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Phyllis Ford



Jack Rafferty and Werner get suited up for "Harry, Harry," 1971 version.

A look at the early days when *est* was coming into existence. They don't mean anything, mind you — and they did happen.

Then and Now at *est*

During the past few years, it has been getting increasingly clear that *est* — the training, the organization, the graduates and participation — is about manifesting transformation. To say it another way, *est* is a space that people can use to complete their transformation by bringing it into the world.

"If you don't take it out into the world," Werner has said, "you didn't get it in the first place. What I got clear about was that it would require an organization — and a particular kind of organization — to take the experience of transformation out into society." (People are getting it. For some ways in which they say so, look at the letters on pages 10 and 11.)

Lately we have been looking at *est* as organization, and it seems worthwhile to supplement the big abstractions with flashbacks, as it were, to *est*'s earliest days and some of the people who were there. Where did the organization, the doing as well as the being, begin to appear?

As you know, Werner created the abstractions of *est* not from the world but from "nothing." When *est* appeared in October of 1971 as a company with a name and a program of trainings and workshops for graduates, however, it definitely took on a form in the world. With Werner as its source, that form included a number of people who had chosen to

participate with him in *est*. To explore what that was like, John McMillen and Gary Clarke of *The Graduate Review* talked with four of those people — all of them graduates of early trainings, three of them people who worked with Werner before he founded *est*. There were others in that early "family," of course; these are four who happened to be at this particular conversation. They are:

GONNEKE SPITS, who has worked with Werner for 10 years and now manages his office.

LAUREL SCHEAF, who has worked with Werner for 9 years, was the first president of *est*, held various key executive roles, and is now a trainer candidate. She is also Corporate Secretary of *est* and a member of the Board of Directors.

JACK RAFFERTY, who has been at *est* for over 5 years and now works with Rich Aikman in Operational Control.

RICH AIKMAN, who has been at *est* for 5 years and is now co-manager of the Control Division, with primary responsibility for overall quality control and operational control in *est*.

"I wanted to let him know that even though I was in the dead middle of the Sahara Desert . . . it was still working."

Kenneth Yamamoto



Four who joined the staff early talk about *est* in 1976: Jack Rafferty, Gonneke Spits, Rich Aikman, Laurel Scheaf.

Each of the four has performed almost every job in the organization at one time or another. As a group, they span the time between the beginnings — before *est* had grown to its present dimensions — and the future, and they offer a human perspective on that time.

John Poppy

GR: What we'd like to accomplish in this interview is to get in touch with what it was like to be a person working in *est* back in the beginning. We'd like to get at some of the elements that may not be so obvious now that *est* is a larger organization, but that are still there and still underlie what *est* is all about — like how it feels to be a graduate who is participating by being on the staff.

GONNEKE: A few months ago, Elaine Cronin, who manages the Chicago Center, was in town and Werner took Elaine, Laurel and me to dinner. We'd all been there when *est* started, and here we were together again. [The full staff in October, 1971, consisted of Phyllis Allen, Elaine Cronin, Sheila Pearson, Jack Rafferty, Laurel Scheaf, Gonneke Spits, and Barbara Wilson.] Werner said something at that dinner meeting that was really incredible for us. He said to us that where *est* really came from was not just from

him as an individual, but out of the relationship that the four of us had. You know, we'd never looked at it that way. To tell you the truth, I always realized Werner was the source of *est* and thought we just came along with the furniture, you know.

We got to look at what we all brought with us that was actually a part of the integrity of *est*. You see, without the part that Laurel represents, and without the part that Elaine represents, it's not complete, and without the part that I represent, it's not complete either. As *est* developed, some things were added that seemed to be necessary for putting it out into the world. Things like what Jack brought in, what Rich brought in, and what other people brought in, too. It isn't that anyone was personally necessary, but whatever it was that we represented was and certainly is part of what *est* is.

GR: So what you're basically saying is that *est* came out of relationship.

