Introduction

Esalen, the Soul Rush, and Spiritual Privilege

Millions of contemporary Americans search for personal and spiritual fulfillment through meditation, yoga, and other practices that engage simultaneously their bodies, minds, emotions, and spirits. Today, these activities are commonplace, unremarkable. Yet, before the early 1960s, they were rare options for most people outside the upper class or small groups of educated spiritual seekers. The contemporary soul rush for self-transformation and individualized spirituality began on the central California coast at Esalen Institute. Its founding generation made myriad options for spiritual experiences and personal growth available to ordinary Americans who were disenchanted with mainstream religions.

Esalen encouraged widespread enthusiasm for an enormous range of spiritual paths that offered possibilities for individuals to live joyfully and discover fresh truths about themselves and the cosmos. The Institute democratized spiritual privilege by popularizing options that had once been available to relatively few Americans and made the religious marketplace more diverse and open. Esalen played a critical role in introducing and promoting esoteric spirituality so that it flowed into mainstream culture. Millions of contemporary Americans identify themselves as spiritual, not religious, because the Institute paved the way for them to explore spirituality without affiliating with established denominations (Roof 1999).

The Institute’s founding generation started lasting organizations and social networks that continue to facilitate the development and spread of alternative spirituality and humanistic psychology in the twenty-first century. This book is about spiritual privilege at Esalen, its sweeping impact on American religion, and some of the people who have organized their lives around the Institute’s imperatives to achieve their full human potentials.

Innovative approaches to spiritual growth and personal transformation did not spring up suddenly like magic mushrooms in the cultural forests
of the 1960s. Instead, they were cultivated on Esalen’s 120 acres in Big Sur, California, and introduced to middle-class Americans through media and by word of mouth. People who learned about Esalen at a distance, individuals who passed through briefly, and even those who lived on the property viewed the Institute in different ways because of their own priorities and experiences. They might characterize it as an esoteric think tank, a sacred retreat, a spa, a center for humanistic group psychology, a place for psychedelic trips, a massage school, or an intentional community (Back 1972; Bart 1971). The Institute continues to be all of those things and more.

Esalen’s many identities and its eclectic workshops and programs reflected its founders’ inclusive approach to spirituality. The first generation modified, combined, and popularized varied spiritual doctrines and practices for self-actualization that had been developed elsewhere.

Little of Esalen’s basic spiritual doctrine was new, but the Institute presented original combinations and applications of arcane philosophies and religious perspectives. Esalen’s founders, Michael Murphy and Dick Price, sought out cultural innovators and opinion leaders who enthused about new kinds of psychotherapy, physical practices such as massage, and fresh approaches to spirituality. The Institute’s menu of varied workshops and small-group experiences quickly became known at university campuses, churches and synagogues, therapists’ offices, health spas, and other emerging growth centers.

**Esalen’s Major Contributions**

Esalen is interesting in itself, but its unique historical significance rests on the ways that it made the prerogatives of spiritual privilege widely known, meaningful, and accessible throughout the United States. *Spiritual privilege is an individual’s ability to devote time and resources to select, combine, and revise his or her personal religious beliefs and practices over the course of a lifetime.*

The growth and rapid spread of spiritual privilege reflects two long-term influences that are embedded in America’s social structure: widespread economic comfort and numerous religious alternatives. Religious pluralism and the vibrant post–World War II economy allowed many middle-class Americans to pursue alternative religions and personal growth psychology. As established liberal faiths waned, there was a mounting demand for new, more meaningful religion, and Esalen rose up to meet it (Brooks 2001).

The Institute transformed spiritual privilege into a human right that could be available to any American dedicated to maximizing her or his potential in
mind, body, spirit, and emotion. Different kinds of people have access to different degrees of spiritual privilege, but Esalen's founders emphasized the fact that all could benefit in some ways from the doctrines and practices available there.

Individual spiritual privilege rests on a dynamic mixture of four attributes—affinities for supernatural meanings, experiences, and explanations; religious and cultural knowledge; participation in supportive social networks; and economic resources. The Institute’s leaders assumed, somewhat erroneously, that almost every American possessed enough of all four elements to select and benefit from the varied practices that emerged in Big Sur.

Esalen promoted the growth and spread of spiritual privilege because its foundational doctrine held that everyone had sparks of divinity that could be connected to a benevolent, distant cosmic force. This essential belief linked apparently disparate approaches to spirituality and defined them as complementary to one another.

The faith that everyone could cultivate a personal divine spark seemed to make the rewards of spiritual privilege somewhat independent of social class, gender, or ethnicity. Because of the divinity within each person, everyone was entitled to become spiritually and emotionally fulfilled in some ways. In
realities, however, spiritual privilege has not influenced working-class or poor Americans to the same degree as it has touched members of the middle and upper classes, who hungered for more meaningful lives because they did not worry much about their material survival (Brooks 2001).

The Institute’s other three important, but somewhat less significant, contributions linked alternative spirituality to other avenues for personal and social change: the human potential movement in humanistic psychology, progressive political groups that connected social and personal issues, and the men’s movement. Each of these three additional innovations connected the Institute to late-twentieth-century social movements and made the rewards of spiritual privilege more accessible and attractive to ever wider audiences.

When they defined the pursuit of full human potential as a new national goal, the Institute’s founding generation combined alternative approaches to spirituality and the psychology of personal growth (Anderson 1983:115–116). Esalen’s varied workshops about personal fulfillment encouraged participants to redefine arcane spiritual experiences like trances and past life connections as reasonable routes to greater happiness and self-actualization (Litwak 1967). The fusion of spiritual expansion and humanistic psychology made Big Sur a crucible for the emerging human potential movement that refuted traditional dichotomies of mental health and illness and focused on helping individuals create more vital and meaningful lives (Wood 2008).

