

R.D. Laing and me

Roberta Russell

*Guided by the research-supported belief that empathy and the feeling of alliance between a client and therapist are the active force in therapeutic change, and motivated by my desire to help R.D. Laing increase his income, in 1981, I suggested to Laing that he write a book telling his readers how to have a therapeutic relationship with a carefully selected person outside the confines of therapy. Like the heroine in the movie, *Pretty Woman*, he saved me right back, by counter-proposing that I join him in London to write such a book. By doing so, we could try to create a successful "how-to" book and to increase our personal options as one does in a successful therapy. That is the way *R.D. Laing & Me: Lessons in love—which is actually a true love story—began.**

If you want to know about R.D. Laing from someone who was touched by him, I can tell you. He marked my life like the burr upon a knife.

When I met the legendary R.D. Laing he was still a myth, with 12 globally published books to his credit, all still in print, and at least 10 biographies written about him.

Up close, where one could feel the lightness of his vision, Ronnie Laing was the most intuitive person I ever met—a fascinating man. He enjoyed his fame, like his drink, and was perhaps mortally wounded by his own fall from favour. Still seen as a guru by some, he was none-the-less residing inside the persona of a man not interested in growth, by his own admission, a man who was withering away, non-stop. Inside of that man, there was still the soul of a seer. The real Ronnie Laing watched the person of R.D. Laing wither away—he watched with detachment. The watcher wasn't withering away at all, just passing through the shadowy veil of maya like a beam of light.

Laing and I were introduced by our mutual friend, Knut, in August 1980, at a three-week-long psychotherapy conference in a twelfth century monastery in Zaragosa, Spain. Without much of a prelude, several days later, Laing belatedly offered up a subtle observation on my state of being, "When we cry for others, we cry for ourselves". Days before he had seen me stirred by the unexpected expulsion of a couple of the conference organisers by a council of their peers. Like a trapper staking out his territory, he was letting me know he had noticed me.

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Three months after that at another conference in Rome where we were both speakers, he repeatedly singled me out to join him and his wife at that time, Jutta. For that week we were frequently side-by-side and I felt then that he was grooming me for some emerging mission. Nothing else remarkable happened until a year later when I received a distressed call from Knut. Laing was in dire straits, Knut reported, with severe money and marital problems—perhaps suicidal.

At that time I was lonely, not the kind of lonely that makes you climb the walls, but a more pervasive, acceptable, run-of-the-mill lonely. Living alone, divorced, family dead, working for myself, and attached to the phone like an umbilical cord, I was hungry for real communication. I ate too much. Out and about in Europe and New York, I met plenty of interesting people though, but at 37, having been on my own for most of the prior seven years, I had recently begun to muse about going it alone, even though I really would have preferred a life partner. More than anything else, I wanted to be understood. I'm unusual; all this being alone has made me so, and getting understood is not so easy.

Although I had met Laing on my psychotherapy outcome reporter mission in Spain, he had become aware of my having run workshops on the subject of marketing, in Italy. I gave his troubles some thought as well as my own, and called him in London offering a suggestion: why not write a how-to-have-a-relationship book for sale in America (where he expected that the extra money he wanted was to be found). I was saved right back: he suggested that I come to Hampstead to see if we might do the suggested book together. We were to co-counsel with each other in the process. I was instantly transported to a magical world of myth, adventure and grand design.

In response to Laing's invitation on 4 July, I arrived on the scene in Hampstead, London, in November 1981, four months after Laing had "cleared a space for me".

We had our first meeting at Francis Huxley's house, where Laing had arranged for me to stay. Because Laing needed to get away, Huxley had given him guest privileges in his nearby Hampstead flat and Laing had merely extended them to me. From the airport I took a cab to Huxley's house and I called him immediately when I arrived there.

I hope you're not turned off by my occasional flights of hyperbole. I'm risking it, because I want you to understand how it really was back then. When I heard Laing's voice on the phone the magic continued; I felt as if I was connected to a direct pipeline of oxygen and my heart was beating like mad. He arranged to see me a few hours later, after he had completed his last therapy session. Before going out for the afternoon Huxley showed me around the high-ceilinged, five room flat, inviting me to stay in a lovely peach coloured room with abstract oil paintings, fireplace, a garden view and shelves of well-read books. Huxley eventually left for two weeks, leaving me alone in the well-stocked flat.

I sat on the couch...and waited. I had never been alone with Laing and was, initially, anxious at the thought of meeting this great man as a co-author.

