

TURNING SPY SATELLITES INTO ENVIRONMENTAL SAVIORS

U.S. News & WORLD REPORT

JUNE 29, 1992

\$2.50

ROSS PEROT'S AMERICA

His boyhood,
his career, his
values—in his
own words



Human potential hits 30

Wiser and less raucous, the Esalen Institute faces the future

Large pillows line the far wall of the Esalen Institute's Huxley Room, and students in the workshop entitled "The Extraordinary Human: Theory and Practice" arrange themselves in a circle on the carpet. A Tucson veterinarian leans back, hands behind his head. A computer expert from Virginia sits cross-legged. In San Francisco, 140 miles north, the business of the 1990s is grinding away: Fax machines beep, executives crumple lunch napkins and pull out their MasterCards, word processors churn out legal briefs. But at Esalen, things move at a slower pace. The room is quiet, except for the sound of seagulls scouting for food along the Big Sur cliffs.

The workshop's title refers to the central idea of Esalen co-founder Michael Murphy's newly published book, "The Future of the Body"—that the human race may be poised on the brink of a psychosocial transformation as profound as the discovery of fire or the Industrial Revolution (Page 71). Over the course of the next five days, the 22 men and women gathered in the Huxley Room will try their hand at transforming themselves—dipping into meditation, self-hypnosis and the ancient Japanese martial art aikido, attempting to locate a partner



Early days. A body and sensory awareness session, 1971

across the room with their eyes closed.

Reunion. But Murphy's presence here, after a decade spent writing books and pursuing other interests in relative remove, signifies a new phase in Esalen's evolution as well: The institute, which spawned the human potential movement in the 1960s and marks its 30th anniversary this year, is hoping to leap into the 21st century with a highly sophisticated array of offerings for spiritual, artistic and psychological development. Plans are already underway, including a center for corporate seminars, a performing-arts center, research on "extraordinary human abilities," expan-

sion of Esalen's exchange program with the Russians.

Yet the spirit of Esalen, and the workshops that attract 10,000 guests from around the world each year to its manicured campus, are not likely to change. Nor are the reasons that people travel here, paying \$675 for a week, bunking with roommates and munching on vegetables and an occasional piece of fish. They come seeking something beyond the fabric of their everyday lives—the passion missing from their work, the love missing from relationships; they come to ponder the questions that tug at them in the middle of the night.

Not everyone, of course, arrives at Esalen with such intentions. Some are in search of nothing more than a dip in the legendary "clothing optional" hot springs, a massage or a chance to meet eligible members of the opposite sex. Others come to see the place where Gestalt therapy guru Frederick "Fritz" Perls once spanked Rita Hayworth, where Ida Rolf pioneered Rolfing, where Paul Tillich and Abraham Maslow and Buckminster Fuller and B. F. Skinner all dropped in at one time or another and celebrities continue to visit. Actor-writer Spalding Gray taught a recent workshop.

Yet it was the deeper quest—the ex-



Eastern disciplines. Esalen draws on a variety of techniques, including the martial art of tai chi, for self-actualization.

SCIENCE & SOCIETY

ploration of spiritual and psychological worlds—that Murphy and Richard Price had in mind when they established Esalen in 1962. Murphy, who as a Stanford University philosophy major in the 1950s began meditating eight hours a day, had a long-standing interest in the spiritual realm. Leaving graduate school, he spent a year and a half at an ashram founded by Indian philosopher and mystic Sri Aurobindo. Price was also a renegade, fleeing the psychology doctoral program at Harvard. They envisioned Esalen—founded on 120 cliffside acres owned by Murphy's grandmother—as a laboratory for experimentation with a wide range of philosophies, religious disciplines and psychological techniques.

