

Ultimately, the issues of contention are not really resolved in Welchman's account. Nevertheless, it remains an important and well-written book, which is small in size but not in scope. Perhaps, the contribution of the book can be best summarised by a statement Welchman makes in his preface. 'The study of Erikson and of those who shared his world and those who have written about him has been its own reward. When faced with some particularly confusing or intractable question, I could often find in returning to Erikson's writings, if not an answer, at least an insight, a thought-provoking response or a path to follow. I hope I have conveyed something of this.' Indeed, I believe he has.

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The Crucible of Experience: RD Laing & The Crisis of Psychotherapy

DANIEL BURSTON, 2000

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Since RD Laing's death on a tennis court in St. Tropez in 1989, at least eight books, and a profusion of articles have been added to the considerable collection of works by or about him. The latest addition, *The Crucible of Experience, RD Laing & The Crisis of Psychotherapy* by Daniel Burston promises to explain RD Laing's therapeutic technique. Does it fulfill the book jacket's advertisement, and tell us of Laing's perception of a crisis in psychotherapy, as well?

The book opens with a prosaic distillation of Laing's life story, followed by an admittedly self-

propelled treatise on existential phenomenology. Although the author's erudition is in evidence—he is assistant professor of psychology at Dunesque University—the connection to Laing's thinking is academic at best. Burston's relentless attempt to show what he perceives to be Laing's indebtedness to other theorists—Scheler, Husserl, Heidegger, Brentano, Jaspers, Keirkegaard, Buber and Nietzsche—is abstract and labored. These references resemble a course in existential phenomenology, more than a treatise on Laing.

As for the etiology of Laing's therapeutic technique, one of his most influential mentors, the interdisciplinary Eric Graham Howe, who introduced Eastern philosophy to psychotherapy in England, is not discussed, nor is any reference to his body of work to be found in this bibliography. Howe hired Laing as Director of The Langham Clinic in 1962 and then dismissed him in December of 1965, primarily because he disapproved of his use of drugs. By 1965, Howe, had published nine books and had been a member of the original staff of the Tavistock Clinic in 1928. Before their falling out, in 1965, Laing wrote a glowing Foreword to Howe's popular book, *Cure or Heal*, referring to him as a 'master psychologist'. 'What we have here is not a synthesis of different schools', he wrote, 'but an original expression in the modern idiom of that which all schools seek to express in more or less rigid and desiccated ways. But the expression here is supple and fresh'. Laing would, no doubt, have preferred this epitaph for himself, rather than the series of intellectual debts ascribed to him by Burston.

The exciting and disturbing thing shared by Laing and his mentor, Howe, is that they both brought to bear on therapeutic issues an understanding derived from spiritual experience, germinated in flesh and blood reality. A vital sense of the intuitive genius of Laing's therapeutic interventions is missing from this account, by Burston, who never had the benefit of meeting Laing. Even if he had had this advantage, he might have missed Howe's importance, as Laing had a way of dropping those who turned on him from his discourse.

In the course of knowing Laing and observing his sessions during our 9-year project of writing *RD Laing & Me: Lessons in Love*, a book that both depicts and describes our therapeutic alliance, much of Laing's therapeutic style was revealed. Here Laing acted as if discussing method was like discussing sex, as if it took away from the effect. Laing's reluctance to talk about methodology made Burston's task of describing his method all the more difficult. Laing's 'method' was more of an attitude, a presence, and a receptiveness to the person called the patient, than a formal set of rules. It was the suspension of the therapist's own agenda

in the service of letting the other's out into the light. Both points are illustrated in our co-authored book, by Laing's editing and sanctioning my psychoanalytic description of his behavior, which used terms such as 'resistance' and 'transference', while avoiding the use of such terminology himself.

Burston rightly tells us that Laing doubted that the really critical elements in psychotherapy could be expressed in words, but he takes up this Herculean task anyway, stressing Laing's emphasis on the present (p. 47). The author conveniently distills Laing's therapeutic goals to four points:

1. to restore the person's capacity for relatedness to others and authentic self disclosure;
2. to reduce anxiety by overcoming the person's feelings/fears of engulfment, implosion and petrification;
3. to help patients differentiate between 'true' and 'false' guilt and to minimize or abolish the latter; and
4. to make the 'unconscious' conscious, ... by illuminating the person's recourse to pretense and self-deception ... and elucidating patterns of collusion and/or mystification ... (p. 51).

Furthermore, Burston reduces Laing's positive methodological recommendations to only two dictums:

1. to express tact, courtesy, and empathy for patients; and
2. be fully awake, aware, and present to them.

Unfortunately, these statements do not depict Laing's capacity for therapeutic relationship, nor do they sufficiently differentiate him from most practitioners. In fact, I observed Laing to be quite unusual in his therapeutic approach. He might be playful with a patient, and go with him to watch old war movies, or join him in song with a piano accompaniment. He was ever willing and able to participate in another's world. A believer in the healing benefits that could be found in altered states, he was not afraid of losing himself in this extension, either. Laing tended to the patients according to their wants and their needs.

Actually, Laing wasn't known for the courteous behavior advised in Burston's first point, and could be quite confrontational with patients and friends alike. In therapy or out, he didn't hesitate to point out inappropriate or maladaptive behavior in others.

The uniqueness of Laing's way was that he brought his compassion, sagacity and wit, to a wide diversity of patients, without distancing himself from them with diagnostic reification. Many people experienced being closer to him than anyone else, even some who only knew him from his writing. Laing was quite good at establishing the personal trust that precedes a therapeutic alliance, though,

and he did this through honesty and attention. After a strategic and expensive therapeutic session with a female patient in New York City, at which I was present, he asked her if she had received her money's worth, a rather uncommon question from any professional to his client. She had.

The crisis referred to in *RD Laing and the Crisis of Psychotherapy*, which apparently refers to the impending death of psychotherapy and a loss of some of the exclusivity of professional practice, is contrived, as it relates to Laing. Laing did not fear accountability. Neither did he try to keep psychotherapy as a closely held profession. On the contrary, he embraced the opportunity to increase the options for people to help each other. When asked by a student for an explanation of psychotherapy, Laing recommended a reading of *Report of Effective Psychotherapy: Legislative Testimony* (1981, 1994) which he had described as 'illuminating and interesting. A useful piece of work ...', even though it summarized and analyzed the egalitarian findings of psychotherapy outcome research. When appropriate, he told patients to take care of each other. Laing was clearly holding on to his profession with an open hand.

RD Laing's effect on the world of psychotherapy is present and still reverberates in those who were touched by him. The whole field of psychotherapy has been altered and empowered by his ideas. Although Burston's book attempts to place Laing in an intellectual zeitgeist, it suffers from the proverbial hardening of the categories, and fails to convey the vitality and subtlety that was Laing's gift.

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RD Laing & Me: Lessons in Love. Lake Placid NY: Hillgarth Press, 1992.

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Identity: A Reader

PAUL DU GAY, JESSICA EVANS AND PETER REDMAN (eds)

Open University Press/Sage

386 pp.

In his 'A note on "Status"', at seven pages, one of the shorter of thirty essays and extracts in this collection, T.H. Marshall, a former Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics, tries to exemplify the benefits to be gained from precision in the use of sociological and psychological