

# Werner, dearest . . .

Many idolized  
the best guru,  
but did he  
mistreat them?

Nikki Meredith  
Independent Journal reporter

First of two parts

**T**O SOME people, Werner Erhard was always a bit of a cosmic joke.

It was amusing that educated adults flocked to a program called est where they paid substantial sums of money to sit interminably in uncomfortable chairs in hotel ballrooms, where they were told their lives didn't work and, what's more, they couldn't use the bathroom until their "trainer" said they could.

It was amusing that educated adults would pay money to enroll in a campaign that promised to end world hunger in this century just by thinking about it . . .

It was amusing that esteemed philosophers and scientists revered a former used car salesman who got enlightenment in his wife's Ford Mustang somewhere between Corte Madera and the Golden Gate Bridge . . .

But Werner Erhard doesn't seem so amusing anymore.

Picture the king of personal transformation, a man who has been described as a "radiating power of love," getting up close to a man's face and screaming that he is not just worthless, but a worthless piece of excrement.

Picture the international expert on employee management shoving his own employee in anger because he didn't massage him correctly.

Picture the promoter of freedom from self-imposed limits demanding that employees pledge eternal subordination to him. Werner Erhard, otherwise known as "Source."

These accusations and more have surfaced in recent months because a Werner Erhard & Associates (WE&A) executive fired a popular employee in April 1988. Since then, the employee, Charlene Afremow, has filed a wrongful termination suit (see page E4) that has prompted several other former employees and volunteer staff to speak out against the organization and, in some cases, sign court affidavits alleging mistreatment by Erhard.

WE&A has responded to the attacks by issuing a statement denying the accusations, maintaining they were made by a few disgruntled employees. According to the organization, "virtually all" of the thousands of employees who have worked for Erhard's various enterprises have been satisfied with their employment.

The intensity of anger felt by those who



**WERNER ERHARD:** photographed here in 1985, got rich from a two-weekend pop psychology course known as est. Now some former followers are saying they're getting it at last: the emperor has no clothes

UJ photo/Marian Little Utley

are not satisfied is equally matched by the intensity of the attraction they once felt for Erhard. Not only were his courses — est (Erhard Seminar Training) and then later the Forum — emotionally powerful, he was personally charismatic and produced a never-ending supply of "break-through ideas" that had, they believed, international significance.

"We felt like we were on the cutting edge," says Becky Carter, a former staff volunteer whose husband, Landon, was an est trainer. "We believed we were a part of something important in our time."

Indeed, Erhard arranged symposiums

with world-class philosophers, scientists and writers and he attracted an array of politicians and entertainers. Valerie Harper called him "the most extraordinary man I know"; Raul Julia said Erhard had "found out what it takes to make a life work"; John Denver said "Werner epitomizes for me what it is to be a human being."

"He encouraged us to think as big as we could. He asked us to commit as much as possible — to go for everything, not just what we thought was possible," says Wendy Drucker of San Anselmo, a former volunteer and wife of one of Erhard's top ex-

ecutives during the '70s.

Erhard's employees and volunteers became committed to extending this high-on-life-and-human-possibility to the whole world. "Werner can make a difference on the planet" became the refrain.

The staff devoted their lives to implementing Erhard's vision. In addition to leading courses, they produced events and relentlessly recruited people for Erhard's various programs. They even provided Erhard with personal care.

"I felt like it was an opportunity to

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# Clothes encounter: 30 people managed Erhard's closet

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work for someone who was like a Zen master," says "Drew," a Marin County man who asked that his real name not be used because he is now embarrassed about the kind of treatment he tolerated from Erhard.

Once people got immersed in the organization, however, they found the Zen master was also a formidable task master.

According to court affidavits, they worked extraordinarily long hours — paid staff were expected to work 12 hours a day, six days a week although most people interviewed for this article say they typically worked much more than that; volunteers report working between 40 hours and 80 hours a week.

