

'A road less travelled': The dark side of R. D. Laing's conception of authenticity

MICHAEL GUY THOMPSON

What does it mean to be 'authentic'? In recent years, the popular notion of authenticity reduces it to whatever one happens to be feeling at any moment in time, as opposed to what one is merely thinking—the more in touch with your feelings, the more authentic you are. The added implication is that the more authentic a person is, the more pleasing they will be to be with, and the more valuable to society. In this article, MICHAEL GUY THOMPSON undertakes a more critical exploration of the concept of authenticity through the lens of the life and thought of R. D. Laing. Against the background of his personal relationship with Laing over sixteen years, Thompson highlights the influence of the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard on Laing, as he seeks to understand Laing's unusual and radical take on what it means to be authentic—and the extremes of behaviour he engaged in that he believed were true to an authentic sensibility.

What I am about to share with you is not based on Ronald Laing's published work, but on what I have gleaned from my personal relationship with him over the course of some sixteen years. I first came to know Laing in 1973 when I moved to London to study with him at the *Philadelphia Association*. After returning to California in 1980, I enjoyed occasional visits from Laing to my home in San Francisco, up until his death in 1989. So I knew Laing in a variety of contexts; as my boss (when I was Secretary to the *Philadelphia Association* for seven years during his tenure as President), teacher, supervisor, 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 is essentially distilled from these reminiscences.

It is only fair to warn you that

what I am about to say is going to be both positive and negative, because Laing was both a wonderful and a terrible man. 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 knows. The positive stuff we have all heard about and that will remain an enduring part of his legacy.

Though many people have the impression that of all the existential philosophers who influenced Laing—and there were many—Jean-Paul Sartre was the most important, the fact is that Laing was cagey about who influenced him and how. Laing'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—conceptions of authenticity in a sea of other competing

variations that bear little resemblance to how Laing saw or practiced it. A third vital influence was the work of the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, whom I shall turn to later.

To understand Laing's unusual and undeniably radical take on what it means to be authentic—and the extremes of behaviour he engaged in that he believed were true to an authentic sensibility—it is important to know something about both Nietzsche's and Heidegger's respective views on this philosophical principle, and the respective ways their views of it influenced him. Given the space I have available, I will be brief.

The popular notion of authenticity that has swept contemporary America and Europe in recent years reduces it to whatever one happens to be feeling at any moment in time, as opposed to what one is merely thinking. This goes all the way back to Rousseau (Guignon, 2004) in the Enlightenment, who

argued against the emphasis most Enlightenment thinkers lent to rationality at the expense of the feeling states so important to artists and the like. This is a simplification, but this idea evolved into the notion that we are imbued with an inner self that is

loving person, the kind of person you might want for a friend. Carl Rogers was one of the champions of this popular vision of authenticity. This is also a characterisation of authenticity that is typically featured on American television talk shows, popularised by

...Laing was both a wonderful and a terrible man. His struggle to determine the nature of authenticity...and to measure up to that standard himself, brought out the best and the worst in him...

hidden. Moreover, this self consists of feelings that reveal far more about who a person is than who we think we are. So the more in touch you are with your feelings, the more authentic you are. There is the added implication that the more authentic a person is, the more pleasing that person will be to be with and the more valuable to society. So the authentic person is a nice, and even

such icons of public opinion as Oprah and Dr. Phil, who devote considerable air time to this topic on their programs.

Now Nietzsche and Heidegger would have had none of this. First, because they did not believe in the notion of a stable self, so for them there is no 'inner core' of feelings to get in touch with. Second, there is no direct or necessary relationship

between authenticity and ethics, or how pleasing one may be as a person. Behaving authentically may make one extremely unpopular, as both Nietzsche and Heidegger demonstrated in their personal conduct. For Nietzsche (2002, 2003), the authentic individual is simply a person who is not afraid to face up to the fundamental anxieties of everyday living. This special individual was embodied in Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch*, usually translated into English as 'superman' or 'overman'. This is a person who would 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 progressive evolution that will improve from one generation to the next with scientific breakthroughs that will make our lives increasingly satisfying. Nietzsche countered that, in many respects, our lives are actually getting worse. In Nietzsche's opinion, our capacity to reason is not as reliable as Enlightenment philosophers claimed,

