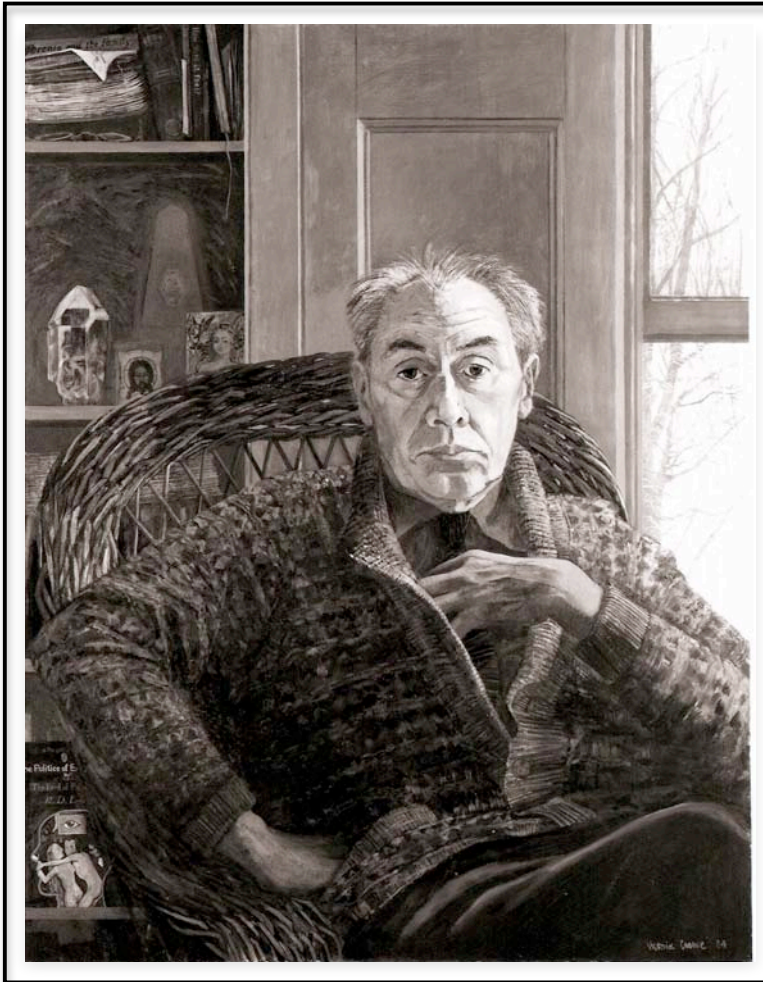


# EDITORIAL<sup>1</sup>

THEODOR ITTEN

---



This special issue is dedicated to the life, the work, and the extraordinary person that was R.D. Laing. His close and oldest friend, social anthropologist Francis Huxley, gave a moving and eye-wetting farewell address at the memorial and thanksgiving service at St. James's, Piccadilly, in January 1990. "*I honour him more than I can tell you,*" he said, while reminding us of Laing's personal struggle for a truthful life and his "*psychic fist hitting at the navel of insincerity.*" This sentence became the key for John Clay, to write Laing's biography, subtitled: *A Divided Self*. Laing saw his life as a search for his true self and encouraged others, be

they family, patients, friends, foes, readers and colleagues to join him on that arduous, lie-challenging journey to an authentic paradise. Of course, even being on course, we will never reach any permanency in this state, which - more often than not - comes as a fleeting moment in our ordinary and normal life. "*I am a student of my own nature,*" he lectured in 1972 to an American audience, "*I can only tell you how my life has gone. It has been a very circuitous journey ... in a sense, I suppose it's just the story of a mid-twentieth century intellectual. I suppose I am one of the symptoms of the times.*"

This special edition commemorates the 50 years of publication of Laing's: *The Divided Self*. Eight publishers rejected the book at first; some of Laing's famous colleagues such as

---

<sup>1</sup> The picture above is a portrait of R.D. Laing, by Victoria Crowe, and is the property of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (Cat: PG 2616). It is reprinted here, with their special permission.

Winnicott critically supported this work; others like Bowlby had their strong reservations. When the book came out in a Penguin paperback edition in 1965, it sold over 380,000 copies in the first five years, to Laing's great surprise. It continues to sell very well indeed and has been translated into virtually every other language in which books are published (Smith, 1982).

When Victoria Brittain interviewed Laing in 1972, after his return from his sabbatical in Sri Lanka, he saw the success of *The Divided Self*, "... as a reflection of how many people knew the uncomfortable experience of living with an inner reality which does not correspond to the apparent outer reality of the world." (Brittain, 1972) In other words, we are living within a family embedded in a society, which teaches us to play roles and fulfill functions, which cut us off, "... from our deepest feelings and needs: it alienates us from ourselves." (Berman, 1970)

Few people at that time had been able to get through to patients hiding their true self within a closed schizophrenic world. Laing was able to make this form of "being-in-the-world" intelligible. He explored the soul's underworld journey into madness even further, while still returning to tell the tale. In giving Jesse Watkins, the late well-known sculptor, room in *The Politics of Experience* (in Chapter 7), to recount his Ten-Day Voyage, full of painful treasures from having gone inside and downwards, thereby freeing himself from his anxiety of living his life, letting go of the protective false self, which served as a detached, disembodied hiding place for his core being.