## Fanatic perfectionism

Many of those hours were spent getting things right for Werner, as described by insiders.

His fanatic perfectionism was applied to everything from arranging furniture for an event to lining up the toiletries in his bathroom.

This side of his personality was no secret. In Erhard's authorized biography, "The Transformation of a Man," by W.W. Bartley (Clarkson J. Potter Inc., New York, 1978), Sandy McNamara, a senior employee who still works for the organization, gave an example of his employer's exactitude when he described how Erhard insisted the 60 pillows in a meeting room be placed.

"Each pillow had an exact place in the room. A pillow could not be off by two inches. And it wasn't legitimate to ask what two inches mattered to a pillow. You got to be enlightened from Werner's handling of pillows: you either did it exactly right or you didn't get to assist Werner with the pillows anymore."

## Into the closet

Kassy Adams, a Novato woman who worked for Erhard in the mid '80s, got a taste of his compulsive nature when she worked on a team of 30 assistants involved in overseeing his "closet" — actually a section of a Sausalito warehouse.

She was given a manual on how to iron his clothes and was instructed on how to maintain the order of his shirts which were cataloged, by label, color and where acquired. "There was a tracking system so if there was a flaw of any kind like a button missing or a thread hanging, it could be determined who last handled it, whose responsibility it was."

Adams was also instructed on how to polish and align his more than 150 pairs of shoes.

When tasks didn't meet Erhard's specifications, former employees say he often became enraged. "It wasn't just that he got angry," recalls Drew, a former member of Erhard's personal staff. "he would get up close to you, right in your face and scream,

## Werner's works:

The following lists Werner Erhard's enterprises:

■ **Werner Erhard & Associates**, San Francisco: Offers more than 40 seminars, programs and workshops to individuals on personal effectiveness, communication skills and productivity in 80 cities across the country. The Forum is the centerpiece of WEA.

■ **Werner Erhard & Associates International**, San Francisco: Offers the Forum and other courses in North America, Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, Australia and Europe.

■ **Transformational Technologies**, Sausalito: Established in 1984, TTI sells franchises of Erhard's management "packages"

to business management consultants and, sometimes, directly to corporations. In recent years, Erhard has set himself up as an expert on management practices, using some of the same "breakthrough" concepts he has applied to personal transformation.

■ **Synex**, Sausalito: Coordinates Erhard's private life and speaking engagements.

■ **Non-profits**: Werner Erhard is also founder or "senior consultant" to a series of non-profit organizations located in various parts of the country which focus on issues ranging from juvenile delinquency to visiting inmates of institutions during the holiday season. The best known, The Hunger Project, based in New York, is dedicated to ending hunger in this century by getting people to declare their commitment to ending hunger by enrolling in the project.

"You a-----, you worthless piece of s-----."

Drew also recalls Erhard pushing him "roughly" after he failed to massage his back properly. On another occasion, he says he saw Erhard strike an employee and, in a separate incident, witnessed him putting his hands around someone's throat in anger.

## Unleashed anger

Others say Erhard often overreacted to criticism. In an affidavit in support of Affirmos lawsuit, Irving Bernstein, a former est trainer and Forum leader from 1977 to 1985 and now a certified public accountant in Mill Valley, says Erhard threatened his wife when she complained that Erhard was having an affair with an employee. According to Bernstein's court declaration, Erhard stated that he would "squash her like a bug" if she didn't stop "being a problem for him."

"The cause of this behavior," says Bernstein, "was that Mr. Erhard had been carrying on a relationship with a staff member who had confided in his wife her mixed emotions about the affair. When Erhard learned of this, he became extremely angry."

## What loyalists say

Werner Erhard, who lives on a million-dollar yacht in Sausalito, declined to be interviewed for this article through his spokesman Bill Barnes. However, his media office arranged for interviews with Erhard loyalists.

Bob Curtis, chief executive officer of Werner Erhard & Associates International, has been associated with Erhard for 16 years. He says, "stories such as these are inconsistent with my experience." He ac-

knowledges that Erhard once yelled at people, "but I haven't heard him do it in eight years."

