Association's Fortieth Anniversary Celebration all-day conference on Saturday, 25 June 2005 at the Friends Meeting House in Hampstead, London. The text is a slightly expanded version of the paper that was originally given in the same lecture format. Most of the papers given were devoted to the memory of R. D. Laing, who founded the PA in 1965. Although the event was open to the public, most of those in attendance were members of the PA, many of whom had known Laing intimately. Michael Guy Thompson was asked to base his talk on reminiscences of his relationship with Laing.

What I am about to share with you is not based on Ronnie Laing's published work, but on what I have gleaned from my personal relationship with him over the course of some sixteen years, from 1973 when I first came to know him when I came to London to study with him at the Philadelphia Association; and then later after returning to California in 1980 when I continued to enjoy his visits to my home in San Francisco on his lecture tours, until his death in 1989. So I knew Ronnie in a variety of contexts: as my boss

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(when I was Secretary to the Philadelphia Association for seven years while he was President), teacher, supervisor (during my psychoanalytic training), friend, house guest, and confidante. Over the course of these sixteen odd years I not only observed him in all kinds of circumstances, but we also discussed his views about authenticity and countless other topics, so what I share with you today is essentially distilled from these reminiscences.

I think it is only fair to warn you that what I am about to say is going to be both positive and negative, because Ronnie was both a wonderful and a terrible man, and his struggle to determine the nature of authenticity, to define precisely what he believed it entailed, and to measure up to that standard himself, brought out the best and the worst in him, as everyone who knew him can confirm. The positive stuff we all know about and that will be an enduring aspect of his legacy. Though many people have the impression that of all the existential philosophers who influenced Ronnie — and there were many — that Jean-Paul Sartre was the most important, the fact is that Ronnie could be cagey about who influenced him and how. Ronnie's conception of authenticity relied predominantly on the thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, the two German philosophers to whom we are indebted for the most radical — and for many, disturbing — conception of authenticity in a sea of other competing versions of it that bear little resemblance to how Ronnie saw or practiced it. A third decisive influence was the work of the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, whom I will discuss later. To understand Ronnie's unusual and undeniably radical take on what it means to be authentic and the extremes of behavior that he engaged in that he believed were consistent with an authentic sensibility it is important to know something about both Nietzsche's and Heidegger's respective views on this philosophical principle and the ways their respective views on it influenced him. Given the time I have available, I will be brief.

The popular notion of authenticity that has swept contemporary America and Europe reduces it to more or less whatever it is that one happens to feel, as opposed to what one is thinking. This goes all the way back to Rousseau (Guignon, 2004, pp. 55-60) in the Enlightenment who protested the emphasis that Enlightenment thinkers gave the role of rationality at the expense of feeling states that were more important to artists and the like. This is a simplification, but this idea evolved into the notion that one has an inner self that is hidden and consists of feelings that say more about *who* a person genuinely is than who we “think” we are, so the more in touch one is with one’s feelings the more authentic one is. There is the added implication that the more authentic a person is the more pleasing that person will be to others and society in general. In other words, the authentic person is a *nice* person and a loving person, the kind of person you might want for a friend. Carl Rogers was one of the champions of this vision of authenticity. This is also the characterization of authenticity that is a feature of talk shows on American television, popularized by such icons of public opinion as Oprah and Dr. Phil, both of whom have discussed the topic on their respective programs.

Now Nietzsche and Heidegger would have none of this, first because they did not believe in the notion of a self, so for them there is no “inner core” of feelings to get in touch with; and second there is no direct or necessary relationship between authenticity and ethics. In fact, behaving authentically can make one extremely unpopular, as both Nietzsche and Heidegger demonstrated in their personal conduct.² For Nietzsche (2002,

² Each has been accused of having been an inspiration for the Nazis or collaborating with them. The very fact that each refused to directly link authentic behavior with a socially-mandated code of conduct inevitably lends itself to accusations of this nature. See Thompson, 2004, for a detailed examination of both Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s respective views on authenticity.

2003) the authentic person is one who is not afraid to face up to the fundamental anxieties of everyday life. This special individual was embodied in Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch*, usually translated into English as superman or overman; a person who could come to grips with his fears and overcome the weight of his existence by accepting reality for what it is, unbowed and unafraid. Nietzsche rejected the Enlightenment view that society is in an inexorable process of evolution that will inevitably improve from one generation to the next with scientific breakthroughs that will make our lives more satisfying and countered that in many respects our lives are actually getting worse. In Nietzsche's opinion, our capacity to reason is not as objectively reliable as Enlightenment philosophers claimed, because humans are driven by passion, the source of which is predominantly unconscious. Nietzsche loved the Greeks and though he rejected the conventional view of morality — that we should conduct ourselves by a set of rules that are dictated by God or society — Nietzsche devoted much of his thinking to the topic of values and what kind of values are important for the *Übermensch* to embrace. Nietzsche believed, as did the Greeks, that courage is perhaps the greatest virtue for the authentic person to cultivate and he saw the *Übermensch* as a heroic figure. This is because it takes courage to go against what society dictates and follow the beat of one's own drum, so to speak, which is exactly how Nietzsche conducted himself.