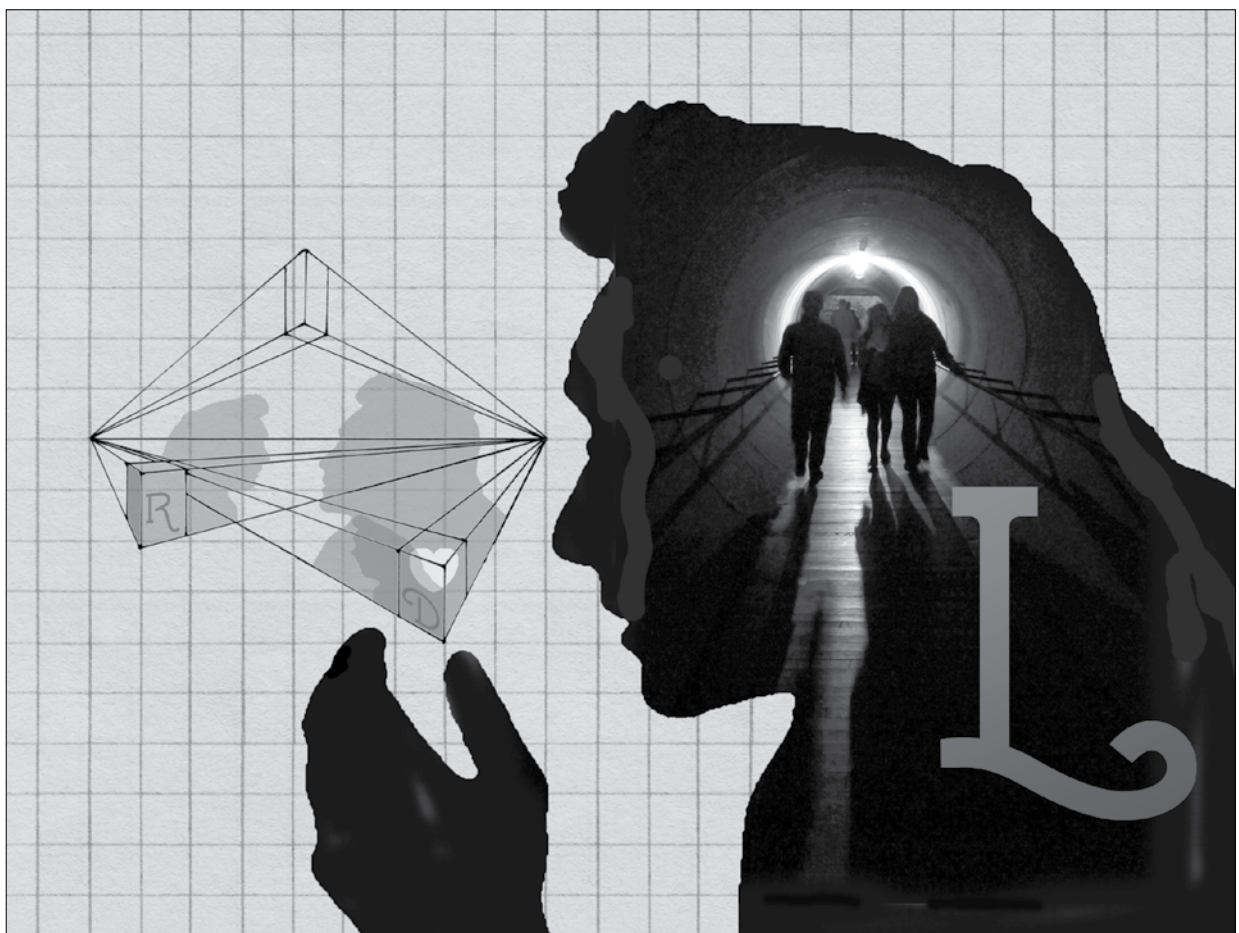


Illustration: © Savina Hopkins, www.savinahopkins.com

because humans are driven by passion, the source of which is predominantly unconscious. Nietzsche loved the Greeks and rejected the modern view of morality, that we should conduct ourselves by a set of rules that are dictated by God or the greater good. Nietzsche nonetheless devoted much of his thinking to the problem of values, and what kind of values are important for the *Übermensch* to embrace. Nietzsche believed, as did the Greeks, that courage is probably the greatest virtue for the authentic person to cultivate and he saw the *Übermensch* as a courageous and heroic figure. This is because it takes courage to go against the dictates of society and follow the 'beat of one's own drum', which is more or less how Nietzsche conducted his own life.

