

Like countless spiritual pilgrims, Esalen Institute faces its own midlife crisis

by [Don Lattin](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service BIG SUR, Calif. (RNS) Perched atop the rugged splendor of the California coast south of Monterey, the Esalen Institute is the mother church for people who call themselves "spiritual but not religious." Over the last five decades, hundreds of thousands of seekers have come to this incubator of East-meets-West spirituality looking for new ways to bring together body, mind, psyche and soul.

But today, as this iconic hot springs spa and retreat center celebrates its 50th birthday, a bitter dispute has broken out over its future. Like the many "seminarians" who come here after losing a spouse or a job, Esalen now faces its own midlife crisis.

The institute was founded in 1962 by two charismatic Stanford University graduates, Michael Murphy and Richard Price. Murphy (whose family owned a funky hot springs motel at Big Sur) and Price (the scion of a wealthy Chicago family) were looking to start something new. Murphy had already been to India in search of spiritual truth, and Price was looking for a more humane approach to helping people suffering from mental illness, himself included.

Big Sur was already known in the 1950s as a mecca for beatniks and other bohemians, and Esalen continued that countercultural tradition into the 1960s and 1970s. People came here to study yoga, meditation, and massage; to take psychedelic drugs; and to scream, cry and/or laugh their way through encounter groups with a series of avant-garde psychotherapists and other self-styled prophets of the New Age.

Much to the dismay of Murphy, who was the institute's more intellectual co-founder, Esalen became infamous for hedonistic seminarians who to this day frolic buck naked at the co-ed baths, where outdoor massage tables overlook stone pools -- all of it precariously hung over the left-leaning edge of the American continent.

David Price, the son of the late Richard Price and a former general manager of the institute, is one of many Esalen veterans who complain that the place has lost its edge. Others point to upgraded rooms in which a spiritual seeker can spend up to \$1,595 for a weekend workshop. Standard rooms, with two or three people sharing a room and bath, cost \$730 per person for the weekend.

What began with a burst of hippie idealism, they say, is turning into a spa for the 1 percent. There's even some talk of an "Occupy Esalen" protest.

Some staff members, workshop leaders and temporary "work scholar" volunteers have begun gathering in a daily "circle of silence" to protest recent layoffs and staff changes designed to improve efficiency. Meanwhile, the blogosphere is abuzz with "Esalen Friends" letting off steam on a Facebook page.

"The community has become more tightly regulated," said Price, who was born at Esalen in 1963 and now lives in Poland. "These people are not just a labor force. There's always been a priority set for the people who work here to also be able to work on themselves."

Virginia Lea Arnone, a former staffer, said Esalen is now run by "business men-corporate types who have never lived the Big Sur life."

"They are not psychologists or spiritual teachers. They mean well but are destroying the very essence of Esalen life. It's like taking a beautiful wild bird and putting it in a cage in order to sell it or even preserve it."

Esalen President Gordon Wheeler said most of the people stirring up discontent "have not been here for quite a long time."

"They are remembering a time when the world was different. People didn't have to show up in the same way," said Wheeler, a Gestalt therapist who first taught here in 1997 and went on to become the CEO.

"Sometimes we make mistakes, but we certainly don't want to turn into one of today's big bad corporations ... Everything we do here is about the evolution of

spiritual transformation."

Jeffrey Kripal, chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Rice University and the author of "Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion," said the institute's impact on American society "is largely indirect, but also immense and profound," especially with the rising number of Americans who refer to themselves as "spiritual but not religious."

"This group's interest in science, the body, modern psychology, and personal experience -- all of these things have been celebrated and pioneered by Esalen in unique and effective ways," he said.

Esalen has always provided an eclectic course offering, and this summer's workshops are no exception. They will include sessions titled, "Writing and Knowing," "Advanced Yoga for Everyone," "Introduction to Radical Aliveness," and "Immediate Level Chinese Pulse Diagnosis and Integrating Western and Traditional Chinese Herbal Medicine."

Kripal, who has worked closely with an Esalen think tank known as the Center for Theory and Research, said he has "a lot of faith in the community and the administration" and thinks the current troubles "will work themselves out, as they always have."

"Esalen is going through a classic generational process that sociologists call the 'institutionalization of charisma.' Every new religious movement has to figure out how to preserve and pass on the charisma of its founders and visionaries to the next generations. It is never easy, and it is always contentious. "