It is telling that Ronnie's most famous and polemical book, *The Politics of Experience* (1967), in which he railed against contemporary society as a toxic wasteland, is an *homage* to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1966), one of Ronnie's favorite books. Courage is another theme to which Ronnie referred countless times, noting that etymologically the root of the word means "heart," so that the literal meaning of courageous becomes "openheartedness." So an extension of Ronnie's take on authenticity is that it requires courage, or guts, in the conventional sense, but that on

a deeper, more profound level to be authentic is to open one's heart to another person, which takes real courage, as Ronnie would say, because it is the riskiest thing one can do. This is consistent with Freud's thesis that virtually all forms of psychological distress can be traced to unrequited love, a thesis to which Ronnie subscribed.

Heidegger's conception of authenticity is indebted to Nietzsche, but takes it in new directions. I want to just stay with that aspect of Heidegger's thinking that had an impact on Ronnie's views about authenticity, which relates to Heidegger's rejection of Nietzsche's overly romantic characterization of his heroic *Übermensch*. Instead, Heidegger believed that all human beings are inherently inauthentic pretty much all of the time, because this is our lot and our human condition from which we cannot escape, though we can relieve ourselves of this burden momentarily with acts of authentic action when opportunities permit us to rise to the occasion. The rest of the time we are more or less caught up in the pursuit of our daily affairs of trying to get ahead in life in unremitting inauthentic fashion, in the sense that we court popular favor, compete for promotions or referrals for our private practices, seek to enhance our reputations and status by "looking good" professionally, lying at will as it suits us whenever being truthful is inconvenient or embarrassing, and so on. In a word, we get caught up "in the crowd" of our own device, whatever crowd or circle we call our own, and that crowd becomes the arena of our inauthenticity as well as our self-identity, but it is also the source of our estrangement from ourselves, which is where our authenticity resides. Now Heidegger does not strictly dispute the existence of a self, but conceives it as a construct that is never strictly mine, but a creature of the myriad relations that make up my world, which is necessarily different from your world, and the world of the next person, and so on. Becoming authentic does not, however, strictly entail wresting free of this so-called illusory or "false" self (c.f. Winnicott) in favor of a higher or better one that is genuine or true, because the self is always, given its nature, composed of compromising influences

to varying degrees. Each of us has the capacity of learning about and accepting these circumstances about ourselves, and in the process attending to deeper, more subtle levels of our nature that cannot so easily be reified into this or that personality trait or characteristic, but an indistinct *otherness* that speaks of the inherent mystery of our existence.

From Heidegger one gets the sense that we are imperfect, fallen creatures, who nevertheless possess a capacity for grace and forgiveness. One also gets the sense of a profound loneliness that is co-extensive with authenticity in both Nietzsche and Heidegger, because sticking to your principles and doing what in your heart you believe is right instead of what is politically expedient will sometimes cost you, not only public favor and job opportunities, but even those friendships that expect you to abandon your principles as a test of your devotion. These aspects of Heidegger's thesis had a profound impact on Ronnie's conception of and relationship with authenticity. In fact, the capacity to be honest about inauthentic transgressions and the wherewithal to own up to them was, for Ronnie, almost as "authentic" as being authentic! As we will see, this distinction also planted the seed of a certain confusion for Ronnie that became a source of rationalization and contradiction.

So what were the basic elements of authenticity in Ronnie's thinking?³ Ronnie couldn't stand people who he thought were "phonies," who put on airs and pretended to be who they were not, who were too shy to speak up for fear of making fools of themselves, or when they did tried too much to impress you. On the other hand he loved it when you were able to just come out of your skin and be yourself, which of course wasn't easy to do in Ronnie's company because Ronnie was never really

³ See also Thompson, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2003 for more on Laing's views on authenticity.