In the mid-1960s, Esalen became the flagship venue for new approaches dedicated to self-transformation through more honest and emotionally intimate interpersonal relationships. The human potential movement brought innovative individual and group psychotherapies together, with a focus on enhancing present and future relationships, rather than on mending old psychic wounds. Human potential psychology attracted thousands of Americans because it fundamentally redefined psychotherapy as a context for personal growth rather than recovery from mental illness, and it provided group experiences that were not as time or money consuming as traditional therapies.

The Institute’s founding generation also affirmed humanistic psychology’s ideal of self-actualization, an enhanced capacity to lead a meaningful and socially useful life. Esalen connected humanistic psychology and alternative spirituality and normalized spiritual practices like vision quests and yoga as pathways to better mental and physical health.

Public service and support for liberal social reform constituted another area of interest at Esalen, and the Institute’s political stance bridged spiri-
tual privilege and worldly activities beyond Big Sur. The founding generation believed that true self-actualization had to include the pursuit of social justice and peace. Actualized humans were compassionate toward those who were less fortunate and were obligated to help others lead better lives by means of both personal assistance and collective activities (Leonard and Murphy 1995:41). Esalen became even more visible when its founding generation developed informal ties to social movements for peace, racial equality, psychiatric patients’ rights, and educational reform in an historical period when progressive politics were part of public discourse (Rakstis 1971).

Because of its early links to the human potential movement and campaigns for social justice, the Institute became a crucible for the loosely configured men’s movements that unfolded during the 1980s and 1990s. People at Esalen advocated spirituality, emotional disclosure, and men’s connection to other men as pathways to a new, better kind of masculinity. And, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Institute once again linked spirituality to affluent Americans’ personal and political concerns.

The full exercise of spiritual privilege requires a large supply of religious options that can be joined to established faiths, practiced individually, or cobbled together in different combinations. The Institute’s most important contribution to the soul rush involved opening up a vast range of complementary religious choices to middle-class Americans and alerting them to their right to maximize their spiritual and emotional satisfaction. Esalen popularized established practices and brought together alternative spirituality, psychotherapy, and social reform in order to democratize spiritual exploration and personal growth.

**Early Achievements and Lasting Effects**

By 1971, Esalen was the model for more than ninety similar centers, known informally as “Little Esalens.” They were large and small, rural and urban, with the majority located in California or in or near major cities like Chicago, Boston, and New York (Rakstis 1971:311). Most of these “Little Esalens,” like Kairos, in San Diego, or the Center for the Whole Person, in Philadelphia, survived for less than a decade. However, two of the early retreats that were modeled on Esalen reorganized in the late 1970s and early 1980s and still thrive: Hollyhock, in British Columbia, and Oasis, in New York State.

During the 1960s, Americans who had never before heard of spiritual retreats or growth centers considered visiting Big Sur after detailed descriptions of Esalen appeared in mainstream media. Whether favorable or criti-
cal, pieces in *Holiday, Life, Newsweek, Ramparts, Look,* and *Time* contributed to the Institute’s reputation as a catalyst for individual psychological transformation, improved intimate relationships, and new social arrangements (Carter 1997:34). Will Schutz, the Institute’s best-known encounter group leader, reached deep into mainstream culture when he appeared for three consecutive nights on the popular *The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson* soon after the release of his best-seller *Joy* (1967), a book that went through nine printings by Grove Press in the late 1960s.

Seventeen books by authors directly associated with the Institute came out between 1969 and 1975 as part of the short-lived Esalen/Viking series (Kripal 2007a:527–528). College and university faculty assigned Esalen books to their classes and encouraged students to sample practices that involved alternative spirituality and humanistic psychology.

The Institute’s call to explore and expand human potential resonated with the historical moment when undergraduates at elite universities believed that they could transform themselves and build a better society (Keniston 1968). People talked about Esalen at schools like Stanford, Harvard, and Brandeis and also at high-status public universities like the University of California at Berkeley and the University of California at Los Angeles (Anderson 1983:59; Gagarin 1969).

I first heard about Esalen in a Berkeley social psychology class in the late 1960s. The professor enthused about the Institute’s fresh approaches to self-actualization, and he required one hundred undergraduates to participate in weekly sensitivity-training groups that were milder versions of Esalen’s encounters where participants focused on their immediate interpersonal reactions to one another, scrutinized the actions of other members and examined the process of the group as a whole (Back 1972).

Many of the theories and practices developed in Big Sur challenged both conventional middle-class social relationships and established American institutions. Esalen’s critiques resonated with campus activists, although the Institute’s leading theorists and practitioners wanted to revitalize religion, education, and psychology, rather than destroy society so that it could be completely rebuilt (Leonard 1988). Because Esalen promoted personal and social reform rather than revolution, radicals disparaged the Institute at the same time that conservatives attacked it as a hotbed of radical experimentation (Bart 1971; Kopkind 1973). Liberal reformers in education and psychology, however, appreciated the Institute’s goals and incorporated some of Esalen’s approaches to maximizing human potential when they organized the American Association for Humanistic Psychology and the Confluent
Education Program at the University of California at Santa Barbara (Anderson 1983:183–184, 190–191).