It is telling that Laing'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 Laing's favourite books. Courage is a theme to which Laing referred countless times, noting that etymologically the root of the term goes back to the Latin '*cor*', meaning 'heart'. This led Laing to conclude that the literal meaning of courageous is 'openheartedness'. So an extension of Laing's approach to authenticity is that it requires courage, or 'guts' in the conventional sense, but on a deeper, more profound level to be authentic means to open one's heart to another person. This requires real courage, Laing would say, because it is one of the riskiest things a person can do. This is consistent with Freud's thesis that all forms of psychological distress can be traced to unrequited love, a thesis to which Laing subscribed.

Heidegger's conception of authenticity was influenced by Nietzsche, but he also took it in new directions. Heidegger was a complex thinker and authenticity occupied a major role in his early thinking. *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger's magnum opus, was devoted almost entirely to his novel conception of authenticity. However, I want to focus on just that aspect of Heidegger's thinking that influenced Laing's views on authenticity, which pertains to

Heidegger's rejection of Nietzsche's relatively romantic characterisation of the heroic *Übermensch*. Instead, Heidegger believed all human beings are inherently inauthentic most of the time because this is our lot, and a major aspect of the human condition from which none of us can entirely escape. We can, however, relieve ourselves of this burden from time to time with authentic exploits when opportunities embolden 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, trying to get ahead in life in unrelenting inauthentic and expedient fashion.

According to Heidegger, we spend

*Heidegger believed all human beings
are inherently inauthentic most of the
time because this is our lot, and a major
aspect of the human condition from
which none of us can entirely escape.*

most of our time courting popular favour, competing for promotions and monetary advantage, seeking to enhance our reputations and status by looking good professionally, lying at will as it suits us when being truthful is inconvenient or costly, and so on. In other words, we get caught up in the crowd of our own device, whatever crowd or circle we adopt as 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 strikes at the core of our authenticity.

Heidegger does not strictly dispute the existence of a self, but conceives it as a construct that is not entirely 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, etcetera. Becoming authentic does not, however, strictly entail wresting free of this so-called illusory or 'false' self (c.f. Winnicott) in favour of a higher or better one that is genuine or true, because the self is always, due to its nature, comprised of compromising

influences to varying degrees. Each of us has the capacity to learn about and accept these circumstances about ourselves, and in the process gain access to deeper, more subtle levels of our nature that cannot be so easily reified into this or that personality or character trait, but rather an indistinct otherness at the heart of our being that speaks to 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 in the form of public favour and job opportunities, even friends who expect you to abandon your principles when they get in the way of political expediency. These aspects of Heidegger's thinking had a profound impact on Laing's conception of authenticity. The capacity to be honest, even about our inauthentic transgressions and the ability to own up to them was, for Laing, almost as admirable as being authentic! Indeed, the capacity to be honest about our inauthentic actions became something of an ideal for Laing that was more realistic than measuring up to either Heidegger's or Nietzsche's respective notions of what authenticity entailed. As we shall see, this distinction also planted the seed of confusion for Laing that became a source of contradiction and rationalisation in his personal behaviour.

So what were the basic elements of authenticity in Laing's thinking?

Laing could not bear people who he took to be 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 tried too hard to impress you. On the other hand he loved it when you were able to come out of your skin and be yourself, which of course was not easy to do in his company because Laing was never really comfortable with people and this discomfort was telepathic. Though Laing excelled at putting his patients at ease in a clinical situation, social settings did not bring out the best in him, where he could be boorish and intimidating.

A lot of Laing's preoccupation with the dynamics of true- and false-self phenomena 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. They pretend to be someone they are not and then get muddled as to who they actually are, in the sense of being genuine or real, without contrivance. Both Winnicott and Sartre influenced Laing's adoption of this language but, as we saw earlier, the basic thrust of this notion was introduced much earlier by Nietzsche, and then subsequently by Heidegger. In Laing's hands these terms convey a contemporary sensibility of the human condition that is somehow lacking in Winnicott and even Sartre, despite the latter's literary flair and penchant for drama. As early as *The Divided Self*, the relationship between being 'nice' and 'false', or 'inauthentic', was a major component of his thinking, a relationship that Winnicott (1960) also attributes to 'false-self' phenomena. Though Laing gradually abandoned this terminology as his thinking developed, he never wavered from his distaste for what he termed 'putting on airs' or 'pretense', modes of social interaction that Kingsley Hall and subsequent *Philadelphia Association* (PA) houses were so effective at stripping away and exposing.