Art Schuller, a physician who worked first as an est trainer and then as a Forum leader, says he heard more yelling when he was on staff at the University of California Medical Center at Davis than he did working for Erhard.

How can the discrepancies in these observations be explained? The answer may have been unwittingly supplied by Gary Grace, who served on Erhard's staff from 1974 to 1979 in a variety of executive positions. "Werner is a person who relates to everyone individually," he says.

Grace, who now owns a string of Supercuts stores in which Erhard is an investor, adds that Erhard is "totally different with everyone he's with."

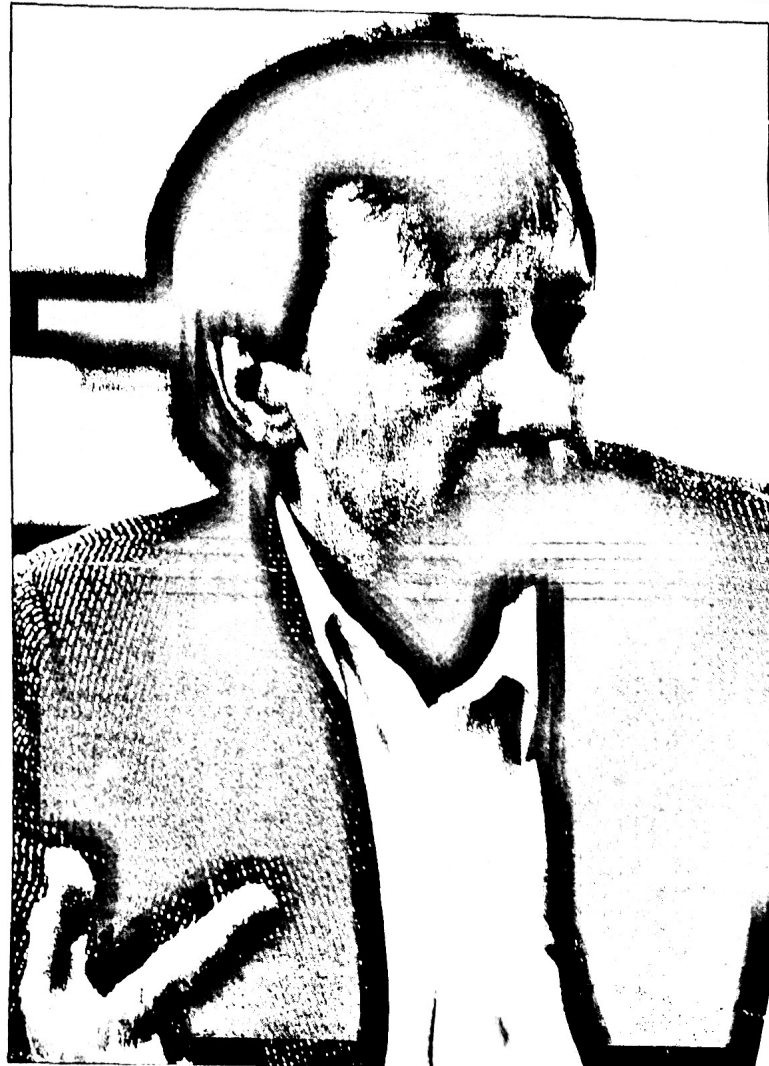
## The Mantos incident

For those who have become disenchanted with Werner Erhard, disillusionment came at different times and for different reasons but almost all former devotees mention the "Jack Mantos incident" as being pivotal in their reappraisal of his true nature.

Mantos, a physician by training, was Erhard's right-hand man and, according to people who knew him, was fiercely loyal and devoted to his boss. In February 1988, Mantos died of a massive coronary.

At the time, Erhard was on a yacht in the Bahamas and did not return home for either the West Coast funeral or the East Coast memorial service a couple of weeks later. Mantos was immensely well-liked, and many were stunned by Erhard's behavior.