comfortable with people. Though Ronnie excelled at putting his patients at ease in a clinical situation, in social settings he could be boorish and intimidating. A lot of Ronnie's preoccupation with the nature of the true-self and false-self in his first book (Laing, 1960) speaks to his preoccupation with the idea of the inherent falsity that people erect around themselves in order to fit in with society. In effect, they pretend to be someone they are not and then get confused as to who they are, in a sense that is genuine or real, without contrivance. Both Winnicott and Sartre were influences in Ronnie's adoption of this language, but we saw earlier that the basic thrust of this idea was introduced by Nietzsche and Heidegger, though in Ronnie's hands these terms convey a contemporary sensibility of the human condition that is lacking in both Winnicott and Sartre.⁴ As early as *The Divided Self* (p. 104) the association between being "nice" and false or inauthentic was a prominent component of his thinking, a point that Winnicott (1960, p. 146) also attributes to the false-self syndrome. Though Ronnie gradually abandoned this terminology as his thinking matured, he never wavered from his distaste for what he called "putting on airs" or "pretense" which Kingsley Hall and the other Philadelphia Association houses were so effective at stripping away in relatively short order.

In fact, Ronnie's conception of the Kingsley Hall community and the houses that followed after its closure was explicitly designed to pare away such inherently false currency of behavior as social niceties, proper manners, and common courtesy that are the standard of social relations virtually everywhere on earth except in the PA houses! I

⁴ On the very first page (p. 100) of the chapter devoted to his conception of the false-self Ronnie offers a list of a dozen or so philosophers and psychoanalysts who he claims to have influenced his thinking on this topic, but I suspect he was reluctant to give Sartre and Winnicott the credit they deserved.

will never forget my first taste of such an experience when I attended a holiday reception at the Archway Community where no one bothered to respond to the most innocent salutation of greeting and where small talk was virtually non-existent.⁵ For those who lived in such places the idea was to simulate the same kind of interaction with each person, no matter how psychotic or disturbed, that you would experience with your analyst. In practical terms this meant dispensing with small talk entirely and speaking from the depths of your being with the same gravity, anxiety, and honesty that you would in a therapy session. The effect was both startling and profound, and served as a *rite de passage* into the life of the therapeutic community. All of the houses fashioned this experience to the personalities of the people who were involved there and came to be known as the “PA experience” or vision, but in fact it was an initiation into Ronnie’s vision, which was embodied in the PA culture as its defining sensibility, and still is. Over the years Ronnie seemed to become increasingly obsessed with this ritual and tried to replicate it in as many arenas as he could find, including his lectures, training seminars, and workshops. Ronnie could be confrontational and, to some, even cruel in the way he could get in your face and call you on this or that character trait or failing, a tactic he borrowed from Esalen techniques practiced in Big Sur, California in the encounter group movement, and taking it as far as he dared.

Yet, as often as not Ronnie could just as easily be uncommonly gentle, kind, and sensitive; it all depended on what you drew out of him in the moment. In a departure from both Nietzsche and Heidegger, each of whom separated morality from authenticity (see Thompson, 2004), Ronnie situated ethical standards at the heart of authentic relating in both his personal and clinical relationships. This is no doubt a feature of

⁵ See Thompson, 1997, for a description of how a typical post-Kingsley Hall Philadelphia Association household functioned in its adherence to Laing’s treatment philosophy.

Ronnie's need for and resonance with a spiritual dimension to his life that goes back to his university days in Glasgow, when he studied German existential and phenomenological literature with a group of thinkers and theologians led by two German émigrés, Karl Avenheimer and Joseph Schorstein. From them Ronnie developed the position that there is an inherent goodness or human decency commensurate with behaving authentically (which, as we will see, comes into diametric conflict with other views that he was to fashion about authenticity). One of the most surprising features of Ronnie's conception of authenticity is its proximity to the experience of, and capacity for, love, epitomized by the Latin word, *Carritas* literally meaning charity. I say surprising because few if any people who knew Ronnie intimately would describe him as a particularly loving or charitable person, but Ronnie sought it all his life and found its absence to be the pivot around which the most chronic levels of human misery derive. Kierkegaard and Scheler were important influences on both his understanding of what love is and the relation it occupies to authenticity.

One of the many books that Ronnie recommended to me when I was in supervision with him was Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing* (1956), a wonderful little text that speaks about Kierkegaard's notion of "double-mindedness," or how the source of human suffering derives from hypocrisy, and how its cure amounts to cultivating one's capacity for *agapé*, the form of love that early Christians associated with love of God, but can also be directed to other people. Ronnie was fascinated with all religions and conversant with many, including several schools of Buddhism and other Eastern traditions, but it was Christianity with which he was most identified. From Kierkegaard, Ronnie added to his conception of authenticity the idea that it is possible to love another person without, as he said, "trespassing" on them, which is to say, without doing them violence in the act of using them for one's own narcissistic ends. Though no relationship can be entirely free of narcissism, nor should be, Ronnie felt