LAUREL: Definitely, yes.

GR: Why did you take the training in the first place?

GONNEKE: You know, we never chose to take the training.

LAUREL: It was our job. For the first five years I was working for Werner, before he started *est* in 1971, he would come in and say, "We're going to go to this course," or, "This week we're going to do Success Motivation," or, "Now we're going to do this training." So we did this training.

GR: What initiated that whole relationship? Where did it start? Were you just walking along the street and suddenly there was Werner?

LAUREL: We answered an ad in the newspaper . . .

GR: Did you know each other before?

GONNEKE: No.

LAUREL: Werner wrote brilliant ads. He appealed to educated women who at that time were not particularly accepted in key contributory jobs. He had found by the time he had been in the business world for about eight years that an untapped resource was women, and they could do the work he wanted to do.

GR: Who answered first?

LAUREL: Elaine Cronin answered first . . .

GR: Then next?

GONNEKE: I did.

GR: Rich, how did you and Jack enter into the picture?

JACK: Four months before they put the thing together, I was hired. In fact, I was the first male person hired.

RICH: I represent a transition from this early group to this present group. I'm right smack in the middle. See, when I took the training I was unconscious and didn't know it.

GR: When was that, Rich?

RICH: It was 1971. I had no idea who Werner Erhard was, let alone what the potential of the training was. I was at a period in my life where I was about to leave the lifestyle I'd spent my entire life creating. So, one night, I met this chick in a bar and I started doing the number I used to do. Which was hustling women with my "newspaper knowledge" of astrology. And she said, "Wait a minute. Have you ever heard of Werner Erhard?" And there I sat for the next three hours, with no idea what she was talking about. I mean zero idea. She was saying something about getting your buttons pushed and I was thinking about making out. "Great! Terrific!" I said, thinking about getting to the "good stuff." I was a complete mess.

I mentioned before that I was in a transitional period of my life. I was going to rebel against the "system" and give up all my success. I had left my job, liquidated everything, and had this stack of money. My plan was to go all over Europe and Africa and come back when the stack was gone.

So this chick invites me to a guest seminar, and, since what I had in mind was an evening with her anyway, what the hell, I went.

LAUREL: There were only about 300 or 400 people who had taken the training at that time.

RICH: That's right. And I didn't know one of 'em. Zero idea what it was all about.

LAUREL: You ought to tell about your guest seminar.

RICH: It was at Fisherman's Wharf, and in those days the guests used to stay right there in the room with the

graduates. And they were sharing this amazing stuff. The one that really got me was this guy who was about 50 years old and had broken his hip when he was 10. And somewhere in the training he got in touch with the fact that the doctors said he would never walk right, so he hadn't. He then realized that it would be okay if he walked right, and he stood up and started walking across the room with no limp or problem at all. And I said Jesus Christ! Whatever it is, if I can get in touch with half of that stuff, this thing would be worthwhile. Two weekends? Pooley, nothing to it. \$150? Pzzzt. I didn't have any of those considerations, so I took it. And it was incredible. But nothing I could put my finger on. I just kept getting stuff. "Self expression? Oh! You mean it's really all right to say everything? You mean it's really all right to tell the truth? You mean love isn't walking on the beach hand in hand at sunset with wind chimes in the background?" The experience was out of sight. I found out who I really am. It's like the doors opened.

GR: How did you get on staff?

RICH: Just after the training, I took off for Africa for 10 months. While I was gone I sent Werner a couple of cards from places you wouldn't believe, and then I got one from him in Bangui, Central African Republic, which is right in the heart of Africa. And we were three weeks late, so I should never have gotten the card, except that I did. That knocked me out. It was during that trip that I decided that when I got back I was going to see what I could do about being around this Erhard guy.

I had been gone 10 months and I got back on a Friday, and went to a seminar on Monday. Werner walked in just like he knew I was going to be there that night. He walked in, right in the middle of all those people, gave me this big hug and said, "Welcome back," and it knocked me over. I went to the *est* office the next day and was interviewed by Laurel, and hired four days later.