A month later, at a meeting called



**WAS ERHARD INSENSITIVE?** Jack Mantos (above) was Werner's right hand man. He died of a coronary in February 1988. Erhard chose not to attend either the funeral or memorial service.

the March Forum Leader Days, Erhard addressed the reaction to Jack Mantos' death. The following is an excerpt from a transcript of that meeting (all such meetings were recorded):

"... I want to take to task those of you who used Jack's death as a signal to produce some kind of a signal in the space because you could get away with it. Because nobody has got the balls to get up in your face when somebody dies. I am not one of those people Jack is a lot less important to me at the moment than you are. And I don't have to be nice to Jack. I was nice to Jack when he was alive. I don't need to be nice to him when he's dead. I don't need to honor his memory either. I may choose to do that, but I don't need to do it."

## The dark side

Drew says few people in the organization ever see all of the aspects of Erhard's "dark side." "A lot of people had different pieces of the puzzle," he says, "but unless you worked with him every day, you didn't have the whole picture."

Even those who had the whole picture say that they had ways of explaining Erhard's behavior. One man likens it to a Zen master who whacks his students when they doze during instruction; another says he told himself that Erhard was like a tough coach who exacts total com-

mitment from his athletes. Others say they tolerated mistreatment because they felt utterly dependent on him and his power.

Within the organization, Erhard was referred to as Source. "Source started out to mean that Werner was the source of the training and the organization," says Becky Carter, "but what it came to imply was that he was the source of each individual's personal success."

In his court declaration Irving Bernstein says that within the organization "Source" was "akin to God."

## The halo effect

There are more than a few clues that Werner Erhard sees himself as someone with transcendent powers. At a December 1987 meeting, Forum leader Vic Gioncia quoted Erhard: "When you get to a field of open snow, on which you have never walked before, and which no one has ever walked before, and which you don't think that it is possible to walk, look for my footprints."

One former volunteer even remembers people describing the aura of light encircling Erhard.

"People gave their power away to Werner," says Becky Carter. "As long as you were in the organization, you would be powerful too because you got your power from 'Source,'

and we were grateful to him for that."

If a person was ill or had an accident, it was assumed that the cause was being "incomplete with Werner" — meaning there was something amiss in one's relationship with Erhard.

When people did leave, those still working for Erhard claimed the defectors even looked different. "We used to say we could see it in their eyes," recalls Landon Carter, a former est trainer.

The elevated position Erhard held in people's hearts and minds was where better reflected than in the relationship he had with the trainers — the organization's high priests. When est trainers and then Forum leaders were "designated," a sort of swearing in ritual they essentially promised eternal servitude.

(According to an affidavit filed in the Affirmos lawsuit by Berkeley sociologist Richard Offshie, this designation ritual is very similar to a Scientology practice in which volunteers sign a contract which obliges them to a "billion years" of service to Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard.)

As Bernstein says in his court declaration, "I gave my word that I had a word to give, gave my word that I would do what Werner asked, gave my word that I would do what Werner asked forever."

**Tomorrow: Is Werner Erhard operating a cult?**

# Werner, dearest . . .

By Nikki Meredith

Independent Journal reporter

Second of two parts

**T**HEY ARE entrepreneurial types in business suits who spend their days promoting corporate and personal effectiveness, talk about breaking out of paradigms and have a penchant for marathon conference calls. But some former employees say Werner Erhard & Associates (WE&A) operates more like a cult than the educational enterprise it claims to be.

Since the term "cult" is often applied to cloistered groups with chanting, blissed-out acolytes in saffron robes, it seems a bit of a reach. Descriptions of WE&A seminars, symposiums and networks are decidedly unspiritual, while their hardball sales tactics are reminiscent of encyclopedia peddlers.

Whether or not the organization qualifies as a cult, many former staff members and volunteers contend that Erhard's enterprise is totalitarian in nature and exploits people in the name of personal and global transformation.