deeply that it is possible to achieve a state of awareness with another person whereby one is able to give and accept love without doing them violence. This is a theme that is also touched on by Max Scheler, who devoted a book to this subject, *The Nature of Sympathy* (1954), another tome Ronnie insisted I read. Scheler, who was a follower of Husserl, made an important distinction between empathy — which he defined as the ability to intuit the emotional state of another person — and sympathy, which he defined as taking the capacity for empathy a step further. In sympathy, I not only intuit what the other person is feeling, I also resonate with it as well. In effect, I fashion a loving relation with the other person in his or her being. This idea also had a pivotal impact on Ronnie's thinking about the essence of love and its relation to authenticity. What Scheler seemed to suggest was that sympathetic relating is more authentic than mere empathic understanding, the conventional standard for working in a clinical context. You can empathize with someone and not feel especially or even remotely sympathetic with them, for example. Ronnie thought that Scheler was saying something very important for therapists to hear, that it isn't enough to understand one's patients, that one has to love them as well, in a manner that Scheler terms sympathetically, an attribute that can be cultivated over time.

But of all the sources of influence on Ronnie's notions about love and its role in human misery and well being, none compares with the importance that Christianity enjoyed on Ronnie's thinking. This was probably why the most frequent litmus for Ronnie's personal stamp on authenticity derived from the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. I can't think of another expression that I heard Ronnie refer to more than this one in terms of basic human decency, as a rough and ready guide to authentic relating. Ronnie loved to read from the Lord's Prayer in his seminars on various occasions, influenced, I think, by a book of Aldous Huxley's on the subject, where he would go through each line of the prayer and render a contemporary

interpretation. He was especially taken with the part of the prayer that speaks of *trespassing* against one's neighbors and the need to forgive both those who trespass against oneself as well as one's own trespasses against others. Ronnie seemed particularly sensitive to crossing that line, when therapists, for example, trespass into that space of vulnerability that is not therapeutic but injurious. In fact, this is the one irreducible element of Ronnie's critique of psychiatric and other forms of therapeutic practice. It seems to me that the heart and soul of Ronnie's clinical philosophy over the entirety of his professional career comes down to one inescapable conclusion: That psychological conflict is more often than not the consequence of uncommonly subtle forms of violence perpetrated by persons in authority — be they parents, guardians, educators, psychiatrists, and psychoanalysts — against persons, for one reason or another, who happen to be at their mercy, be they children, students, or patients in treatment. In book after book, and vignette after vignette, Ronnie was able to bring our attention to something that is such a common part of everyday life that it is usually too obvious to notice: That most of us are simply more callous than we allow ourselves to admit; and those to whom we entrust ourselves when most vulnerable are often insensitive to the power they have to inflict injury. As we know, Ronnie's most controversial message, and no doubt the one that caused him the most trouble, was the accusation that the very people who hold themselves out to be helpful — mental health professionals and the like — oftentimes make matters worse due to the extraordinary thoughtlessness with which they treat the patients in their charge. It was this message that led to the so-called anti-psychiatry movement with which Ronnie's name became indelibly associated, and even if it was a label he despised.

Yet, what are we to make of Ronnie's legacy, of his influence on the contemporary psychiatric, psychotherapeutic, and psychoanalytic scene and the treatment of the severely disturbed? It is not a pretty picture. Ronnie's writing had the

power to persuade and mesmerize, but not to convince those very mental health professionals that he so clearly wished to influence. For one thing, his position on schizophrenia kept changing. First schizophrenia existed, but it wasn't being treated in the correct manner; then he questioned whether anyone was actually schizophrenic at all; next, he said some people were indeed mad, but the mad ones were less crazy than those who were sane; and finally, Ronnie seemed to say that he agreed there is a thing called mental illness, but that psychiatrists and psychoanalysts are employing the wrong techniques; indeed, that the problem is using any technique at all, coming more or less full circle. This is confusing, but Ronnie could have clarified things considerably had he simply written a definitive work that summarized his final — or at any rate, current — word on the matter, from a to z, how he got there, and where he ended up. Sadly, by the 1970s, Ronnie's ability to write in a legible, discursive form seems to have all but abandoned him, as he wrote one self-referential, incomprehensible book after another, none of which sold very well. As his writing became more pretentious, his name and reputation diminished.