Arriving in a black pinstriped suit, complemented by red socks, Laing explained apologetically what he must have considered his unusually formal attire, saying that he had had a meeting with his banker earlier in the day, an ominous sign. I thought him absolutely beautiful and harboured the suspicion that he had dressed this way to impress me.

His dark-lashed hazel eyes, peering at me through gold-rimmed spectacles, warm but wary. I could hear my own breathing. The nearness of him, alone in Francis's apartment, was intense. I imagined his agile wiry legs moving under his dark trousers. His hair fell softly in shades of grey and brown around his ears and met the darker beard tipped in white which he had grown since our last meeting almost a year earlier at a psychotherapy congress in Rome where we were both speakers. The softness of his multi-shaded hair contrasted with the intensity of the strong dark brows, twinkly bright eyes, and sensuous lips.

We sat down at the well-worn wooden kitchen table, facing each other. Laing lit up a cigarette and leaned back in his chair, one elbow resting on the table, as I set up my tape recorder, complete with extending microphone. We began tentatively and he soon told me that it would take him a while to become illogical, a desirable state from his point of view. Maybe he was anxious too.

We got off to an inauspicious start. After a few meetings, Ronnie asked for my understanding of his situation. He wasn't earning as much money as he wanted.

I set about describing Ronnie as resistant and defensive. I did it to his face. I did it in writing. The fear that he would turn me away from my intrusive boldness haunted me, but deep down I knew he wanted the truth, at any price.

After our trial by ordeal, my job emerged: I was to say what I saw. Fully employed with this Herculean, but congenial calling, I read voraciously, trying to keep up with Ronnie's prodigious references. If he mentioned it, I read it. He was moved by my eagerness and exclusive devotion and eventually we did get illogical, after all. There were several trips, by me to London, and him to New York City.

He did tricks for me, literally standing on his head, showing me his scars and telling his medical version of war stories. I was endlessly amused. He took all my confrontations in his stride and reciprocated—a constant source of re-adjusting observations of my behaviour. I loved being the object of his laser perception. Occasionally he would offer up suggestions to correct what he thought of an inappropriately considerate behaviour on my part: "Just because you are using someone's house, doesn't mean you have to invite them along to everything". His strategic interventions were always in private and had a conspiratorial tone. Like Scheherazade, telling stories to extend her life, I kept the material coming. Our closeness engendered jealousy and curiosity in others who wanted more of him. Huxley later told me that he thought we were having an affair, but we were still far from it. Laing only wanted our book.

The funny thing is that what he did with me went by other people largely unnoticed. They noticed that he drank, that he was brilliant, that there were lots of people plugged into him, that he kept on writing, no matter what,

that he felt betrayed. We told people that we were working on a book together. But what we actually did together was even more remarkable, and nobody seemed to notice that. I recorded us talking, then transcribed the conversations, parsed them up, and then analysed them in writing, as grist for our book. Laing, in turn, would receive each instalment eagerly as if he were reading a hot novel starring himself, and then edit me and my writing and wait for the next chapter to emerge from our karmic mist. I would encourage him to write more of our unitive story.

Meanwhile we unwittingly played out a love story of our own inextricable design. *What had escaped everyone was that the classic reaction to challenging one's basic defences, is hardly a series of encouraging edits and a mutual plan to use one's inertia as the cornerstone or an illustrative story of a therapeutic romance.* Of course my love for Laing and our commitment to each other had given me a lift, and I was inspired. That made me quite pleasant for him to have around.

Nevertheless pressures built up and before Christmas I was to go back to New York to write and transcribe our discussions. Before I left he asked me what I thought of our project. "I'm in love with you", I said hopefully, watching the tears in his eyes well up. "I've got nothing to encourage you with", he replied. "This is going to sound very unusual in print", he said, pointing to a still-running tape recorder, as he brought me back to the reality of the book. As always, he wanted the book. He was really very sad, though. Once in New York City tears just streamed down his face and he asked me if I knew why he was sad, as if I was inside him somewhere looking out. His juxtapositioning often left me dazzled. Sometimes I was his mother, his child, his lover, his acolyte, his teacher. He was a ubiquitous student and reader of people. Without words he seemed to hone right in with sagacious precision to the very heart of one's unconscious desires. His, was a heart grasp. It was impossible to be in his presence without being touched and changed. Once when I told our mutual friend Knut that Ronnie Laing was manipulative he burst out laughing and we both kept at it for ten minutes, before we could come up for air.