Laing'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 behaviour as social niceties, proper manners, and common courtesy that are the standard of



J. WRIGHT

social relations virtually everywhere else except in the PA houses. I 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 or greeting, and where small talk was virtually non-existent. For those who lived in such places, the idea was to simulate the same kind of interaction with each person—no matter how psychotic, disturbed, or sane—that you would typically 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 might strive for 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. It came to be known as the 'PA experience' or vision, but in fact it was an initiation into Laing's vision, which was embodied in the PA culture as its defining sensibility, and remains so today. Over the years, Laing seemed to become increasingly obsessed with this highly unorthodox and ritual behaviour, and tried to replicate it in as many arenas of social

interaction as he could find, including his lectures, training seminars, workshops, even parties! Laing could be confrontational and, to some, cruel in the way he could get in one's face and call them on this or that character trait or failing, a tactic he borrowed from Esalen techniques practiced in Big Sur, California, ground zero for the fabled encounter group movement of the 1960s.

Yet, as often as not, Laing 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), Laing situated ethical standards at the heart of authentic relating in both his personal and clinical relationships. This is no doubt a feature of Laing'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 Abenheimer and Joseph Schorstein, the latter who served as Laing's mentor and father figure. From them, Laing developed the position that there is an inherent goodness or

human decency commensurate with behaving authentically which comes into diametric conflict with other views he was to fashion about it. One of the most surprising features of Laing's conception of authenticity is its proximity to the experience of, and capacity for, love, epitomised by the Latin term, '*caritas*' literally meaning 'charity'. I say surprising because few, if any, people who knew Laing intimately would describe him as a particularly loving or charitable person, but Laing sought it all his life and found its absence to be the pivot around which the most chronic levels of human misery derive, including his own. Kierkegaard and Scheler were seminal influences on both his understanding of what love is, and the relation it occupies to authenticity.

One of the many books that Laing 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 addresses Kierkegaard's notion of 'double-mindedness', or how the source of human suffering derives from hypocrisy, and how its cure amounts to cultivating a capacity for 'agapé'. This is a form of love that early Christians associated with love of God, but can also be directed to other people (Jesus Christ, for example, was said to claim that to love others is to love God). Laing 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, Laing added to his conception of authenticity the idea that it is possible to love another person without 'trespassing against them', which is to say, without doing them violence in the act of using them for your own selfish ends. Though no relationship can be entirely free of narcissism, nor should be, Laing 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 committing violence. This theme is also explored by Max Scheler, who devoted a book to this subject, *The Nature of Sympathy* (1954), another tome Laing 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 and embrace it non-judgementally. In effect, I fashion a loving relation with the other person in his or her being.

This idea also had a pivotal impact on Laing's thinking about what love is in its essence and its relation to authenticity. From the perspective of authenticity, you could say that Scheler believed 'sympathetic' relating is more authentic than mere 'empathic' understanding, the conventional psychoanalytic standard for working in a clinical context—you can empathise with someone and not feel especially, or even remotely, sympathetic with them. This might result in countertransference enactments on the part of the analyst—a phenomenon that has become so ubiquitous that it is now considered the norm in the psychoanalytic treatment relationship! Laing thought that Scheler was saying something very important for therapists to hear, that it is not enough to understand your patients, that you need to love them as well, in a manner that Scheler termed 'sympathetically', an attribute that, unlike spontaneous love, can be cultivated over time and with effort.

But, of all the sources of influence on Laing's notions about love and their role in both human misery and well-being, none compares with the importance that Christianity played on Laing's thinking. This was probably why the most common litmus for Laing's personal stamp on authenticity derived from 'the Golden Rule': '*do unto others as you would have them do unto you*'. I cannot think of another expression that I heard Laing refer to more than this one in terms of basic human decency, as a 'rough-and-ready' guide to authentic relating. Laing loved to read from the Lord's Prayer in his seminars on frequent occasions, inspired, he said, by a book of Aldous Huxley's on the subject, where Huxley went through each line of the prayer and after each one rendered a more contemporary interpretation of it.