But the heart of Ronnie's clinical work was situated in the context of his involvement with the Philadelphia Association. It was in this context that I got to know Ronnie. I was the PA Secretary working under Ronnie's supervision for the seven years that I lived in London. Four of those years I lived in one of the PA houses and just before returning to California I graduated from the PA's psychoanalytic training programme. It was through the PA that Ronnie established Kingsley Hall, and later all the other PA houses that were the "laboratories" where Ronnie's theories about the nature and potential treatment of schizophrenia were conducted. At one time there were a total of eight therapeutic households flourishing in the PA, all of which were offshoots of Kingsley Hall. What of their results? Not quite as dramatic as Ronnie had hoped, but amazing nonetheless. What Ronnie finally concluded by the late 1970s was that living in

one of the PA houses might be helpful to a person who was in a psychotic state in the same way that, say, psychoanalysis may be helpful for a person in a neurotic condition. In both cases it depends on the individual and whether or not they are predisposed to making use of the experience that is offered them. It can, however, take time, and, like psychoanalysis, the results may be partial rather than dramatic. On the other hand, some people experienced extraordinary results, and I published an account of one of the most remarkable success stories of one man's journey in a PA household some years ago (Thompson, 1997). All of this effort, however, seems to have done nothing for Ronnie's reputation. Though the PA remains a vital training center and the houses continue to flourish, Ronnie suffered a dramatic break with his colleagues at the PA in 1981 and was, in effect, asked to leave. The death of Hugh Crawford⁶ the year before and the break-up of Ronnie's marriage a few months earlier both conspired to unhinge Ronnie as he fell apart and indulged in a period of self-destructive drinking and acting out that became intolerable to his colleagues and many of his friends.

Despite these tragic and irreparable losses, Ronnie continued to work and to write and to speak out against the inequities in the mental health community as he saw them. Ronnie didn't seem to care how many psychiatrists and psychoanalysts he alienated, and he paid a high price for speaking out against the kinds of manipulative clinical interventions that we continue to take for granted. The clinical establishment still hasn't forgiven him for it, even though some of them idolized Ronnie in their youth. I

⁶ Hugh Crawford was a fellow Scotsman and Glaswegian who joined the PA around the time Kingsley Hall closed in 1970, and soon after established the Portland Road household in which I lived for several years. Ronnie looked up to Hugh and turned to him in times of crisis, so his untimely death in 1980 of heart failure deprived Ronnie of the one person he could turn to when he was troubled.

consider this pretty heroic stuff, but it only paints part of the picture, and if we're to be honest, then the rest of the picture has to be painted as well.

What are we to make of a man who by the time of his death, due to his grievous behavior, had managed to alienate most of his closest friends and colleagues? Who delighted in bullying those closest to him as a form of sport that was amusing to no one but himself? Whose drinking and drug use drove him to behaving so irresponsibly over the last ten or fifteen years of his life that it was obvious to those closest to him that he was gradually but inexorably destroying a brilliant reputation that had only taken him a few short years in the 1960's to fashion? For those of us who knew Ronnie and loved him, witnessing this process was a painful and helpless affair and one to which every one of us fell victim at one time or other. We remain haunted to this day by this perplexing legacy of a man to whom we owe so much but understand so little.

I know I could spend my efforts simply celebrating Ronnie and singing his praises, but given that the topic of my talk concerns authenticity, I don't believe Ronnie, who is here in spirit, would stand for that. I hope those of you in the audience who adore Ronnie and who are loathe to hear anything of a negative sort said about him can forgive me, but I am going to say some things that may be painful to hear, but they must be said because every one of us knows what they are and there is nothing to gain in pretending that we don't continue to feel disturbed by them. Instead, I am going to try and reconcile Ronnie's unseemly behavior with his views about authenticity as he himself tried to justify — or rationalize — them, depending on your perspective. In other words, was Ronnie's penchant for bullying a form of unmitigated rudeness masquerading as a radical therapeutic intervention, or a manifestation of genuine authentic self-expression, true to his personal values but destined to confound the uncomprehending?

As I was preparing this talk I was reading through some of the contributions to

Bob Mullan's (1997) collection of papers published shortly after Ronnie's death, consisting of articles and testimonials by many of Ronnie's friends and professional acquaintances, some of whom are here today. Many of the contributions were predictably reverential, but what struck me most reading through them was the pain expressed even by those who were closest to Ronnie. Saddest was the contribution from John Duffy, Ronnie's oldest and dearest friend from childhood and a man who Ronnie described to everyone who knew him as his "best friend." John Duffy described Ronnie as a kind, sensitive, and loving young man, a really outstanding individual who was different than the rest, remarkably caring and gentle. He also noted that Ronnie changed over time and became increasingly self-absorbed and brutal. Some of this he attributed to his first and extremely unhappy marriage to Anne. But later when Ronnie married Jutta and became famous, although this marriage was happier than the first Ronnie's brutal behavior grew worse and encroached into their friendship. Ronnie's drinking escalated and he became increasingly aggressive and belligerent. Duffy recounts an incident at a local bar in Scotland when Ronnie threw a glass of whisky at a barmaid for no reason. What finally got to Duffy, however, was Ronnie's increasing self-absorption: Their conversations were always about *Ronnie's* pain, with less and less time apportioned for concern about Duffy's, until he finally concluded that Ronnie simply didn't care about him any more, but only himself. Eventually he had enough and ended their friendship, much to Ronnie's shock and disbelief.