"It had a humane facade while it was a highly abusive place," says one former executive.

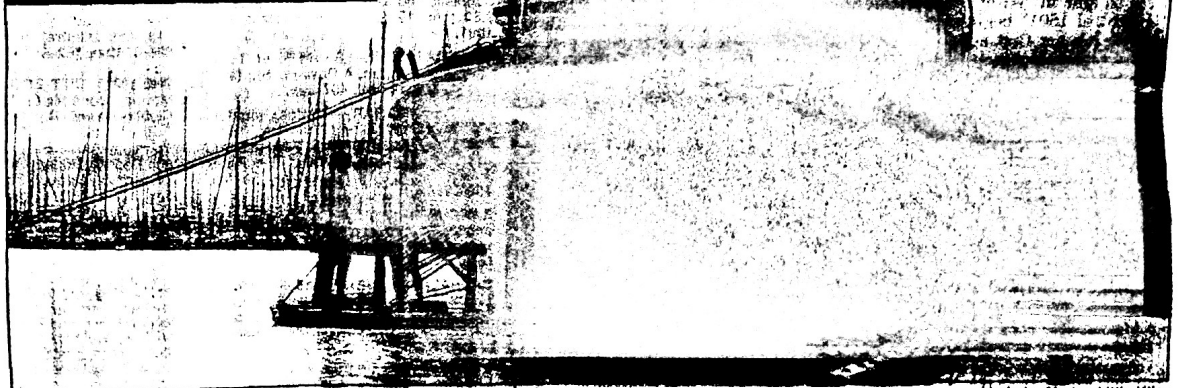
Those who are now disenchanted say the experiences that hooked them in the first place, while initially liberating and "transforming," became emotionally crippling. "The principles were extremely valuable," says Kassy Adams of Novato, a former staff member who worked as a volunteer and a paid staff member in both Michigan and California, "but the organization took the work and bastardized it."

## Learning Wernerspeak

The Work, which refers to Erhard's teachings, includes two key ingredients: one, the need to break through to new possibilities by shedding self-imposed limits; two, the importance of making commitments. In Wernerspeak, the former has to do with effectiveness and productivity; the latter concerns a concept they term "living as your word." According to people who have worked for Erhard's organizations, both are used to bully people into devoting an inordinate amount of time and energy to his enterprises.

"They say, the only way your life is going to work, is to give your word," says Carol Giambalvo, of Oceanside, N.Y., a volunteer with the Hunger Project for five years, who worked more than 80 hours a week. "Then they say you've got to give whatever it takes, no matter how many hours it takes — 24 people are dying of hunger every minute and you're letting it happen."

Giambalvo, who is now the national coordinator for FOCUS, a support group for former cult members, left the Hunger Project after she and her husband could no longer tolerate the organization's practices. "They say the program was used to spread 'Werner's message' rather than as a genuine effort to resolve the complex issues of hunger."



Inset photo: Erhard on the seminar circuit

**SAFE SPACE:** A place to call home — Werner Erhard's million-dollar yacht at its Sausalito berth. A former staffer reports having to clean the bilge with a toothbrush and Q-tips. Inset photo: Erhard on the seminar circuit

Kassy Adams experienced the same kind of pressure in working for WE&A. She was responsible for getting people already enrolled in programs to follow through.

"Every morning I went into work, they would ask me how many people I could contact that day," she says. "I would calculate, given the number of hours in the day, what was possible. They would say, 'That's insufficient.' So they would 'process me,' scream at me, intimidate me until I increased my promise. I'd increase my promise, but it would be impossible to keep, so then they would berate me for not keeping my word."

Keeping your word was used as a rationale to intrude into almost every aspect of people's lives. Staff members were expected to be available to Erhard 24 hours a day, seven days a week, according to Stu Ludlow, of Novato, who worked in various staff training, recruitment and personnel positions for est and then for WE&A.