In the late 1960s, Esalen’s cofounder Michael Murphy and some members of his inner circle reached out to clergy through the National Council of Churches’ Division of Education and Ministry. The NCC sent ministers to Big Sur for workshops on Gestalt therapy, which focused on emotions and events in the immediate therapeutic setting; sensory awareness, which involved exercises in breathing, touching, and balancing; and interpersonal encounter groups (Kripal 2007a:187; Murphy 2005:309). Popular contemporary marriage and peace encounters that are now associated with mainline Protestant denominations have their roots in some of Esalen’s early programs for religious leaders.

Before the NCC sponsored its members’ visits to Big Sur, the Institute’s informal relationships with established liberal faiths had already generated surprise and humor among Esalen residents and regular visitors. As early as 1964, participants in workshops and seminars, no matter how sexually experimental or otherwise outrageous, laughingly called themselves seminarians, because of Esalen’s reputation as a cloistered space dedicated to transforming spiritual and emotional life. People at Esalen still use the term “seminarian,” although the Institute’s formal ties to liberal faiths and the NCC faded away long ago.

Along with liberal clergy, another influential group, teachers from grades kindergarten through twelve, came to Big Sur in the 1960s because of a Ford Foundation grant to bring creativity, emotions, and physical expression into classrooms (Kripal 2007a:213).

Esalen’s collaboration with clergy and educators illustrates how it directly influenced two major American Institutions: schools and churches. Participants took what they had learned in Big Sur back to their colleagues and to the people that they served, who then passed it on. Like many other religious innovations, Esalen’s first traveled through informal interpersonal networks of influential advocates (Stark 1996a:19–23).

The Institute affected American psychology because therapists and social workers interested in psychology, psychedelics, and spirituality visited Big Sur individually and in small groups (Anderson 1983:184–188). Between 1962 and 1967, almost seven hundred psychotherapists sampled new clinical techniques in Esalen workshops and seminars (Litwak 1967:120). When they returned home, many urged their clients and colleagues to try out some of the Institute’s approaches to personal and spiritual growth. Their spreading the Big Sur blend of spirituality and humanistic psychology was another example of the person-to-person transmission of the Institute’s innovations.
By the mid-1970s, external competition and internal disorganization had diminished the Institute's cultural visibility and its direct influence on educators, clergy, and psychotherapists. People in Big Sur turned inward to examine their own lives and reconsider their mission. Esalen's message of individual divinity and human potential, however, continued to influence many Americans.

In the late 1990s, the Institute developed new programs for professionals, a growing presence on the Web, and connections to alternative institutions and emerging social networks that linked spirituality, personal growth, and social change in a global perspective. Esalen also began to define itself once more as a center for Gestalt and humanistic psychology, reemphasizing themes from its first two decades. Although it no longer has a dramatic public presence, the Institute continues to be important to the thriving shadow culture where individuals pursue alternative spirituality and emotional expansion.

Religious Diversity and Spiritual Privilege

Esalen’s inclusive approach encouraged people to mix and match diverse sacred traditions from all parts of the world (Kripal 2007a). The Institute transformed American spirituality by introducing varied sacred practices that people could pursue without blending them together. Spiritual seekers responded to this religious inclusivity by becoming *bricoleurs*, people who create their own mosaics of separate meanings and practices (Levi-Strauss 1962; McGuire 2008:195–199). They join together various spiritual doctrines and practices, but they remain separate and distinct from one another. For example, a regular Esalen visitor’s recent practice includes Zen meditation, tai chi, African drumming, and Gregorian chanting. *Bricolage* is always unfinished, so it generates virtually limitless demand for new spiritual innovations. People can sample different choices throughout their lifetimes and revise their spiritual paths from adolescence through very old age. If their material wealth and health diminish over time, they can use the spiritual privilege that they have already accumulated to make their lives less difficult.

Throughout the history of the United States and in the present, advantaged individuals have dominated alternative religious movements that posit an amorphous, divine cosmic spark linked to individuals’ personal sparks of divinity. These faiths have ranged from nineteenth-century Transcendentalism to contemporary Scientology (Goldman 1999; Menand 2001). Economic security or its viable possibility has enabled people to seek new practices
that affirm their personal divinity. Spiritually privileged Americans resemble the chanters of the morning Buddhist Sutras who began their worship listening to these words: “O sons and daughters of good family. You people who can afford to be listening to me, who aren't starving to death” (Downing 2001:108).

Esalen’s founders enjoyed extraordinary spiritual privilege that went far beyond simple material security, and their uncommon resources made it possible for them to create the Institute. Each man possessed a personal affinity for supernatural meanings and explanations, financial flexibility because of his family’s wealth, religious and cultural knowledge, and access to established social networks of elite seekers. Other people at Esalen have benefited from various aspects of their own privilege to different degrees.

Americans are well off compared to citizens of most other nations, and the fact that the majority of people in the United States have few problems meeting their basic needs for food and shelter has opened them to the potential rewards of spiritual privilege. Millions of Americans who are economically marginal or poor, however, also search for self-actualization because spiritual privilege is embedded in many areas of contemporary social life. Esalen’s early influence on public education, psychotherapy, and liberal religions has not disappeared, and it reaches far beyond the middle class.

Other affluent nations, such as Denmark and Sweden, without strong mainstream or alternative religions, have not experienced the dramatic growth and spread of spiritual privilege, although there are pockets of interest in alternative religions and personal growth in Scandinavia (Zuckerman 2008). Opportunities to enact and accumulate spiritual privilege multiply in societies like that in the United States, where most people believe in some supernatural power, there are many religious options, and switching religious loyalties or affiliations is acceptable to most (Finke and Iannaccone 1993).