Everyone who knew Ronnie experienced what Duffy was talking about first hand, the drinking, the anger, the bullying and aggression, crossing the line, in a word: *Trespassing*. And yet, Ronnie would often say that such expressions of anger were authentic, that it wasn't simply a case of being drunk or out of control, that there was method to his madness, *ala* William Blake. Ronnie loved Blake and one of his favorite adages from Blake was, "*The Road of Excess Leads to the Palace of Wisdom.*" Ronnie

seemed to interpret this adage as a personal license to commit all sorts of mischief, endorsed by Blake and Nietzsche, with whom Ronnie identified intensely. Such explanations, however, could be confusing because Ronnie could just as suddenly apologize for such behavior as if to say he hadn't meant it, while on other occasions he would insist, in a paranoid sort of way, that he was provoked, or teaching the bloke a lesson.

An example of this latter explanation was recounted by Maureen O'Hara (Mullan: 1997, pp. 314-322), an ex-patriot British woman who had been living in Southern California and working with Carl Rogers as a personal assistant when in 1978 she contacted the PA with a proposal to organize a one-day public event featuring Ronnie and Rogers on stage. As PA Secretary, I was assigned to work with Maureen to organize the event and it eventually took place at the London Hilton in August of that year with a coterie of people that accompanied Rogers and another group that Ronnie selected from the PA. The event was uneventful, but the evening before it was a night the participants will never forget. Ronnie and Rogers had never met, so he invited Rogers' group to his home the evening before the workshop to get to get acquainted. But from the first moment, in O'Hara's words, an air of discomfort pervaded the room. Rogers' group introduced themselves while Ronnie, Francis Huxley, Hugh Crawford, and several others gathered around in stony silence saying nothing until they were finished, and again nothing but silence. Finally, as the silence becomes palpable, Ronnie announces to Rogers: "If you and I are to have any kind of meaningful dialogue, you are going to have to cut out the California 'nice-guy' act and get to something approaching an authentic encounter" (p. 315).

At this point a testy exchange of views concerning the human condition was shared, Rogers with his everyone-has-love-at-their-core perspective, while the PA position proceeded to expound on the opposite view that it is probably the "nice" people

in the world who are most responsible for the terrible mess we are in. After this exchange was over, the two groups were more polarized than ever and not on speaking terms. It was time to break for dinner. At the restaurant near Ronnie's home on Eton Road, Ronnie isolated himself from the others and proceeded to get drunk, much to Rogers' and his group's discomfort. A group of people then entered the restaurant and Ronnie called out to them: "See that bald-headed man sitting there — pointing to Rogers — Well, he's not a man, he's a perrrrson!" (p. 319), alluding to Rogers' most famous book, *On Becoming a Person* (1961), in a rather dismissive fashion. As the room fell into stunned silence, Ronnie ambled over to where O'Hara was sitting and proceeded to pour some Scotch into her empty water glass. He asked if she liked it and she said she did, thinking this was a gesture of friendly camaraderie designed to defuse the considerable tension he had created. At this point Ronnie spat in her drink and asked, "Well, how do you like it now?" (Mullan: 1997, p. 19). O'Hara tossed the drink in Ronnie's face and the situation devolved into pandemonium. Outside the restaurant the two groups were on the verge of a fist fight and Ronnie announced that the Rogers group was not welcome to return to his home, at which point they announced that they were withdrawing from the event scheduled for the following day, and so on.

Though the groups eventually patched things up and went on with the program the next morning, the damage had been done, and Ronnie's and Rogers' relationship was permanently tainted. Later, Ronnie held to his conviction that making Rogers and his group feel intensely uncomfortable with his rude and provocative behavior was his way of being authentic, or real, in a way that they were not being with him and his group, because they were being "nice" in a way that was blatantly artificial. So he decided to get them rattled and angry with him in order to show them what they were really made of, the rot and gore, as it were, lurking beneath the sweet facade. Ronnie had convinced himself that anything goes when it comes to stripping away this artificial

niceness whenever and wherever one meets it, no matter how much trespassing is necessary to perform the exercise. I don't believe in Ronnie's right mind that he really believed this, but that he fell prey to this behavior on certain occasions when he simply lost it.