It wasn't enough to just put in the hours — one had to get results. Ludlow says. If, at the end of a 13-hour day, a staff member hadn't met his "production promise" (producing a specified number of enrollments), he often couldn't go home until he had. Comings and goings were monitored, and staff had to sign out even to go to the bathroom.

Some former employees say Werner Erhard & Associates operates more like a cult than the educational enterprise it claims to be.

If a person asked for a day off, even after working many consecutive days, Ludlow says the response would be: "What are you committed to? Are you committed to relaxing, to luxury, or are you committed to Werner's work and keeping your word?"

People who didn't keep their word were berated and screamed at, says Keith Torgan who worked for est in New York for three years. He says his first exposure to the organization's management style occurred one evening when a manager let out a "violent, blood-curdling" scream after a group of volunteers working the phones failed to meet their target number of enrollments.

According to Ludlow, these incidents reflected a pattern of abuse that started at the top and cascaded down through all levels of the organization and often included threats.

He remembers a manager once banging the phone down hard on his desk and then saying, "Did you hear that? I wish it was your head."

Others talk about having objects like pens or stacks of enrollment cards thrown at them when they weren't "living their word."

Not living one's word led to being "out of integrity"; issues in the integrity category included not only keeping one's word

to recruit as many people as one said, but involved details of a worker's personal life. Kassy Adams says she was given an "integrity check list" which made her promise, among other things, to balance her check book, pay her bills on time, keep her car cleaned and straighten her drawers.

Part of being "in integrity" was acknowledging that you were responsible for everything that happened to you. Adams recalls that, at first, this idea was valuable because "for the first time, people stopped blaming circumstances for their problems. They started to feel they truly had choices." But the number of areas that a worker had to assume responsibility for were infinite.

Torgan remembers a time when he was quite ill and unable to work. He was required to call in every day and talk to "consulting services" where he would have to review the moment he got sick, the choices he made that resulted in his getting sick and to answer the question, "Are you willing to be well yet?"

"Consulting services" were set up for the purpose of "clearing one's head." But according to Berkeley sociologist Richard Ofshe, the utilization of consulting services within WE&A serves a similar function as the practice of "security checking"

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**FAST TRACK:** This 1979 photo of Werner Erhard shows him at the wheel during his Breakthrough Racing days

## Some staffers bolted for freedom

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in Scientology. "The purpose of these practices is to identify persons who have thoughts that are critical of the organization or its leader."

"These consultants were sort of analyst-priests hearing confessions," says one man who worked on Erhard's personal staff.

"What you said was supposed to be confidential, but there were things that I talked about that got back to me from other people."

Throwing objects, screaming insults and hounding all led to a phenomenon known within the organization as "bolting." When someone bolted, he wasn't just leaving for the day—he was leaving for life, hoping never to be found, says Ludlow. "One woman signed out to go to the dentist and left the state," he says. "That sort of thing was not at all unusual."

### Losing 'it'

Given the working conditions, what is amazing is not that people bolted but that they stayed at all.

"Fear was used as a tool," says one former est trainer. "People were told if they left the organization, they would lose 'it.'" "It" referred to a

mysterious essence of Erhard enlightenment.

Those who worked for Erhard for a number of years also say that the experience of being in the organization eroded their common sense and made them distrust their "normal" reactions.

A cornerstone of Erhard's ideology is that people are enslaved by their past experiences, condemned to a lifetime of self-defeating constraints. Est and the Forum encouraged people to throw off these shackles and begin anew. This often produced a powerful feeling of renewal and rebirth.

But it also meant that people no longer had any internal gauge by which to judge situations. All they had were the dictates of the organization. "Since it was all the things in the past that made you unhappy, the organization assaulted your prior belief systems and moral judgments," says Carol Gambalvo.

"When my manager called me a f--- idiot because I didn't have a banner ready for an event, it never occurred to me to protest," she says.

"Now I think, 'I was devoting my whole life to that organization. I didn't deserve to be treated that way.' But at the time, I thought she was right. I hadn't kept my word."