LAUREL: It was really interesting. I think there's a fundamental element that Rich represented about the beginnings of *est*. He took the training. He went to two or three seminars. He left the country, and he'd write Werner these postcards, and Werner didn't think it was peculiar that Rich would write. Werner would share the cards with us and say, "That's far out! There's a guy making his life work." It seemed a little strange to us, but to Werner it was perfectly natural.

There was something about the training and people's relationship with Werner that made it easy to communicate.

RICH: I didn't really know Werner, but without knowing it I felt like I had known him a long time. At the time I didn't know what it was. I just wanted him to know that the training still

worked for me. I wanted to validate it for him. I wanted to let him know that even though I was in the dead middle of the Sahara Desert, the wasteland of the world, it was still working.

GONNEKE: One of the things that I think was important during the early days was that everybody was always pulling for Werner. "Werner, it's working," we would say, "Keep doing what you're doing."

LAUREL: People used to call the office and share their miracles. All the time.

GONNEKE: And it came out of total support. You see, there was no agreement for *est* out in the world then. But what people produced in their own lives and communicated about was so big, exactly as it is now, that we just had to keep putting that out there. There was nothing else to do with it. That was really what that first year was all about.



2:00 AM at the first *est* office on Broadway in San Francisco.

GR: How many people were on staff?

GONNEKE: Eleven by the second year.

GR: How did you get there, Jack?

JACK: I met Werner at Enrico's [a sidewalk cafe in San Francisco]. I had a nightclub up the street and I used to hang out at Enrico's, and I saw this guy sitting over at a table with Enrico himself. My whole life had been about talking to people. I used to sit at the same table every night at Enrico's, and everybody in the world would come talk to me. I'd shot the breeze driving around with Gary Cooper, talked to Gregory Peck, Sammy Davis, Jr. . . . So to me, nobody was a big deal, because I handled myself pretty well around anybody . . .

LAUREL: In fact, very well.

JACK: Anyway, I sat down and talked to this guy and he was pleasant and when I left the table I experienced something I just had never experienced before with all those powerful people, and I didn't know what it was. It was something that I could not put my finger on. That guy was *there*. I felt I had been communicated to. I'd heard everybody's number, and I never heard one number out of this guy except straight communication. It was

just something.

GR: So how did you get into the training?

JACK: One time I was in Enrico's and Bob, one of the waiters, floated up to me. [Whistles.] He said, "You know Werner?" I said yeah, and he said, "Well, he's doing this thing," and I asked what it was and he could in no way communicate what the hell it was. But it so happened that Werner walked in, so I went up and asked him. "Bob told me he did this thing with you. What is it?" And you gotta understand this is a guy that I don't know. All I know is there is something about this guy, and anything he was doing I was pretty interested in. Well, he laid it out to me in a way . . . he said exactly the right words for me, in my language, and I've never heard him ever say it that way again. Which blew my mind. It just blew my mind. So I went to this workshop — that's what they were called then — at Gonneke's house. Gonneke was there, Elaine Cronin, Laurel.

LAUREL: I did most of the Guest Seminars in the beginning, and Gonneke and Elaine would do the personality profiles and register people.

JACK: Right there in the bedroom. I remember walking up to Laurel standing at this table . . .

GONNEKE: Which table? There wasn't room for a table . . .

JACK: That's right. It was probably a dresser or night stand or something. Anyway, I gave this good-lookin' chick my money and I was registered. My last \$150. I took the training at the Holiday Inn on 8th Street, and I went to work for Werner a month and a half later. I made 75 bucks a week.

LAUREL: And it was hard to get \$75 out of me. I was signing the checks then.

JACK: The money didn't mean a thing then. I remember exactly what Werner said when he hired me. He said, "I love you." And I thought, "Jesus, the guy really means it."

GR: Was there anything else you particularly remember from those days?