Where did this behavior come from and what made him so convinced that acts of aggression can be construed as an authentic way of behaving? This is one of those chicken or egg conundrums as to whether this sensibility originated in Ronnie's character and found confirmation in theory or the reverse. Ronnie was profoundly identified with his Scottish heritage, and a significant part of that heritage is that the Scots don't suffer fools gladly. Moreover, Ronnie had a mean temper and suffered from a drinking problem all of his adult life. One could surmise he was predisposed to perceiving authenticity as a license to permit these aspects of his personality that Ronnie identified with Nietzsche and Blake free reign. Another element in Ronnie's assertion that anger is a Royal Road to authenticity is supported in Winnicott's conception of the "true-self," outlined in "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self (1960), published the same year as *The Divided Self*. There and in other publications Winnicott proposed that everyone constructs around themselves a false self façade that is comprised of good manners and social niceties that serve to disguise what we are really feeling, and that we are often not even aware of what we are concealing from ourselves until we pop a cork or experience a good analysis. Under this façade lies the true self which is more often than not made up of feelings that we are uncomfortable with, such as anger, disgust, resentment, hate, even murderous rage.

According to this thesis, it is the angry, hateful feelings that are more representative of how we really feel about someone, whereas the nice façade is more often than not a lie. Ronnie elaborated on this theory in *The Divided Self* and, if anything, treated it with more finesse and insight than did Winnicott (whom Ronnie

happened to see in supervision during his psychoanalytic training). In a chapter devoted to "The False-Self System," Ronnie avers that

The actions of this false self. . . usually amount to an excess of being "good," never doing anything other than what one is told, never being "a trouble," never asserting or even betraying any counterwill of one's own. Being good is not, however, done out of any positive desire on the individual's own part to do the things that are said by others to be good, but is a negative conformity to a standard that is the other's standard and not one's own, and is prompted by the dread of what might happen if one were to be oneself in actuality. This compliance is partly, therefore, a betrayal of one's own possibilities . . . (1960, p. 104)

Although Winnicott would have been loathe to suggest that expressions of anger are always more authentic than, say, kindness or sensitivity, one can appreciate how such a theory may be stretched to fit just such a thesis, especially if one is predisposed to seeing the world that way.

Ronnie was a mass of contradictions. He was a solitary figure with a profoundly spiritual center that fueled his quest for authentic relationship, especially with people in his care. Yet he pursued fame and celebrity with such naked ambition that you would think his life depended on the adulation of strangers. Ronnie once confided to my six-year old son that from the time he was a child he had a singular, all-consuming ambition: To grow up to be healthy, wealthy, and wise — rich and famous! Fame became the driving force in Ronnie's life, and in the end it tore him apart because it could not have been more antithetical to a person who was committed to a path of

wisdom and authentic expression. Ronnie hated being famous and yet could not live without it. He despised the people who came to his public lectures and who bought his books because he believed — quite rightly, sometimes — that they hadn't a clue as to what his message was really about.

Ronnie probably peaked too early and became famous too fast for his own good, before he was able to handle it. Yet fame didn't come easily. His first book, *The Divided Self*, which will be remembered as his best, fell upon the psychiatric and psychoanalytic professional worlds like a stone, and its sequel, *Self and Others* (1969), published a year later, fared even worse. But in the following five years Ronnie threw himself into an incredible amount of activity during which he published several more books, voluminous papers and magazine articles, gave frequent public lectures, mounted professional conferences and congresses, founded the Philadelphia Association and set up its inaugural therapeutic household, Kingsley Hall. In London, Ronnie became a local celebrity with a reputation for radical theories about the etiology of schizophrenia and its inhumane treatment by conventional psychiatry. All this activity culminated in the publication of *The Politics of Experience* (1967), a collection of the papers he had published in the preceding five years in a variety of radical left-wing journals and periodicals, where he pronounced that contrary to conventional wisdom, it is the mad people who are sane and the sane who are stark-raving mad. Comments like that came back to haunt him, but they served their purpose. This message catapulted Ronnie to the ether sphere of fame or infamy — depending on your perspective — and by the late 1960s Ronnie assumed the role of an international presence and a guru to the Vietnam-era counterculture in America, where his notoriety made him a best-selling author and nattily-dressed, “with it” man of means. The fame he had craved all his life was finally his, but the price he had paid to get there was enormous.