People also say that there was no way to share their concerns with peers in the organization because there were both explicit and implicit sanctions against complaining. Employees and volunteers had to sign a document promising that they wouldn't gossip or "natter" and they would take complaints they had to superiors (or consulting services), not peers.

### Persuasive powers

The warning not to complain was taken very seriously. "If people tried to complain to friends, they would be chilled out," says Wendy Drucker of San Anselmo, who served on the volunteer staff. "I chilled people out too. Being critical was not acceptable behavior."

When the Forum was launched in 1985, Steven Hassan, of Boston, the author of the book "Cult Mind Control" (Park Street Press, 1988), attended a lecture Erhard gave in Boston to promote the new program. Hassan, a former member of Rev. Moon's Unification Church and a deprogrammer, went with a friend who was also a former Moonie. Both were awed by Erhard's persuasive powers and the effectiveness of his do-your-really-want-to-close-the-door-on-your-own-possibilities challenge to the audience.

They were also amazed at how tenacious the staff was in their attempts to enroll people in the Forum. "As soon as I indicated I wasn't interested, they started in on me," says Hassan. "How is your relationship with your wife? Don't you want to improve it? How about your mother? Your father? How's your work going? Don't you want to do better at work?"

"What is it about you that you're not open to the possibility of growth? Is your mind closed? If I didn't have the background I had, I'm sure I would have signed up," he says.

Later that evening, after everyone had left the meeting but Erhard's devotees, Hassan and his friend hid in the back and listened to Erhard address his followers. "The speech was right out of the Moonies. He didn't talk specifically about God, the way they do, but the flavor was exactly the same. I said to my friend, 'Holy Mackerel, he really does believe he's the Messiah.'"

## WE&A in trouble: Reasons for the hard sell

When Werner Erhard retired est in 1985, the reason given was that "the training got its work done" and it was time to do something new. The something new was the Forum.

The Forum turned out to be a kinder, gentler version of est, a marketing strategy critics saw was inspired by waning est enrollments.

Apparently, the new incarnation didn't prove to be the hoped-for draw. According to Stu Ludlow, who was involved in recruitments for both est and the Forum during his seven year tenure, when he left the organization in 1987 the Forum was only getting about 200 enrollments a week.

In comparison, about 1,000 people took the \$450 est training each week at its peak.

One of the responses to the Forum's poor showing was an escalation of the hard sell.

The company does no advertising and relies on word-of-mouth to get people to guest lectures. Typically, est and Forum graduates invite friends to attend a "special evening" sometimes telling them it's connected to Werner Erhard, sometimes not.

The last part of the guest lecture is devoted to getting people to sign up for the Forum—which now costs

\$625 for the two weekend course—and that's when the pressure starts.

"If a guy said he couldn't sign up because he didn't have his check book, we'd follow him home—even if it was midnight," recalls Ludlow. "If he said he didn't have enough money in his checking account, we'd say we'd take Visa, Mastercard or American Express. If he said he didn't have enough margin on his credit cards, we would turn to the friend who brought him and say, 'Well, you don't mind lending him the money do you?'"

The same kind of pressure was used on people who enrolled for other kinds of seminars after they had "graduated" from the Forum.

"If people decided not to take any more seminars, we were told to do anything to talk them back into the program," says Ludlow. "We called and called. If they hung up, we'd call back. Sometimes they'd get angry, but we'd call back anyway. We were told to keep trying up to the time they mentioned the police or the Better Business Bureau and then we were to back off."

The hard sell may not be paying off. According to inside source enrollments for the Forum are dwindling and the organization is in financial trouble.

— Nikki Meredith

## The Forum: does it work?

What the Forum seminar offers, Werner Erhard has said, is a "new possibility of living."

"The Forum gives you the key to shaping action, performance and results. Here you find the actual source of ability, competence and productivity," claims one of the brochures.

However, research published in 1989 in the Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology demonstrated "a lack of substantial positive effects" for people who take the course.