Religious pluralism is central to the growth of widespread spiritual privilege, and constitutional safeguards for the free exercise of religion facilitated the Institute’s cultural impact (Stark 1996a). The open, competitive religious marketplace made Esalen and its diffusion of alternative spirituality possible.

An important historical coincidence also enriched the Institute’s early offerings and further diversified the spiritual choices that it provided. More religious possibilities became readily available to Americans when the 1965 Immigration Act opened the United States to hundreds of Asian teachers and their devotees (Melton 1993). Through its seminars, workshops, and public celebrations of specific individuals and approaches, Esalen introduced global
spiritualities to ordinary Americans (Roof 1993, 1999). The extensive demand for new kinds of spirituality increased as the supply of religious choices grew (Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Roof 1999; Warner 1993).

The American Soul Rush

During the 1960s, in the midst of widespread affluence and the growth of social movements for equality, baby boomers and some members of the Depression generation cut loose from liberal Protestant denominations and Roman Catholic congregations and embarked on searches for personalized religious meaning (Bellah, Masden, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985; Roof 1999). Some found homes in charismatic evangelical congregations and participated in the extraordinary growth of those faiths (Wellman 2008). Others engaged in searches for religious meanings and personal authenticity among alternative doctrines and practices, which they tried out sequentially or pieced together by means of bricolage (Roof 1993).

Over the past six decades, millions of spiritually privileged Americans have sampled alternative practices that stand apart from mainstream religious denominations (Bader and BSIR Study Group 2006). Some have limited their interest to listening to Oprah Winfrey exhort women and men to get in touch with their inner sparks of godliness. For many years on the Oprah Show, she described her “aha” moments and offered interviews with popular alternative spirituality icons like Eckhart Tolle and Elizabeth Gilbert.

Oprah’s endorsements made best sellers of Tolle’s A New Earth (2005), Gilbert’s Eat, Pray, Love (2006), and other books that explain how people can transform their lives. Barnes and Noble, for example, stocks more than eight thousand titles in the broad category of alternative spirituality, where the works of a number of Esalen-connected authors can be found.

Others move beyond relatively passive consumption through television and books and spend time and money actively seeking spiritual well-being and personal growth. Americans cultivate their connection to the supernatural when they try out products like healing oils, meditation classes, or structured groups focusing on a single spiritual practice like Hatha Yoga.

Some journey to contemporary holistic retreat centers that incorporate many of Esalen’s contributions. They may spend weekends meditating at Kripalu in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, or exercising and doing yoga at the Canyon Ranch Spa in Tucson, Arizona, or Lenox, Massachusetts (Newman 2008). More adventurous pilgrims tour sacred sites in New Mexico or embark on treks in the Himalayas.
Individualized approaches to spirituality and expanded emotional and physical powers are the lifeblood of the rising numbers of twenty-first century retreats and self-enhancement programs that promise “Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability” (LOHAS) (Newman 2008). While Esalen is no longer the vortex of alternative spirituality and personal growth in the United States, it continues to occupy a special place in the field because of its pioneering role in offering workshops and seminars that promise to integrate mind, body, spirit, and psyche. Moreover, Esalen is the only retreat that still sustains an explicit commitment to research, theory, and writing that explore the intersections of spirituality, psychology, physical experience, and social change.

Americans who pursue alternative spirituality and personal growth in varied contexts tend to share a basic assumption about the hidden sparks of divinity that are located deep within all humans and link them to one another and to the cosmos (Stark 2001:9–30). Close to a quarter of adults in the United States view God as a distant, benign cosmic force, similar to the supernatural power in Esalen’s doctrine. Many of these people, whether they are affiliated or separated from established religions, eagerly participate in the market for alternative spiritualities (Bader and BSIR Study Group 2006:27).

Baby boomers, Americans born between 1946 and 1964, are those who are most likely to sample alternative spiritual practices, although most of them casually retain their formal affiliations to established religious faiths as well (Roof 1999). These aging seekers are relatively affluent, and people living in households with yearly incomes over $100,000 are more than twice as likely to be theologically liberal as people in households earning less than $35,000 annually. Moreover, only 6.1 percent of Americans with high school or less education define themselves as religiously liberal, whereas more than a fifth of the individuals who have attended college or graduate or professional schools do so (Bader and BSIR Study Group 2006:16–17).

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton exemplifies the affluent, religiously liberal cohort of boomers who embrace inclusive spirituality that combines mainstream and alternative religious perspectives. Clinton grew up attending a suburban Methodist church, and, during her eight years in the White House, she went to Sunday services at various liberal Protestant churches in the D.C. area. However, she was looking for something more, so she invited Jean Houston, a psychologist, psychic, and seminar leader long associated with Esalen, to visit her in the White House.

Houston writes about personal growth and spirituality in books like Mystical Dogs: Animals as Guides to Our Inner Life (2004). At the White House,
she led the First Lady in imaginary conversations with Mahatma Gandhi and Eleanor Roosevelt. These exchanges helped Clinton cultivate her own spiritual sparks and pursue emotional growth in the same directions that Esalen first charted in the 1960s (Brown 1997:9).

Like Clinton, Esalen’s two founders grew up in liberal congregations, and they believed in a distant, benevolent God that was compatible with the Gods of other faiths. Dick, whose father had renounced Judaism to become an Episcopalian, was confirmed in his suburban Chicago church. Michael served as an altar boy in Salinas, and he once considered becoming an Episcopal priest (Anderson 1983:24–25). By the time they reached college, however, both young men sought spiritual rewards beyond what was offered by established denominations. They desired mystical moments, not just old doctrine and dry ritual.

