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."

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
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.

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**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 out. 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 those 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 that made it easy to communicate. Rich 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.

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

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 cleaning 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.
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 it? Is there some kind of natural alignment?

WERNER: It was the very first seminar series. We began taping things down and before long we had a seminar called Body Series #1. That was the very first seminar series. I'm not sure until later.

GONNEKE: And you ran an issue, 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 was like an "restaurant," and said, "I'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 is to set things up, begin experiencing it out. That's just where I am."

GONNEKE: That's not really quite all that was. What he meant was that I needed to let go of the past, or events, and they haven't seen Werner for a couple of years. But they didn't really. He's always been. "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 with 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.

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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 more 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 with 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.

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