*"When I came out of hospital, I was there for about three months altogether, when I came out I supposedly felt that everything was much more real and that it – than it had been before. The grass was greener, the sun was shining brighter, and people were more alive, I could see them clearer. I could see the bad things and the good things and all that. I was much more aware."* (Laing, 1967)

Watkins describes how he was suddenly enriched with an enormity of inner and outer knowing. He experienced his journey, as numerous others have done after and before him, as a natural way of healing.

In his first famous work, *The Divided Self*, Laing, a specialist in events in inner space and time, made a deep impact in his appeal that the plight of those among us, who suffer from mental disturbance, needs to be taken absolutely seriously. My wish, to put pen to paper in order to commemorate this event half a century ago, went out to a few colleagues and friends. For once I chose to ask others and not the same dear old folks, who have already, since his death 22 years ago, written extensively about Ronnie Laing.

His books, *The Divided Self*, *The Self and Others*, *The Politics of Experience*, *Knots*, and *The Politics of the Family*, as well as his advocacy for expressed emotions and clarification of mystification in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* all made a profound impact on our profession and on lay people. John Clay brought this to a point:

*“Many readers felt their own voices were being articulated for the first time; Laing’s genius lay in the ability to say what so many knew intuitively, but had never thought to articulate before. His writings touched people’s secret minds.”* (Clay, 1996, p. 270)

Some of us, assembled in this special issue, have known him personally as friend, colleague and teacher. The younger ones only know him from his work either through his writing, lectures or film appearances. So what is on offer?

First ‘his masters voice’, Laing himself was broadcast on Swiss-German-Radio, DRS2, on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1983. Here, you can read the first publication of the transcript of that broadcast.

Befitting a long friendship, Francis Huxley, comes second to none, with his obituary words, spelling out his sympathy for Laing, whilst not flinching from shining his torchlight on his darker sides.

Philosopher Ljiljana Filipovic, from Zagreb, takes up the thread, which she explored in her book on Laing, challenging our profession and society by questioning the meaning and role of the psychotherapist professionals, as well as the concepts of sanity and madness which form the axiomatic ground for theory-making.

As befits demystifying mystifiers like Laing, David Abrahamson’s reflects on Laing’s and others discrepant accounts of the by-now well-known ‘rumpus room’ experiment at Gartnavel Royal Hospital (1953-1955). Laing’s actual interactions in the ‘rumpus room’ were not always as he made them out to be and became divorced from clinical realities as other witnessed them.

Voyce Hendrix was one of the first staff members in the Soteria-House, founded by Loren Mosher in California. Following the latter’s stay in London in the mid 1960’s, learning from Anna Freud as well as Laing, Soteria became the major continuation of therapeutic housing, first tried out by Laing and others in Kingsley Hall. Soteria (California and Bern) became the best social phenomenological empirically researched alternative to mental health establishments. Hendrix’s and others skilled humane intervention, in being with, rather than doing for, allowed a high rate of social and psychological recovery without psychopharmacological medication.

My own musing considers Laing’s issues in *The Divided Self*, with its claim for existential analysis’s aid to lost souls. How Laing’s ‘warming up’ and ‘uniting of divided souls’ works, can be witnessed and comprehended through his case stories, spread like field notes in all his latter books as voices of experience. He did lend his voice to madness in order to convey how we can understand persons diagnosed as so-called ‘psychotics’.

How Laing’s theoretical ideas, based on his experience in the field of psychiatry, psychoanalysis and family therapy, were taught over a period of 40 years at an English University is shown by Brian Evans. I was one of his students, at Enfield College (1974-78), who picked up his critical enthusiasm for Laing and his work. Evans tells a vivid story of change in both students

and teaching context, in his unique paper on the impact of the ideas of Laing on English psychology students from the 1960s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Next, in her open fashion, Emmy van Deurzen, Professor in Psychotherapy, reflects on her encounters with Laing and the Arbours Association, as well as the Philadelphia Association and the anti-psychiatry movement of the late 1970's and early 1980's, with a very candid touch. Here we can witness, how projections onto Laing, as the great existential thinker, are taken back and made good use of in going one's own way.

Putting Laing into the context of post-modern thinking is Ron Roberts's great ability in his essay on Sanity, Madness & Memory. As a well-versed reader at Kingston University, he argues that the legacy of Laing's work extends beyond the practical and theoretical realms of service user's emancipation.