As it turned out, they created not just a place but a national movement. Esalen became the mecca for an entire generation, building ladders to higher consciousness faster than the pilgrims who flocked there could climb them. "It was incredibly exciting," recalls George



Centered. The Zen meditation room at Esalen

Leonard, a former *Look* magazine editor who discovered Esalen in 1965 and now serves on the institute's board of trustees. "There was explosion, catharsis, adventure. The noise level in the dining room was so high that we'd all be shouting, and every few minutes, someone would burst in the door saying, 'We've just invented a new technique!'"

Yet the rollicking pace of Esalen's formative years spawned as many problems as peak experiences. There were takeover attempts by resident gurus, most

notably Fritz Perls, who tried to turn the campus into a headquarters for Gestalt therapy. Community meetings became marathon confrontational encounters. And the push for instant insight bred disappointments. Indeed, Murphy, who in the first three years after Esalen's birth attended 200 workshops in a row, gradually distanced himself from the institute's day-to-day management, devoting his efforts to writing books and developing institute-related projects.

By the 1980s, with Ronald Reagan in the White House and the ethos of the 1960s long faded, Esalen faced an identity crisis as well. Americans were rapidly abandoning self-exploration in favor of marketing seminars and mutual funds. Lack of leadership was edging the institute toward economic ruin. Murphy and Price, reviewing the "excesses" of the previous decades, were having second thoughts themselves. Murphy even considered selling. Instead, the co-founders hired Steven Donovan, a Columbia University M.B.A., to serve as president, restoring order—and profit-

YELTSIN'S FIRST HOST

Esalen's Russian connection

To most Americans, Esalen is synonymous with the trappings of the human potential movement. But in diplomatic circles, the Big Sur, Calif., institute is better known for its role in thawing relations between the United States and the former Soviet Union. In 1980, when the superpowers were still locked in a cold-war standoff, Esalen began sponsoring meetings between Soviet and American scientists and academics. In 1989, at the Soviets' request, the institute arranged Boris Yeltsin's "unofficial" visit to the United States—a trip that gave the Russian president his first chance to meet President Bush.

Two decades. Esalen's Soviet link goes back to 1971, when co-founder Michael Murphy traveled to Russia, intrigued by reports of research on parapsychology. In 1980, he returned to give an invited address on sports at a pre-Olympics conference in Tbilisi, and it was on that trip that Murphy and his wife, Dulce, decided to work toward improving communica-



Yeltsin. Esalen hosted the 1989 visit.

tion between the two cultures. "We kept thinking that there must be something going on underneath this political morass," says Dulce Murphy. "There were people there who cared deeply about psychology and philosophy and spiritual things."

Creation of the "Esalen Soviet-American Exchange Program" followed and a series of joint seminars on the psychology of international relations, "enmity" and the nuclear threat, and other issues like science,

education and health. As it gained momentum, the program began to attract prestigious donors, including the Rockefellers and corporations such as Apple Computer and American Express. It also attracted the attention of high-level Soviet officials: "Concepts we were talking about in the workshops started showing up in [Mikhail] Gorbachev's speeches," says Joseph Montville, who helped organize early seminars. "The program helped keep the faith in human relationships alive when cultural relations were officially cut off."

Now that the Soviet Union is no more, Esalen's diplomatic involvement is less central. But the institute's influence can still be felt: Gorbachev's recent tour of the United States, for example, was masterminded by an Esalen alumnus, James Garrison, who met the Soviet leader as director of Esalen's program. And the institute continues efforts to expand the reach of cultural interchange between the two countries. "Esalen has always been a place that gives people permission to be individuals," says Dulce Murphy. "People sense that when they come here, and the Russians are no exception."

ability—to the institute's chaotic finances and programming. One night in November 1985, Price turned to Murphy and said, "We're finally on the right path." The next day, he was killed by a falling boulder on the institute grounds.