Laing was especially taken with the part of the prayer that speaks to trespassing against one's neighbours and the need to forgive both those who trespass against oneself, as well as one's own trespasses against others. Laing seemed particularly sensitive to crossing that line, when therapists, for example, trespass into that space of vulnerability that is no longer therapeutic, but injurious. Indeed, this was the one of irreducible elements of Laing's critique of psychiatric and psychoanalytic forms of therapeutic practice. It seems to me that the heart and soul of Laing's clinical philosophy over the span of his professional career comes down to one ineluctable 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, 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, Laing took pains to bring our attention to something that is such a common part of our everyday life that it is often too obvious to notice—that most of us are simply more callous than we allow ourselves to admit. This means that those to whom we entrust ourselves when most vulnerable are oftentimes insensitive to the power they have to inflict injury upon us. Laing's most controversial message, and the one that caused him the most grief, was the accusation that the very people who hold themselves out to be helpful—mental health professionals and the like—oftentimes make matters worse by the extraordinary thoughtlessness with which they treat their patients. It was this message that became the battle cry of the so-called anti-psychiatry movement with which Laing's name became indelibly associated, though it was a label that he himself rejected.

What are we to make of Laing'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. Laing's writing had the power to

persuade and mesmerise, but not to convince those very mental health professionals that he so desperately wished to influence. For one thing, his position on schizophrenia kept changing. First schizophrenia existed, but it was not being treated in the most humane or effective manner; then he questioned whether anyone was actually schizophrenic and whether it even existed; next, he argued some people were indeed mad, but the mad ones were less crazy than those who were sane; then schizophrenia was a transcendental experience that amounted to a self-healing; and finally, Laing seemed to argue that if there is such a thing as mental illness, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts are employing the wrong techniques, indeed, that the problem is using any technique at all, coming more or less full circle to his original position. This is confusing, but Laing could have clarified things considerably had he simply written a definitive work that summarised his final—or at any rate, most current—word on the matter, from ‘a to z’, how he got there, and where he ended up, if only provisionally. Sadly, by the 1970s, Laing’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 and self-indulgent, his name and reputation diminished accordingly.

The heart of Laing’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 him intimately as the PA Secretary working under Laing’s direction for seven years. 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 Laing had originally established Kingsley Hall in 1965, and subsequently the many PA houses served as ‘laboratories’ where Laing’s theories about the nature of, and potential treatment for, schizophrenia flourished. At one time in the 1970s, there were a total of eight therapeutic households under the PA’s

auspices, each with its own unique character and feel. What of their results? Not quite as dramatic as Laing had hoped—which was to change conventional treatment of psychotic process—but amazing, nonetheless.

What Laing 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 available to them. However, it can 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). Despite all this effort and success, however, they seem to have done little to enhance Laing’s reputation. Though the PA remains a vital training centre, and the houses continue to flourish, Laing suffered a dramatic break with his colleagues there in 1981, and was more or less invited to leave. The death of Hugh Crawford the year before, and the break-up of Laing’s marriage a few months earlier, both conspired to unhinge Laing as he fell apart and indulged in a period of self-destructive drinking and acting out that became intolerable to most of his colleagues and friends.

Despite these tragic and irreparable losses, Laing continued to work, to write and to speak out against the inequities in the mental health community, as he saw them. Laing did not seem to care how many psychiatrists and psychoanalysts he alienated, and he paid a price for speaking out against the kinds of manipulative clinical interventions that we continue to take for granted.

The clinical establishment still has not forgiven him for it, even though a significant number in their midst idolised Laing in their youth. I consider this pretty heroic stuff, but it only paints part of the picture, and if we are to be honest, then the rest of the picture needs to be painted as well.

What are we to make of a man who by the time of his death, because of his grievous behaviour, managed to alienate most of his closest friends and colleagues? Who delighted in

We remain haunted to this day by this perplexing legacy of a man to whom we owe so much, but understand so little.

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 decade of his life that it was obvious to those closest to him that he was gradually, if inexorably, alienating himself from a phenomenal following that had taken him only a few short years in the 1960’s to fashion? For those of us who knew Laing and loved him, witnessing this process was a painful and helpless affair, and one to which everyone 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 expend my efforts simply celebrating Laing and singing his praises, as others have done, but given the topic of this paper concerns authenticity, I do not believe Laing would have stood for that. I hope those of you who admire Laing and who are loathe to hear him criticised can forgive me. I am going to say some things that may be painful to hear, but must be said because everyone who knew him knows what they are, and there is nothing to gain by pretending that we do not continue to feel disturbed by them. I am going to try to reconcile Laing’s unseemly behaviour with his views about authenticity as he tried to explicate them. Was Laing’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 innocent and uncomprehending?