Esalen’s conceptions of divine personal essence are vague, and that makes them attractive to a range of people. The phrase “My life will be better” can cover many different meanings. Even individuals with strong ties to the Institute describe their own divine sparks in very different ways. An attorney in her late forties who is a regular Esalen visitor summed up her sacred experience and personal beliefs in a casual conversation. She sighed: “I sat and watched the ocean at Esalen and suddenly I knew, I felt that I was God!” The basic assumption that God is part of all beings and that we are gods is Esalen’s cornerstone.

\textit{Esalen’s Invitation}

The Institute’s creation narrative describes how it took shape during a long summer road trip from Big Sur south past the Mexican border and back again in 1961. Two handsome young Californians, Michael and Dick, had vague plans to create a retreat center on Michael’s family property in Big Sur, when they headed their battered red Jeep pickup down Highway 1 toward Tecate, in Baja California, drinking beer and debating arcane philosophy (Anderson 1983:9–10; Price 1982). By the end of their trip, they had mulled over advice from elders in Southern California and Baja and had made specific plans to open a modest center for intellectual debate about spirituality and psychology. Over the next few years, Esalen grew into something quite different and became a mecca for prosperous seekers of meaningful religious experiences, emotional catharsis, and sexual adventures.

During the Institute’s dynamic first decade, streams of Hollywood insiders visited and increased Esalen’s public visibility. Two major celebrities,
Dyan Cannon and her husband, the iconic actor Cary Grant, often drove up Highway 1 to Big Sur. Cannon joined Natalie Wood, another Esalen habitué, to star in *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*, a hit 1969 movie that both satirized and publicized the Institute. Another major star, Jane Fonda, learned about Zen and human potential psychology during her brief romance with Dick at Esalen.

Most celebrities who helped make Esalen fashionable during its first decade soon discovered other paths to self-actualization and largely forgot about the Institute. Big Sur is no longer au courant with Hollywood’s A-list. Monty Python’s John Cleese and the Clinton administration’s labor secretary Robert Reich are the most famous popular figures publicly connected with Esalen in recent years.

Men who were part of the founding circle still refer to their old associations with movie stars from the 1960s in order to underscore the Institute’s cultural significance and also to recall the distant times when they were all young, beautiful, and wild. Esalen’s brief impact on Hollywood augmented its early cultural status and amplified its initial public visibility and broad appeal during an era when relatively few Americans seemed to be interested in alternative spirituality (Verter 2003:165; Wuthnow 1976).

When it began, in 1962, Esalen provided weekend accommodations so that guests could attend talks and workshops about Asian religions and human creativity. However, a growing stream of twenty- and thirty-something visitors who had heard about the Institute by word of mouth and in local media sought sudden insights and active participation, and, in response to this demand, Esalen expanded to embrace activities that addressed every aspect of human potential: spirit, emotion, mind, and body. Esalen’s many paths to self-discovery and personal transformation quickly became more intense and included marathon encounter groups where people displayed extreme emotions and sometimes attacked one another physically, as well as nude massage, group sex, and psychedelic trips.

Twenty-first-century media still rehash some of the controversies from the 1960s and describe the Institute’s most embarrassing moments. In December 2007, an influential international magazine, *The Economist*, portrayed Esalen as the place where all of the strange and wonderful lifestyle innovations associated with California in the 1960s “bubbled up” (*The Economist* 2007). Another recent article in a different British periodical characterized the contemporary Institute less sympathetically, describing it as a place where people hugged each other relentlessly and justified material indulgences like new Porsches as balm for their past emotional wounds (Marsh 2008:45).
Today, new guests, often aging boomers, join returning seminarians in workshops about massage, health, yoga, and personal relationships. Almost ten thousand people stay at the Institute yearly, although only about fifteen hundred of them are under thirty-five years old (Watanabe 2004). Despite attempts to reach out to new constituencies, almost everyone at Esalen is white and well over forty, reflecting the composition of its first generation. Nevertheless, even with the limitations of age and ethnicity, the Institute attracts enough visitors and committed seekers in their twenties and early thirties to spread its doctrine and practices to younger generations and different ethnic groups, who enjoy their own versions of spiritual privilege.

The sacred pathways and possibilities for personal growth that unfolded in Big Sur engaged men and women in different ways.Privileged men developed and spread Esalen’s unique approaches to essence spirituality, and they continue to elaborate its doctrine and quietly control the Institute through its Center for Theory and Research.

The CTR was formally named and differentiated from the rest of Esalen in 1998, but Michael and his inner circle have lived out, written about, and publicized Esalen’s doctrines of expanding human potential since the Institute was founded (Kripal 2007a:439). Michael drew other men into his orbit who supported his intellectual and spiritual priorities, and they joined him in reaching out to the general public. Dick never fully participated in Michael’s circle, but he shared the unspoken assumptions about the innate differences between men and women that led to persistent, almost accidental inequality between the sexes at Esalen.

**Others at Esalen**

Men associated with the inner circle that became the CTR represented the Institute’s public face in the high-profile networks for personal and spiritual growth that developed in the 1960s and continue in the twenty-first century. They defined Esalen’s central spiritual agenda and embodied spiritual privilege at the Institute, in spite of the handful of women who participated in their circle over the decades. While women at Esalen and in the society as a whole have far more economic and cultural resources than they did during the early 1960s, the initial gender differentiation that marked Esalen remains a fact of life in Big Sur.