These days, Esalen is a quieter place, a place that has learned from past mistakes and knows better what to encourage—and what to avoid. Indeed, guests find their search for self-actualization unfolding in a setting of sober efficiency unheard of in the wilder years. While they meditate on the lawn and attend such classes as "Mid-Life Crisis as Spiritual Emergence," the Esalen staff takes care of business. Program director Nancy Lunney personally interviews new leaders for the 450 workshops offered each year, screening out overly large egos and droning bores while striving for a balance of mind, body and soul. The Esalen brochure is a masterpiece of carefully worded enticement: There are no promises of miracle cures or profound insight.

It is no small triumph, this melding of 1990s sensibilities with the outer reaches of psychic exploration. There are warts, of course: The occasional middle-aged man who leers upon encountering an unclad female body in the hot tubs; the profusion of psychobabble that feeds an endless supply of California jokes. But the deeper vision that for three decades has brought people to Esalen persists, palpable in the stillness of the meditation room, in the powerful magic of the starlit Big Sur night. Strange things do happen here: A doctor returns regularly because, three years ago, he experienced something he could only classify as "mystical." A skeptical Harvard professor finds himself engaging in an extended conversation with a huge bird on the redwood deck. A woman, meditating on the cliffs, is overtaken by the certainty that there is a hidden order beneath the surface of the everyday world.

Perhaps such moments are merely an artifact of gorgeous surroundings and quiet thought. Or perhaps people are simply hungry for something to believe in. Certainly, some seekers leave disappointed. But in a world preoccupied with riots and recession, there are few remaining refuges that offer the opportunity to reflect. Says Richard Smoley, editor of the San Francisco-based journal *Gnosis*, "Esalen crystallizes the spiritual search—both the good and the bad. You may go there for the wrong reasons, or thinking that you just want to hang out. But once there, you may find something else you didn't even know you wanted." ■

BY ERICA E. GOODE

FUTURE CHOICES

Evolution of human ability

PAUL FUSCO—MAGNUM FOR USA/WW



Extraordinary ability. Murphy sees a coming expansion of human consciousness.

Throughout history, human beings have reported experiences that science remains hard pressed to explain. Some are small, everyday occurrences—a dream shared by two people, an abrupt surge of "super-human" strength in an emergency, a sudden intuition that a loved one is in trouble. Others are more extraordinary: accounts of telepathy, telekinesis and psychic healing, of strange visions and moments of mystical connection. A meditation student feels himself leaving his body and hovering above it. A golf pro appears to alter the trajectory of his ball while it is still in flight.

Michael Murphy's newly published book, "The Future of the Body: Explorations Into the Further Evolution of Human Nature" (Jeremy P. Tarcher Inc., \$30) sprang from his desire to gather such reports—across cultures and centuries—and put them together in some systematic fashion. The result is an 800-page, encyclopedic tome, a scholarly work in which scientific studies of the paranormal rest side by side with Roman Catholic Church documents, and discussions of biofeedback and hypnosis brush elbows with accounts of "ecstatic walking" by Tibetan monks.

Murphy views his contribution as following in the tradition of psychologist William James's "Varieties of

Religious Experience," a natural history that will be inevitably revised and readjusted as knowledge increases. But "The Future of the Body" is not just a taxonomy. In it, Murphy argues that—as a society—we might choose to nurture and cultivate such "metanormal" abilities by practicing "transformative" disciplines such as meditation and self-hypnosis. The result, he suggests, could amount to a kind of evolutionary leap, a psychosocial shift in human consciousness as significant as the development of language.

Murphy's effort, which absorbed eight years of his life in research and writing, has received favorable reviews. Yet he is acutely aware of the skepticism his chosen subject matter may generate, especially in academic circles. Indeed, before publication, he took care to vet his arguments with several evolutionary theorists. Murphy contends, however, that many scientists remain unduly closed-minded when it comes to discussions of unusual abilities and are unwilling to examine the evidence that exists—evidence, he says, "which is overwhelmingly convincing to normal people." As for the future of the human race, Murphy cautions, the move to a higher plane of functioning is far from inevitable: "It's completely up to us."