When preparing this paper, I was reading through some of the contributions to Bob Mullan's (1997) collection of papers published a few years after Laing's death, consisting of articles and testimonials by many of Laing's friends and professional acquaintances. Many of the contributions were predictably reverential, but what struck me most was the pain expressed even by those who were closest to him. Saddest was the contribution from John Duffy, Laing's oldest and dearest friend from childhood, and a man who Laing described to everyone who knew him as his 'best friend'. John Duffy described Laing—Ronnie to him—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 Laing changed over time, and became increasingly self-absorbed and sometimes brutal. Some of this he attributed to Laing's first and extremely unhappy marriage to Anne. But later when Laing married Jutta and became famous, though this marriage was happier than the first, his brutal behaviour grew worse and encroached into his friendship with Duffy. Laing's famous penchant for drinking escalated, and he became increasingly aggressive and belligerent. Duffy recounts an incident at a local bar in Scotland when Laing threw a glass of whisky at a barmaid for no apparent reason. What finally got to Duffy, however, was Laing'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 Laing simply did not care about him any more, but only himself. Eventually he had enough and ended their friendship, much to Laing's shock and disbelief.

Everyone who knew Laing 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, Laing would often say that such expressions of anger

were authentic, that it was not simply a case of being drunk or out of control, that there was method to his madness, ala William Blake. Laing loved Blake and one of his favourite adages from his work was, *'The Road of Excess Leads to the Palace of Wisdom'*. Laing seemed to interpret this adage as a personal license to commit all sorts of mischief, endorsed by Blake and Nietzsche, with whom Laing identified intensely. Such explanations, however, could be confusing because Laing could just as suddenly apologise for such behaviour as if to say he had not meant it, while on other occasions he would insist, in a paranoid sort of way, that he was provoked, or teaching some bloke a lesson.

An example of this latter explanation was recounted by Maureen O'Hara (Mullan, 1997), 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 organise a one-day public event featuring Laing and Rogers on stage. As PA Secretary, I was assigned to work with Maureen to organise 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 Laing selected from the PA. The event was uneventful, but the evening before it was a night the participants will never forget. Laing and Rogers had never met, so he invited Rogers' group to his home the evening before the workshop to get acquainted. From the first moment, in O'Hara's words, an air of discomfort pervaded the room. Rogers' group introduced themselves while Laing, Francis Huxley, Hugh Crawford, and several others gathered around in stony silence saying nothing while Rogers' group was speaking, and then when they were finished, again nothing but silence. Finally, as the silence becomes palpable, Laing 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 brief exchange was over, the two groups were more polarised than ever and decidedly on unfriendly terms. It was clearly time to break for dinner. At the restaurant near Laing's home on Eton Road, Laing isolated himself from the others and proceeded to get drunk, much to Rogers' and his group's discomfort. When a group of people then entered the restaurant Laing 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 his thick Scottish burr and in a decidedly dismissive fashion. As the room fell into stunned silence, Laing 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, after taking a sip, she said she did, thinking this was a gesture of friendly camaraderie designed to defuse the tension he had created. At this point Laing spat in her drink and asked, *"Well, how do you like it now?"* (Mullan, 1997, p. 19). O'Hara tossed the drink in Laing's face and the situation desolved into pandemonium. Outside the restaurant the two groups were on the verge of a fist fight and Laing announced that the Rogers group was not welcome to return to his home, at which point they announced they were withdrawing from the event scheduled for the following day.

Though the groups eventually patched things up and went on with the program the next morning, the damage had been done, and the relationship between Laing and Rogers was permanently tainted. Later, Laing held to his conviction that making Rogers and his group feel intensely uncomfortable with his rude and provocative behaviour 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 socially desirable, but blatantly artificial. Rogers had cut his teeth on his own conception of authenticity and Laing thought he

needed to be taught a lesson or two. 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' lurking beneath the sweet facade, which finally came out when they exploded. Laing had convinced himself that anything goes when it comes to stripping away this kind of artificial niceness whenever

whether this sensibility originated in Laing's character, and found confirmation in theory, or the reverse. Laing identified profoundly with his Scottish heritage, and a significant part of that heritage is that Scots do not suffer fools gladly, especially Glaswegians. Moreover, Laing had a mean temper and suffered from a drinking problem all of his adult life.

Laing hated being famous, yet could not live without it.

and wherever one meets it, no matter how much trespassing is necessary to perform the exercise. I do not believe in Laing's right mind that he really believed this, but that he fell prey to this behaviour on certain occasions when he simply lost it.