JACK: I do remember a few months later an incident happened that really made it click for me. Gonneke was ranting about something and Werner blasted her, right there in front of me. One of the things he said was, "You've got to figure out for yourself that either I'm on a total ego trip, or I'm telling the truth." It was so right on I couldn't believe it.

Now, there were two things that came out of that for me. First, I'd seen a lot of arguments, a lot of fights, but this one had a kind of cleanliness to it. There was affinity in it. That just blew me away. And the other thing was that he was telling the truth. I'd been looking for a chink in his armor, and the harder I looked, the more I saw that he always told the truth.

RICH: Yes, 75 bucks a week. That's what I started at. And when Laurel of-

"You can't work together 20 hours a day and not have everything come out."



Gonneke

ferred it to me she made it sound like \$500 a week. No matter *how* I looked at it, 75 bucks only bought so much stuff. Well, I wanted to work there, so I took it figuring more would come if I got the job done. About six weeks later, Laurel called me in and said something about giving me a bonus. Well, now she was *talking*. A bonus to me meant a grand, or something like that. Now I'm interested. Then she tells me: "What we're going to do is increase your salary five dollars per week, if you get the job done. You and I will meet every Monday and see if you're getting the job done. If you are, you get the bonus. If you're not, you don't."

I'll tell you what, that five bucks, was worth *more* to me than a grand. Every Monday, when we met, and I got that five bucks, I was higher than a kite. Man, I *earned* it! I don't mean I "deserved" it or "had it coming," I mean I *earned* it. It's hard to tell you just how that felt, how clean Laurel's acknowledgment of me was. Course, I griped about it sometimes. When I first came on staff I was . . .

JACK: He was shitty.

RICH: I was shitty. Werner would have staff meetings and I'd have no idea what he was talking about. So I'd sit there, annoyed, and wonder why this jerk wouldn't tell us something we, I, could understand. What I finally realized was that telling me something I understood was telling me something with no growth to it, no potential, and that Werner always, always, always was creating space for us, even when it didn't look like it. That's what I was getting even when I didn't know it.

JACK: I couldn't figure out why Werner would hire such an asshole, let alone keep him around. He came in like a bull in a china closet, smashing his way into everything. If my life had depended on it, I couldn't've told you why Werner kept Rich around.

LAUREL: I think that's really one of the things that allowed people to stay around *est*.

JACK: Exactly. Werner was brilliant enough to let a guy go out there and make it. To let somebody put out what's so for him and in the process, find out what's *really* so.

GR: So Werner was a catalyst for the unique individuality of all of you.

RICH: Werner saw exactly who we all were and exactly what everybody was able to put into the organization. Same

as today. He's doing it just the same.

GONNEKE: What I think it is that he is so responsible about is giving me the space to do whatever I want to do, to contribute whatever I am able to contribute *and* fail whenever I fail.

Even in those early days, I didn't have to protect myself. We could fight and be out of agreement but we never had to cover our ass and make sure that our position was protected.

We all did everything. Whatever was needed got done. If Rich fell asleep across the desk, Jack and Laurel would come marching in, tuck him under the desk, then we would all chip in to keep whatever we were doing moving. And that is exactly the way Werner has his relationship with you. You don't have to protect yourself. Any desire for protection comes out of your notion, not out of Werner. And in those first few years we manifested just about every notion we had. Good, bad, indifferent, I mean *everything* came out. Everything. You can't work together 20 hours a day and not have everything come out.

One of us might have to go do a seminar; whether or not we'd ever done that seminar before wasn't the issue, nobody questioned that. If that was the case, Jack and I would just hobble down the street and go do a seminar.

GR: Tell us how the seminars started.

RICH: Let me say one more thing before that. We all thrived on unreasonableness. It was ridiculously, pathetically unreasonable. And that was the choice we all made. That was it. There wasn't any voting after you were on staff.