By the early 1970's and the publication of *The Facts of Life* (1975) Ronnie's

ability to write had collapsed and his books became increasingly self-referential and pretentious and an embarrassment to those of us who worked closely with him and who, frankly, expected more from him. Ronnie's writing abandoned him as he became increasingly self-conscious of his status in the world and what he believed his audience expected from "R. D. Laing," ironically a false-self that had gobbled him up and now represented him before the world in his stead. This was the period of time that I came to know Ronnie, the 1970's, the beginning of his decline, and by 1980, the year I left London to return to California, it was evident that Ronnie was never going to write that last "great book" that everyone kept waiting for him to craft, to redeem both himself and his legacy.

It is perhaps telling that Ronnie's last book, which he struggled with for years but could not finish, was devoted to love, a topic that was central to his work, but a subject that I suspect Ronnie knew very little about. Yet Ronnie argued that whereas love in the form of *Carritas* is a corollary to authenticity, he also insisted that acts of cruelty are perfectly resonant with authentic form of relation as well. On some occasions, for example, he would argue that Jesus states in the Bible that you cannot be his disciple until "you come to hate your mother and father," whereas on other occasions he would claim that this was a mistranslation of the Aramaic that substitutes the word hate for "happily indifferent." It's no wonder that Ronnie could never finish this book, or even settle on a title for it. These views are as contradictory as Ronnie himself was, because his anger at his declining status and fame made him increasingly bitter as his star gradually diminished.

In his biography, John Clay notes that Ronnie once had a painting of Breughel's *Fall of Icarus* hanging on the wall of his consulting room on Wimpole Street in the early days of his clinical practice. Anthony Clare (Mullan: 1997, p. 3) interprets Ronnie's choice of this famous Greek myth as especially relevant; Ronnie, too, flew too close to

the sun, as a consequence of his elevation to the status of a guru. Ronnie desperately needed people to love him, and those of us who knew him know of the loneliness he endured as a child, the depression he struggled with throughout his adult life, and his disappointment with his own analysis with Charles Rycroft at finding relief from the torment he suffered day-to-day. Drugs and alcohol were a constant, but the real drug that Ronnie could not do without was the worship of other people, and the decline of his status when it intersected with the collapse of his marriage to Jutta in 1981 finally did him in. Ronnie went through a period of reprehensible acting out that severed his relationship with the PA and subsequently lost him his medical license. He spent the last decade of his life on the road without a home, at the mercy of the public he so much despised to support him through the lectures he gave all over the globe, more often than not in an inebriated condition. As he told me on one of his visits to California during this period, "They're not paying for a coherent lecture; they're paying to see R. D. Laing, and by God they're going to see him, warts and all!"

I think that even in these acts of rebelliousness Ronnie believed he was salvaging what little was left of his capacity to remain authentic, in the face of having sold out to a forum for which he had nothing but contempt. And, perhaps there was a grain of truth to this. He had opportunities for employment during this period that he was avidly pursuing in the form of university posts, one at Stanford University. Something was arranged through Rollo May and all Ronnie had to do was to show up sober and act nice, something, we know, was not easy for him. When the time came, he just couldn't do it. He arrived drunk and belligerent, blew the interview and that was the end of it, another sabotaged opportunity to be respectable, to play the game *their* way. In a way, I admired this about Ronnie, his inability to grovel, to act the part expected of him. I still see something heroic in his incapacity to pander to the crowd. I think I loved Ronnie for this and will always respect him for it. But when it comes to crossing the line, to

trespassing against others in the guise of teaching them something about how to be just as authentic as he believed he was, I think Ronnie engaged in acts of aggression that are impossible to reconcile with his views about *Carritas*, peace on earth, and the like.

Ronnie's last years were difficult ones. His popularity had ebbed; people thought he was dead. I suppose he effectively was. But his decline was also on a deeper, spiritual level. Ronnie's father became psychotic and died in mental hospital and Ronnie suffered most of his adult life from the fear that he was prone to the same Scottish involuntional melancholia that had afflicted his father and grandfather before him. He often wondered if he, too, would some day go stark-raving mad. It is said he was already dying from cancer on that fateful day in St. Tropez when his life came to a sudden end on a tennis court under a searing afternoon sun, struck down by a heart attack. Yet, however complicated and contradictory Ronnie's legacy, every one of us here owe him more than we can repay; and the world, despite its having moved away from environmental explanations for the causes of psychotic disturbance, owes him a debt of gratitude for bringing the treatment of the mentally distressed from the back wards of mental hospitals onto the front covers of newspapers and magazines where they have remained ever since. Despite his faults and, at times, disgraceful behavior, he was also, as his old friend, Rollo May once remarked, "on the side of the angels." He persuaded an entire generation, including myself, to put our money where our mouth is and enter the cruel fray of the mental health establishment — an oxymoron if there ever was one — and play a role in helping those who are too vulnerable to help themselves. And for that we should be eternally grateful.

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