Yet, to give Laing his due, O'Hara's conclusion to this story is both surprising and typical of what, for lack of a better term, we might allow was a method to his madness. Despite the anger and incomprehension that Rogers felt toward Laing, for O'Hara it was a life-changing experience. After returning to Laing's home to patch things up, O'Hara suffered a breakdown from the stress and strain of the evening, which culminated in a profound therapeutic experience that was life-changing. After she returned to the United States she began to see Rogers in a new light. Previously she had idolised him and believed strongly in his message. After the experience at Laing's home she said that she realised that she no longer needed Rogers as a crutch and that she was now able to stand on her own feet. She had suffered a crisis, but was able to take a step forward in her self-development, feeling wiser and self-confident. All apparently due to the way Laing had challenged them that evening. Was Laing's 'authentic' acting out an agent of therapeutic change, or a mere coincidence?

Where did this behaviour 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

One could surmise he was predisposed to perceiving authenticity as a license to permit free reign to aspects of his personality that Laing attributed to Nietzsche and Blake. Another element in Laing'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 Laing's *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 they 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 we are uncomfortable with, including 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. Laing elaborated on this theory in *The Divided Self*, but treated it with more finesse and insight than did Winnicott (whom Laing saw in supervision during his psychoanalytic training). In a chapter devoted to *'The False-Self System'*, Laing (1960) 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...' (p. 104).

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

Laing was a mass of contradictions. He was a solitary figure with a profoundly spiritual center that in turn fueled his quest for authentic relationship, especially with people in his care. Yet he pursued fame and celebrity with such raw ambition that you would think his life depended on the adulation of strangers. Laing 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, *and* rich and famous! Fame became the driving force in Laing's life and, in the end, it tore him apart because it was so antithetical to a person who was committed to a path of genuine wisdom and authenticity. Laing hated being famous, yet could not live without it. He despised the people who came to his public lectures and bought his books because he believed—quite correctly, sometimes—they had not a clue as to what his message was really about.

Laing probably peaked too early and became famous too quickly for his own good, before he was able to handle it. Yet fame did not 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, Laing 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, Laing 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 Laing to the ether sphere of fame or infamy—depending on one's perspective. By the late 1960s he 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 paid to get there was enormous.

By the early 1970's with the publication of *The Facts of Life* (1975), Laing's ability to write had collapsed and his books became increasingly self-referential and pretentious, an embarrassment to those of us who worked closely with him and who, frankly, expected more. Laing's ability to write best-sellers 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 of his own making that had gobbled him up and now represented him before the world in his stead. This was the period, the 1970's, when I came to know Laing, the beginning of his decline, and by 1980, the year I left London to return to California, it was evident to me that Laing was never going to write that last 'great book' that everyone, including himself, was waiting for him to craft, to redeem himself and his legacy that was once rich with such promise.

It is perhaps telling that Laing's

last book project, 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 Laing knew very little about. Yet Laing argued that while love in the form of *caritas* is a corollary to authenticity, he also insisted that acts of cruelty are perfectly resonant with authentic forms of relation as well. On some occasions, for example, he would remind his audience how Jesus states somewhere in the Bible that you cannot be his disciple until 'you come to hate your mother and father', whereas on other occasions he would assert that the word 'hate' was a mistranslation of the Aramaic that substitutes in its place 'happily indifferent'. It is no wonder that Laing could never finish this book, or even settle on a title for it. These views are as contradictory as Laing himself was, and his anger at his declining status and fame made him increasingly bitter as his once-bright star diminished.

In his biography, John Clay notes that Laing 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) interprets Laing's choice of this famous Greek myth as especially pertinent. Laing, too, flew too close to the sun, as a consequence of his elevation to the status of a guru. Laing 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 Laing 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 was probably what finally did him in. During the tortuous demise of his marriage to Jutta, Laing 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, who supported him through attending the lectures he gave all over the world, 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, that's what they're going to see, warts and all!*"

Even in these acts of rebelliousness, I think Laing 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. Perhaps there was a grain of truth to this. He had opportunities for employment during this period that he avidly pursued in the form of university posts, one at Stanford University. Something was arranged through Rollo May and all Laing had to do was to show up sober and act 'nice', something, we know, did not come easily to him. When the time came, he simply could not do it. He arrived drunk and belligerent, blew the interview and that was the end of it, another sabotaged opportunity to be 'respectable', but by playing the game their way. In a way, I admired this about Laing, 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 Laing 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 implied he was, I think Laing engaged in acts of aggression that are impossible to reconcile with his views about *caritas*, peace on earth, and the like.