GONNEKE: It would be 4:00 in the morning and the mail had to go to the Post Office and you would start to get: Hey, we're just going to do it, so what?

GR: Where did the unreasonableness come from? Was it because Werner was demanding? What?

LAUREL: I had developed a relationship with Werner in which he would say what he wanted of me or I would tell him what I would deliver and it would be that way. It was my job to see that it happened, but it was everybody's job, really — exactly as it is nowadays — and we never thought about it *not* happening. It might take us down to the wire. It might take us until 4:00 in the morning, but it never occurs to us that we won't have it

happen.

GONNEKE: What you call unreasonableness was also a lot of intention and dedication and a matter of being appropriate.

Werner always looks at what's so and does what is appropriate, not what seems "sensible" or "reasonable," ever. Since we're dealing with what is, it requires aligning with it even if you don't "understand" it, and getting it done. What took time in those early days, and what still takes a lot of time, is the clearing out of the resistance to it. It isn't that you're making it more difficult or that you're getting demanding. It's just that it's always the way it is and sometimes the way it is is unreasonable. Werner functions like that. He says this needs to be done now; he means *now*, not two weeks from now. That's very much the way we have functioned from the beginning. Doing it that way made everybody more able.

RICH: You just had to go for it. And for me that unreasonableness was the first time in my life that I had ever been unreasonable with *myself*. I had been plenty unreasonable with other people. I had always been a hard-ass, and now this allowed me to experience *this* side of it . . . it gave me some scope on how to be effectively unreasonable with people.

LAUREL: And you can see the graduates wanted to play from the beginning. They love assisting and participating.

GR: How did the seminars actually come about?

GONNEKE: Well, after the first training, Werner continued to do processes based on whatever came up and one of the first things to come up was the issue of talking to people about *est*. That was natural. Nobody knew what they were talking about, and there was nothing like it anywhere else. So they'd get together with Werner and ask questions like, "How do you handle it with your wife?" or, "How do you explain this to your mother?" or, "My children asked this . . ." They didn't have a way to talk about it so Werner would do processes with us. We'd have a workshop and he'd do whatever he saw that was appropriate. A lot of different processes came out of that.

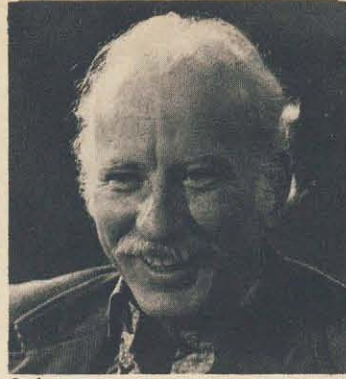
GR: So from those questions and the spontaneous handling of whatever came up, the graduate seminars evolved.



Rich



Laurel



Jack

Kenneth Yamamoto

GONNEKE: Yes. We began taping them, then somebody started writing things down and before long we had a seminar called Body Series #1. That was the very first seminar series.

Werner used to say it didn't make any difference what he did. What people want to do in life is participate and as long as they participate and acknowledge that they are participating, their lives continue to transform. Now in the process of participating, the most important thing is relationship. So, you see, the whole guest program came out of whatever came up in people's relationships — not with Werner or with *est*, but with the people around them. People would bring up an issue and, just by bringing it up, begin experiencing it out. That was what the seminars were and what they still are.

GR: What do you think accounts for your staying around through all this? Is there some kind of natural alignment?

RICH: I don't have to think about being aligned. That's just where I am. *est* has given me the scope with which to really express all the stuff that's here. This incredible self that I am . . . that we all are. I've always wanted to make a contribution, and I never really knew it. I'm not sure I would have ever gotten to it if Werner hadn't come along.

LAUREL: That's really what everybody seems to be up to. Making a contribution and making the world work.