Two other major overlapping groups of people that stand apart from the CTR have also built their lives at the Institute: bodyworkers and operations
staff. Women have collaborated with men at Esalen to create practices that bring together care of the body and care for the soul in massage, tai chi, and dance (Johnson 1994). Since an informal group first came together around the hot springs in the late 1960s, women have been central to the bodyworkers’ network. Both women and men created and later copyrighted Esalen Massage, the Institute’s signature bodywork practice.

Their unique approach to massage reflects their own activities in Big Sur and also guidance from an earlier generation of well-known women who taught and practiced at Esalen for a time (Rolf 1978; Roth 1998; Selver 1979). Charlotte Selver (1979), who emigrated from Germany in the late 1930s and taught sensory awareness at the New School for Social Research in New York City, communicated the European Gymnastik movement’s vision of the body as a site for spirituality, emotional expression, and healing (Johnson 1994:16–17, 176–188).

Massage, bodywork, holistic health, and ecstatic dance unfolded at the Institute long before the bodyworkers assumed an official group identity as the Esalen Massage and Bodywork Association in the late 1990s. The name EMBA emphasized the primacy of massage in the group’s varied practices.
Charlotte Selver participated in the European Gymnastics Movement in the late 1920s and 1930s. She taught physical culture classes that emphasized acceptance, appreciation, and spirituality associated with the human body. (Charlotte Selver Collection in the Humanistic Psychology Archives at the University of California at Santa Barbara Davidson Library)

Research about these bodyworkers would prioritize questions about women and men’s interdependence and the relationships between healing and spirituality, rather than the issue of spiritual privilege, which is our focus in this book.

The third major subgroup whose lives revolve around the Institute are the Big Sur residents and long-term work-study students who take care of daily operations in Esalen’s gardens, kitchens, and guest quarters. A closer look at them would foreground questions about intentional community and the survival of 1960s countercultures.

Each of the three interdependent groups can illuminate different aspects of Esalen and alternative spirituality in America. It is the group that became the CTR, however, that founded the Institute and remains at its doctrinal center. Their activities at the Institute and beyond Big Sur reveal the full impact of spiritual privilege and Esalen’s enduring influence on American spirituality.
The research for this book began when Michael first talked with me at length over lunch at a casual bistro in San Rafael, across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. He displayed his sense of humor and his legendary charm as he talked about the Institute and its foundational spiritual doctrine (Schwartz 1995; Tompkins 1976). When Michael described Esalen's emergence during the tumultuous 1960s, he effortlessly quoted William Butler Yeats, “And what rough beast, its hour come at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?” He mentioned Yeats's poem “Second Coming” and also noted Joan Didion's chronicles of desire and despair in California during the 1960s, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* ([1968] 1990). Slouching became an apt metaphor for this project, as I wove between collecting data and making sense of all of the information that I collected.

Thousands of pages of interview transcripts, archival materials, legal records, published sources, field notes, and ephemera helped me slouch toward the emerging framework of spiritual privilege. Multiple qualitative research methods were essential to uncover the Institute's many layers and its extensive influence on contemporary spirituality. Each cycle of questions brought new information and sociological surprises that generated further questions (Becker 1998). This process—analytic induction—involves moving back and forth between specific information and general themes (Becker 1998:146–214). My primary focus slowly shifted to people close to the contemporary CTR, because Michael and his comrades had shaped Esalen and defined it to a wide audience.

Michael and I met for three hours during lunch and later at his home office in winter of 1999. He provided the names of Esalen insiders, whom I interviewed over the next six months and he also recommended dozens of readings, generously loading my arms with books, manuscripts, notes, and lists. For the next four months, I followed Michael's suggestions for interviewing and reading, also talking on the phone with him six times and adding names and references to the earlier lists. These sources supported his views about Esalen's contemporary influence and the CTR's importance.

People on Michael's lists led me to more respondents and other written resources. Some of his friends provided names of dissidents who had left Esalen or were vocal inside critics of its leadership and current directions. They also suggested that I contact people born after the baby boom ended in
1964, which Michael did not. This is snowball sampling, where one respondent identifies others, who then in turn suggest yet other people; the ball of information grows larger and larger (Chambliss and Schutt 2010:124–125).

During this second stage of interviews, I talked with another twenty people for one to two hours each. After these relatively short interviews, extensive documentary research, and preliminary fieldwork, I contacted people from the three major groups within Esalen: the CTR, the EMBA, and the operations staff. Twenty-three people, sixteen men and seven women who had lived or worked at the Institute for three years or more, participated in long, unstructured interviews for at least two hours. They also provided additional information in short follow-up conversations. Although few specific questions were common to all of these interviews, I asked each respondent: “Can you name three or four people who somehow symbolize Esalen to you?” All of them talked about Michael, but at least two different people from each of the three subgroups also mentioned three younger men who were at Esalen during the late 1990s: Gordon Wheeler, David Price, and Albert Wong.

These four men personify Esalen’s doctrines of essence spirituality and self-actualization. Their lives illuminate the intersection of spiritual privilege and religious affinities in ways that more general descriptions cannot (McGuire 2008; Orsi 2005). They also reveal how Esalen’s different generations have developed and reworked the founding circle’s priorities and perspectives about spirituality through their collective histories and their different mixtures of individual spiritual privilege. The men not only talked with me during a number of long interviews but also discussed themselves and their ideas in books and other publications. Anonymity is not an issue because each one is easily identified by his relatively well-known life history.