Laing's last years were not easy. His popularity had ebbed, people thought he was dead. I suppose in some respects he was. But his decline was also on a deeper, spiritual level. Laing's father became psychotic and died in a mental hospital. Laing 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. Though it was a secret, 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.

However complicated and contradictory Laing's legacy, a legion of contemporary psychotherapists owe him more than they can ever 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 since. Despite his faults and, at times, disgraceful behaviour, 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 their money where their 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.

References

- Guignon, C. (2004). *On being authentic*. New York: Routledge.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York: Harper and Row.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1956). *Purity of heart is to will one thing* (Douglas V. Steere, Trans.). New York: Harper and Row.
- Laing, R. D. (1960). *The divided self*. London: Tavistock Books.
- Laing, R. D. (1967). *The politics of experience*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Laing, R. D. (1969; 1961) *Self and others* (2nd Rev. ed.) London: Tavistock Books.
- Laing, R. D. (1975). *The facts of life*. London: Allen Lane.
- Mullan, B. (Ed.). (1997). *R. D. Laing: Creative destroyer*. London: Cassell Publishers.
- Mullan, B. (1999). *R. D. Laing: A personal view*. London: Duckworth.
- Nietzsche, F. (1966). *Thus spoke Zarathustra: A book for all and none* (Walter Kaufman, Trans.). New York: The Viking Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (2002). *Beyond good and evil* (J. Norman, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (2003). *Writing from the late notebooks* (K. Sturge, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rogers, C. (1961). *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of Psychotherapy*. Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press.
- Scheler, M. (1954). *The nature of sympathy*. (Peter Heath, Trans.). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Thompson, M. Guy (1996). Deception, mystification, trauma: Laing and Freud. *Psychoanalytic Review*, 83(6), 827–847.
- Thompson, M. Guy (1997). The fidelity to experience in R. D. Laing's treatment philosophy. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 33(4), 595–614.
- Thompson, M. Guy (1998). Existential psychoanalysis: A Laingian perspective. In Paul Marcus & Alan Rosenberg (Eds.), *Psychoanalytic versions of the human condition and clinical practice*. New York: New York University Press.
- Thompson, M. Guy (1999). The heart of the matter: R. D. Laing's enigmatic relationship with psychoanalysis. *The Humanist Psychologist*, 27(1), 51–79.
- Thompson, M. Guy (2003). The primacy of experience in R. D. Laing's approach to psychoanalysis. In Roger Frie (Ed.), *Understanding experience: Psychotherapy, philosophy, and postmodernism*. New York: Routledge.
- Thompson, M. Guy (2004). Postmodernism and psychoanalysis: A Heideggerian critique of postmodern malaise and the question of authenticity. In J. Reppen, M. Schulman & J. Tucker (Eds.), *Way beyond Freud: Postmodern psychoanalysis evaluated*. London: Open Gate Press.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1960). Ego distortion in terms of the true and false self. In D. W. Winnicott & M. M. R. Khan (Eds.), *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment: Studies in the theory of emotional development* (pp. 140–152). London: The Hogarth Press.

AUTHOR NOTES

MICHAEL GUY THOMPSON Ph.D. received his analytic training from R. D. Laing and his associates at the Philadelphia Association in London and his Ph.D. in clinical psychology from *The Wright Institute*, Berkeley. Dr. Thompson is founder of *Free Association*, in San Francisco, a psychoanalytic training program modeled on his experiences in London, a Personal and Supervising Analyst and Faculty Member at the *Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California*, and on the faculty of the *California School of Professional Psychology*, in San Francisco. He is former President of the *International Federation for Psychoanalytic Education* (IFPE) and the *Northern California Society for Psychoanalytic Psychology*, on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* and *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, and the author of *The Death of Desire: A Study in Psychopathology*, *The Truth About Freud's Technique: The Encounter with the Real*, and the *The Ethic of Honesty: The Fundamental Rule of Psychoanalysis* (Rodopi), as well as over 60 journal articles and book reviews on psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and schizophrenia. Dr. Thompson has lectured extensively throughout the United States and internationally. He practices psychoanalysis in San Francisco, where he lives.

Comments: michaelguythompson@mac.com