GONNEKE: That's not really quite all of it for me. For me, *est* was like an opportunity to live in the world the way it really is. I remember when I was a child, I knew everybody was lying. I knew they were lying and that it wasn't really the way they said it was. There was an enormous dichotomy between the way you wanted it and the way it was. Later, as I grew up, I still knew that it wasn't that way. So when somebody finally said, "*The emperor has no clothes!*" I said, "*That's it!*" You know? And all I wanted was to have the space in which to live the way it really was. I didn't care about contribution until later.

RICH: See, there was nothing to believe in or follow. I never believed in Werner. He was saying exactly what I had always thought except I never said it so I gotta acknowledge that Werner said it.

JACK: I started noticing that things at

est are consistent, and that creates a lot of space to get what's so. I knew grownups were bullshitting, too. Everybody was. You stand here, they're over there. You move this way, they move the other way. Or they'll move the same way. Then you move back, and they change positions again. You can't count on where they are.

With Werner, if you're here, he's there. If you run over that way, he's still where he was. Then if I run over that way, he's still where he was. No matter *where* I go, he's still right where he's always been.

I'll tell you, it's a great way to find out who's doing all the moving around.

Werner is consistent. And not being right about it. It's not, "This is where *it's* at," but, "This is where *I'm* at," and he's willing to put it out there and let people do what they do with it. And he doesn't care. You can't buy him off. Me, you could've bought. But not Werner. It's dynamite to be around someone who is that consistently consistent.

GONNEKE: And what we're talking about doesn't apply just to me or people on the staff. It applies to all the graduates. Their lives are becoming the way it really is, and they are expressing it their way. What's really true is their experience.

GR: What is *est* to you?

GONNEKE: I think that *est* for me is absolutely nothing. I think we do this thing called the training and we have an office building and Werner's there and Laurel's there . . .

LAUREL: If Werner did "restaurant," then we would all be there.

JACK: And we'd have a great restaurant. Listen, I've got friends who owned a restaurant and they've taken the training. They don't go to seminars, or events, and they haven't seen Werner for a couple of years. But they say the same stuff we've been saying, only they say it in "restaurant" and we say it in "*est*." It's all the same. What *est* means is, "it is." That's all we've been saying.

GONNEKE: So how can you not be committed? Who in the world could not be committed to the way it really is in their experience? It's even silly to bring that up. Now some people may not be in touch with that commitment. It may not be real for them. And what we're saying is that we have a way to

communicate about it and we have a game around it called *est*. It's a way of interacting with each other to allow it to be real for us.

GR: Well, is there something we should all learn from the way *est* started?

GONNEKE: I can't tell you what a privilege it was to be there in the beginning. I can relive it any time I want. And I just don't want to make it right.

About four months ago, Werner and I had a run-in, with me upset and crying . . . It was one of the classics. And it was probably the most invalidating experience I've ever had. It was really going right to the heart of where my mind is. It was *definitely* the worst . . . about an hour and a half's worth.

Werner and I talked about it later, after I was over thinking that this time I was going to die for sure [laughter], and he said, "*What you've got to do is to complete your relationship with me . . .*" — of course, he always says that, and I said, "*Again? I've been doing that for a long time, you know?*" — and he said, "*What you've got to do in order to do that is to let go of the past.*" Now I thought for the longest time that what he meant was that I needed to let go of old things that had happened that I hadn't completed, or things that I still carried around as resentments, or put in a silver box, or whatever. But after I looked at a lot of those things, that wasn't really what he meant. He meant that I needed to let go of any of that *wanting* to go back . . . He meant that my mind is nothing but past. It's just storage. So, in order to make one situation or another work, what I would do was reach into the past to come up with what I thought was going to work. And he pointed out to me in subsequent conversations that it's impossible to make something work that way. Even though it may have worked in the past, you don't know what it was about it that worked. I started to get a reality on what going back to the past was about. You can't say anything about the past except what happened from your experience *now*.

It's easy to evaluate the way things used to be — that it was good, or bad, or fun, or whatever — however, evaluation introduces a lie into the truth. And the truth is, that was the way it was. Nothing more. ■