I wanted to please Laing—surely he was pleasing me. He'd lifted me out of my all-too-familiar New York surroundings and set me up in Hampstead at Huxley's house for a test run. He had honoured me by asking for my take on his situation without offering any false guarantees that we would definitely work together without a trial. After I had presented him with my unflattering perception of his situation, that he drank too much and was too depressed to write a best-seller, which was in direct opposition to his presentation of himself (that he just wasn't being marketed well), he had allied with me, anyway. Or maybe he finally signed a 50-50 contract with me to share any book royalties, because he knew he could trust me and that I would stand up to him and follow through, in case he had to fold up early (something he thought of in advance).

He continued to offer up increasingly prodigious doses of his attention and our stories unfolded. Transference refers to emotion being applied paste-job style from the past to the present without much individuation. But sometimes the character fits the fantasy.

I was so imbued with Laing that I once rented a movie theatre along with the movie, *The Searcher*, by the Russian movie genius, Tarkovsky, just because Laing said I should see it. You see I was following my own method, as I was following my heart. Laing was a searcher and I was studying him.

My method for attracting Laing and others in the past consisted of 22 steps¹, one of which was to get a history. Unlimited by the therapy hour and the economic necessity, a history meant reading about everything Laing mentioned and seeing what he was and hearing his music. I had the time (my successful computer professional's placement business gave me freedom) and I had the desire (I was searching for meaning, understanding, balance and for a man with whom I could have a mutually loving life partnership).

Laing and I were always in touch. Wherever he went, he gave me the phone number. From the moors in Scotland he quoted Ecclesiastes and tried to keep me at bay. My alliance with Laing gave meaning and structure to my existence.

Ultimately we mushroomed together into unexplored regions. We went back in time and our bond was primal and more real than anything else. His "don't let go", answered by my, "there's very little chance of that", gave me a reason for being. Magically I had entered into the realm of the knights of faith. A Kierkegaardian knight of faith is a man or woman who has a singleness of purpose and is thereby protected against despair. My eye was on the goal. If Laing's mother had left him with a drunken slut when he was a baby, I wanted to make up for it.

After about a year, he did have something to encourage me with. He came to New York City, joined me for a week, tracing the course of my life and he loved me. I, of course, was by this time deliriously happy. Laing, sitting in my blush velvet wing back chair, one leg straddled over the edge, wrote, "This book is about power and love. It is intended to give you the power to get what you love...". He said we would always do something together and played Cole Porter tunes on my Steinway, and wrote poetry on scraps, leaving them around my penthouse apartment. He told me that he loved me. Encouraged and knowing that he no longer shared an exclusive relationship with his wife, I asked him if he wanted to have a baby with me. Amazingly, he now wanted to think about it. In order to avoid deception, I immediately asked Jutta, who was still legally his wife, what she thought about this possibility. She said it was between Laing and me and the consideration was out in public—no denials forthcoming. Our story wended its way around the resolution of that issue. Months later Laing came back to visit me and told me he did not want to have any more children, at that time. (He already had eight by two wives, and had enough to do to keep up with that.) I went through a cathartic and healing interlude with him which I have described in our story. Some time after he invited me to stay at his house in Hampstead and continue working on the book. He began going around with another woman, whom I insisted on meeting. Jutta and I consoled each other. On Laing's next trip to New York, I in turn introduced him to the man I grew to love and later married. He was very warm to Harold, but suddenly dropped the book project with me. You can

imagine how I felt: here was a success story, I had lost 35 pounds and found requited love. And Laing had said he was allergic to countertransference! Eventually Laing was divorced and had two other children. The last one was with his former secretary, with whom he had spent his final years.

When I didn't have a baby, after all, Laing eagerly picked up the book project once again, writing and conferring about it right up until several weeks before he died.

By then, I quit, because I didn't feel there was enough of a result from him. (Our co-counselling project was supposed to be *mutually* therapeutic.) How could I frame our story successfully while pandering to Laing's sensibilities? He insisted that I do it when he was dead. Shocked by his reference to his own death, I was both forewarned and forearmed to finish our work.

Strip away all illusion, projections and carryovers from the past, what we had left was an honest, loving friendship and an inspiration for a life work in progress. And Laing's effect is still reverberating.

¹ *R.D. Laing & Me: Lessons in love*, by Roberta Russell and R.D. Laing (includes the 22 steps referred to herein) published 1992 by Hillgarth Press, P.O. Box 1440, Lake Placid, NY 12946. Available in the UK at bookstores; distributed in the UK and Europe by Airlift.