**Documentary Sources**

Published documents, unpublished manuscripts, and other materials provided additional information. The Humanistic Psychology Archives at the University of California at Santa Barbara’s Davidson Library contains more than two hundred collections that include personal papers, institutional records, correspondence, photographs, audiotapes, videotapes, and printed materials such as Esalen catalogues. Thousands of unpublished manuscripts and published materials chart the Institute’s extraordinary first decade and also record the diffusion of its doctrines and practices.

Private letters and diaries in different collections were particularly useful for understanding daily life at Esalen and learning about social networks
in alternative spirituality and humanistic psychology. Documents that were personal and relatively private enriched and sometimes contradicted my interviews, published materials, and formal organizational records in ways that often affect historical research (Bloch 1953).

For example, an internationally acclaimed family therapist briefly directed Esalen’s first residential fellows’ program in 1966. Less than two months after the program began, she suddenly decamped without notifying anyone. She later explained openly that she had never really wanted to assume leadership at Esalen (Anderson 1983:125–127.) Her personal papers, however, revealed her hope to establish a competitive personal growth center, and the manuscript collection contained copies of obsequious letters to Esalen donors like the toy manufacturing heiress Barbara Marx Hubbard. These private documents illuminated not only the therapist’s goals but also the more general issue of outreach and competition for funding (Satir 1916–1993).

The single most important Esalen collection in the Humanistic Psychology Archives includes forty-eight audiocassettes of interviews, now digitally reformatted, that Walter Truett Anderson recorded for his 1983 book, The Upstart Spring. Appendix 2 lists them (Anderson Collection 1976–1986). Anderson talked with people who had built Esalen and remained affiliated with the Institute over many decades and also with individuals who left Big Sur quickly because of personal or ideological differences.

The tapes also provided useful unintentional information. For example, cofounder Dick Price died in a 1985 accident, but he came alive to me through his quirky inflections and humorous asides in the interviews. Even background noises, like a waitress whispering to Michael in the Esalen dining room, revealed nuanced interactions that were missing from written accounts.

On the Anderson tapes, people told stories that had changed years later and mentioned events that they failed to recall when they talked with me. There were also interviews with others who were no longer alive, whose personal narratives and interpretations had been erased from Esalen’s in-house histories (Kripal 2007a).

The Anderson collection also contains clues about legal documents like David Gold’s 1970 wrongful-death lawsuit, which implicated the Institute in his wife’s suicide (Anderson 1983:138). Michael settled with Gold out of court, and the depositions and documents from the case are no longer available. However, the Gold lawsuit led me to county records in Salinas and to useful documents such as Esalen’s articles of incorporation as a nonprofit in 1963, various property assessments and maps, Murphy Family Trust records,
and Dick’s will. The legal documents provide explicit details of the ways that Michael and Dick’s economic privilege made Esalen viable.

The documentary materials were particularly useful because many respondents were wary and sometimes hostile about discussing sensitive issues like financial arrangements, suicides at Esalen, or conflicts within the Institute. As we talked, people who lived and worked at Esalen often tried to find out where I stood in relation to their friends and to people that they perceived as their opponents. These kinds of questions about loyalties are common to field research, and problems surface because sociologists inevitably walk a fine line between participating and standing aside, usually traveling between both paths (Neitz 2002).

In most public situations at Esalen, I observed and participated without emphasizing or even mentioning my role as a researcher. I ate in the community dining room, soaked in the hot springs, and painted in the Art Barn alongside other visitors. I sweated and danced at informal morning sessions open to everyone at the Institute, welcoming the day with other participants. After class, however, I introduced myself to the stylish session leader, who had been at the Institute for almost twenty years, and we arranged an interview.

No matter how or where I introduced my research goals, once I had been around for a day or so, people at the Institute seemed to overlook my role as a sociologist at work. In the midst of a dining-room crunch, staff asked me to set out food. Another time, I helped clean kitchen counters. A young man whom I had already interviewed at length joined me at lunch in order to charm my attractive roommate. A member of the EMBA crew offered to arrange a date for me when we sat together at the small bar near the dining room.

Like most people who were there, I was passing through Esalen, and almost everyone forgot that I kept a private journal and took extensive field notes. During most long personal conversations or informal interviews, I mentioned my project briefly, but then I was quiet.

Once people provide invitations into to their social spaces, they tend to see the sociologist as a person, not a professional. Passing as a “civilian” is surprisingly easy (Becker 1998; Didion [1968] 1990). In public settings, my primary concerns were my own experience and general interactions. However, the roles of participant and observer became muddled in two contexts: a CTR-sponsored conference in the spring of 2003 and two psychodrama workshops in Southern California. During both situations, I silently slipped
from being a full participant to a critical observer, as issues of spiritual privilege came to the foreground.

**Other Approaches to Esalen**

This is the first book to explore Esalen and its enduring influence that has not been written by an Institute insider. Individuals closely associated with Esalen and the CTR have written primarily as advocates, rather than as distanced observers. They rarely looked to sources outside Big Sur or examined the ways that Esalen contributed to the growth and spread of spiritual privilege.

In the 1970s, a number of well-known public intellectuals contributed to seminars and workshops and later used their academic credentials to validate the Institute (Cox 1977; Glock and Bellah 1976; Maslow 1971; Watts 1973). They believed that Americans were careening into a spiritual chasm of amoral individualism, and they hoped that Esalen's spiritual innovations would generate a fresh consciousness and widespread dedication to collective well-being. They ignored issues such as some workshop leaders’ systematic misuse of power or their pervasive sexism, and they were unaware of the ways that their own spiritual privilege shaped their apparently unbiased perceptions.