Bruce Scott, a PhD in Psychology and recent graduate of the Philadelphia Association's training program in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, lets us in on his experience of the inner self's gestation of becoming a professional in 'soul-making'. Being a patient in psychotherapy and training as a psychotherapist both have roots in similar experiences. Many a patient has identified with his or her psychotherapist, wanted and did become a therapist, and then realized, there was no inner calling.

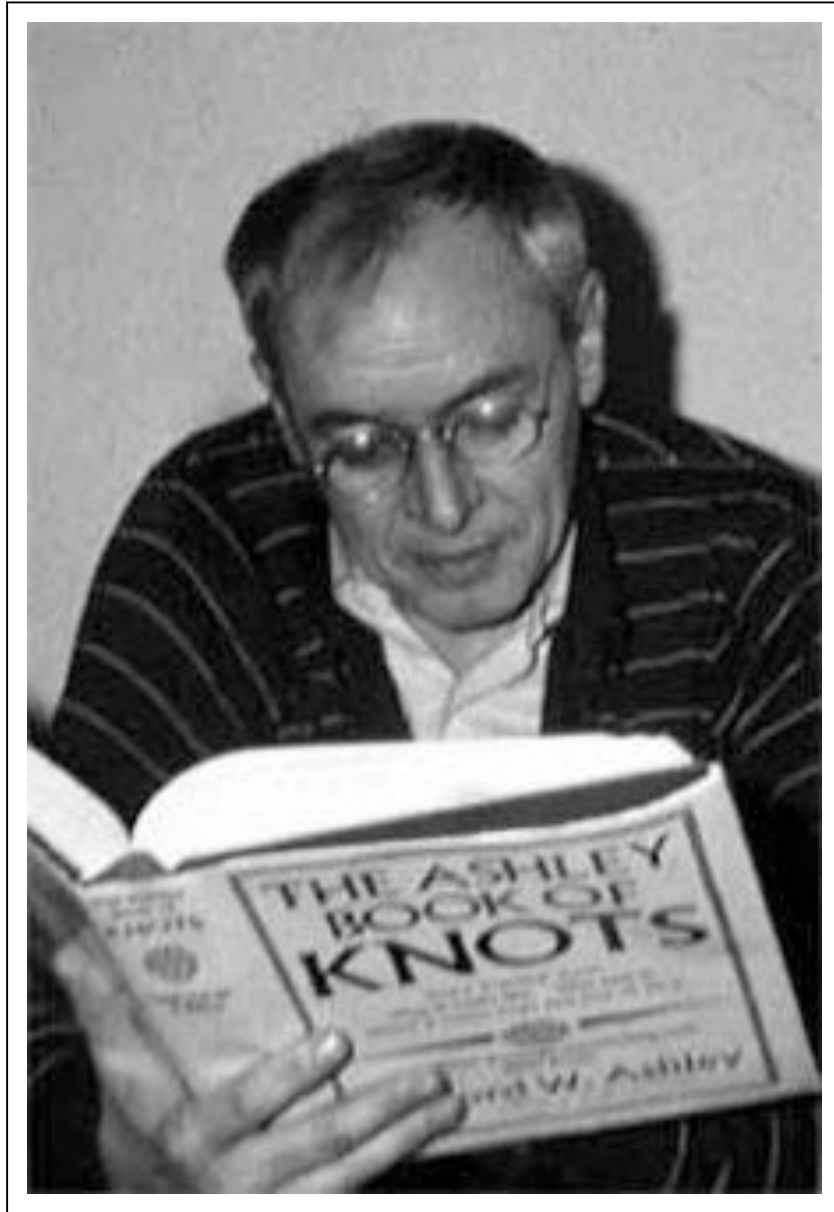
Leon Redler MD, colleague and friend of Laing's since Kingsley Hall recounts his approach in psychotherapy as being very much informed and influenced by what he experienced in 40 years of being around Ronnie Laing and in the PA.

A biographical note rounds up Laing's legacy as being of a mixed bequest. But then whose isn't? For Ronnie once said, "*It does not disturb me to be a human being.*"

I hope you take to this tempting selection and let your notes of life and work, as psychotherapists versed in the healing arts, be compared with ours. I wish to thank all the authors who contributed to this special issue of our Journal and I also express my gratitude to our Co-Editor, Courtenay Young for his final editing work.

## References

- BERMAN, M. (1970) 'The Divided Self'; 'Self and Others'. *The New York Times Book Review*. 22nd February 1970, pp. 1-2 and 44.
- BRITAIN, V. (1972). 'An end to fashionable madness.' *The Times*, Monday 9<sup>th</sup> October
- CLAY, J. (1996). *R.D. Laing*. London, Hodder & Stoughton.
- LAING, R.D. (1967). *The Politics of Experience*. London, Penguin Books. (pp. 120-137)
- SMITH, A.C. (1982). R.D. Laing: The Divided Self. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 140, pp. 237-242



The author of *Knots* (1970) perusing in 1983 "*The Ashley Book of Knots*"

Photo: Robert E. Haraldsen