Recently, Jeffery Kripal, a university professor and an active CTR member, described the Institute as a harbinger of a better, more humane society with a conviction reminiscent of intellectuals’ endorsements in the 1960s and 1970s. He characterized the Institute as a crucial middle ground between arid atheism and unreasonable fundamentalism. Kripal’s book (2007a) praised its many contributions to philosophy and religion, linking Esalen to various spiritual and philosophical traditions. And he specifically targeted an audience of other academics in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2007b), when he praised the Institute’s foundational doctrine of personal divinity linked to benevolent higher powers.

Kripal’s focus on Esalen’s contributions to philosophy and American religion bewildered reviewers and readers who had steeped in the hot springs, sunned on Esalen’s lawns, and casually dropped into a few workshops over the years (Johnson 2007). They had simply visited Big Sur to enjoy the seductive setting, meet interesting people, and possibly take away some insights about themselves. However, the amused critics who dissected Kripal’s work resembled him and the earlier scholars and advocates, because they never looked beyond Big Sur to examine the importance of Esalen’s central contributions to the religious marketplace.
Spiritual Experience

The myriad sacred practices and innovative approaches to psychology that Esalen has offered over the years incorporate direct spiritual experience. Feelings of transcendence can unfold in praying, meditating, doing yoga, exploring Gestalt psychology, or participating in other activities at the Institute. In the course of their practice, individuals often feel that they connect to something supernatural beyond the mundane world (McGuire 2008:12–15). They believe that a sacred presence touches them.

It is difficult to comprehend the multidimensional spiritual experiences available at Esalen through words alone (McGuire 2008). Readers can sample an activity related to each chapter in Appendix 1 in order to explore some of the Institute’s direct visceral appeal and the immediate rewards of spiritual privilege. These possibilities may add value to the intellectual understanding of Esalen, although their impact is diminished without the many scents and sounds that make simple activities special in Big Sur. The exercises work best in small, informal groups, but most can be done alone or in classroom settings.

Transcendent moments are among the many rewards that Esalen has provided to spiritual seekers. The Institute successfully promoted doctrines and practices that make it possible for people to diversify their allegiances and diminish their commitment to a spiritual path or one place, even the Institute (Iannaccone 1995).

Esalen’s many possibilities for enhancing personal and spiritual fulfillment have drawn seekers to Big Sur for six decades. However, diversification also created competition within the market niche that the Institute briefly dominated in the 1960s and early 1970s. The groundbreaking Institute is now an established American institution. Spiritual privilege, the means and desires to reshape personal connections to higher powers, is a resource that has become integral to many Americans’ lives. Shortly after cofounding the Institute, in the early 1960s, Michael asked a dear friend to help him liberate America’s soul: “George,” he said, “let’s fire a shot heard ’round the world” (Leonard 1988:167). And so they did.

Plan of the Book

The first chapter of The American Soul Rush considers the Institute’s central spiritual doctrines. Michael’s sojourn at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in India inspired him to found the Institute with Dick Price and to popularize
concepts of everyone’s essential divinity/godliness and individuals’ ability to maximize their full potential in spirit, psyche, body, and mind.

Chapter 2 describes the Institute’s creation narrative and charts Esalen’s history through the twenty-first century. In the 1960s and 1970s, many people believed that “Esalen is another world. Probably the most beautiful place, the highest pace, the freest place I’ll ever [live]” (Heider 1996:85).

After a period of stagnation from the late 1970s through the early 1990s, the Institute recovered. Its contemporary leaders redefined their mission by emphasizing Esalen’s longstanding commitments to personal growth, spiritual exploration, and global social reform and also considering subjects that were mostly off Esalen’s radar screen in the 1960s: family life and aging.

Chapter 3 explores the four central dimensions of spiritual privilege: religious affinities, cultural and religious capital, social networks, and economic resources. Esalen diffused spiritual privilege and helped change America’s religious marketplace, while it also transformed individual lives.

Chapter 4 describes how four men who have been profoundly influenced by the Institute enact spiritual privilege in different ways. Their personal histories also illuminate the ways that different cohorts interpret and spread Esalen’s contributions to spirituality, personal growth psychology, social action, and definitions of masculinity. Gender advantage, the material and interpersonal resources that amplify men’s power in American society, augments their spiritual privilege, allowing them to step outside the mainstream in order to reinvent themselves.

Chapter 5 examines how two widely known narratives about Esalen’s early years cemented men’s centrality at the Institute. Men’s narratives and their initial priorities created a space to explore new definitions of masculinity. Over the years, Esalen has remained a place where men can construct and interpret their manhood.

Chapter 6 documents some of the ways that the Institute has made a lasting impact on the wider culture through educational institutions, professional organizations, and media, including books, magazines, and websites dedicated to personal and spiritual growth. Its doctrines and practices of personal divinity and limitless human potential are now embedded in American society and associated with goods and services that are available to most citizens. Sometimes, the Institute’s influence is almost invisible, as in the case of the huge best-seller Tuesdays with Morrie (Albom 1997).

The final chapter examines the broad impact of spiritual privilege on twenty-first-century Americans. Even in the midst of deep recession, spiritual privilege does not disappear. If anything, it continues to spread, as peo-
ple seek ways of improving their lives during a painful economic downturn. Critics view alternative spirituality and the optimism that grounds it as futile modes of self-deception (Ehrenrich 2009). Many more people, however, find comfort in the doctrines and practices that first came together at Esalen. The Institute continues to provide a range of spiritual paths and a unifying doctrine to encourage ever wider transmission of spiritual privilege and ever greater participation in the soul rush.