Between 1986 and 1988, a team of research psychologists headed by Jeffrey Fisher of the University of Connecticut administered detailed questionnaires to 135 participants four to six weeks before they took the Forum; four to six weeks after; and one and a half years later. The researchers administered similar questionnaires to a control group.

Forum outcome was evaluated

on several dimensions including perceived control over one's life, life satisfaction, daily coping, social functioning, positive and negative feelings, self-esteem and physical health.

The short-term outcome analyses revealed only one difference: Forum participants perceived that they had more control over their lives after the course. But even this difference disappeared after a year and a half.

Researchers concluded, "The more rigorous analyses revealed no demonstrable long-term beneficial or harmful psychological effects of participation in the Forum."

Interestingly, one of Erhard's non-profit foundations funded the study. But, by prior agreement, Erhard's organization had no control over the results.

— Nikki Meredith



**ERHARD SISTERS:** Adair (left) and Celeste (right) say they feel an obligation to themselves and to the public to tell the truth

IJ photo/Marian Little Utley

# FAMILY AFFAIRS

## Werner Erhard's daughters speak out

On June 17 and 18, 1990, the Marin Independent Journal published a two-part series on est founder Werner Erhard, detailing the dissatisfactions and defections of former staff members and volunteers in his various programs. Many of these people claimed that Werner Erhard & Associates (now the name of his primary enterprise) operates more like a cult than the educational operation it claims to be.

In connection with a lawsuit brought by a former employee, several people filed court declarations accusing Erhard and his organization of abusing them emotionally and physically.

Although Erhard refused to be interviewed for the article, he paid for a full-page ad in the IJ, refuting the claims.

Since then, an increasing number of former associates have made their disillusionment public, and the Erhard story has been — or will be — taken up by other publications. A crew from "60 Minutes" recently was in the Bay Area interviewing and filming many of those with ties to Erhard.

Now two of his daughters, Celeste and Adair, have come forth to give a candid view of Erhard as father and husband.

Werner Erhard refused to be interviewed for this article also.

*"We were petrified of (our father). It was the kind of fear that you feel in your stomach. The only way I can describe it is to say that it's the feeling that you might lose your life."*

— Adair Erhard

■ **WERNER ERHARD:** The King of Transformation?/E4

By Nikki Meredith

Independent Journal reporter

**C**ELESTE AND ADAIR Erhard say it is still a vivid memory, a nightmare that haunts their adult lives and, in many ways, characterizes their childhood.

The year is 1977 and the occasion is a dinner at Franklin House, the Pacific Heights mansion their father, Werner Erhard, then owned. Celeste is 14, Adair is 13, their brother, St. John, is nine. Their mother, Ellen Erhard, is lying in a fetal position on the floor. She has been

knocked out of her chair. One of their father's staff members pulls her hair, another kicks her. Erhard, his own hands unsullied, watches while his devotees brutalize her. The purpose is to get her to confess to an infidelity he suspects.

She does not confess and the violence escalates the following night. Celeste and Adair, their presence mandatory, watch while one of Erhard's "lieutenants" chokes their mother. They watch as her face turns blue and her eyes bulge. Celeste screams for him to stop.

This might seem like a bad dream if it wasn't for the fact that the man who did the choking says it wasn't a dream. Bob Larzelere says he felt Ellen Erhard's body go limp as he cut off the air to her windpipe. "I knew then that I would do

anything that Werner asked, I would do anything for his love and approval," says the former physician who worked in the upper echelon of Erhard's organization. "This was how low I had sunk in terms of giving Werner my power."

To understand how this could happen and why Werner Erhard's daughters are now willing to talk about it, it's important to understand the nature of this family.

While Erhard presented himself as the embodiment of love to the world ("I love you" was his routine sign-off, whether it was in a staff memo or to an audience of hundreds) and offered courses on relationships and communication, he expressed no such love within his own family, say his daughters. (As part of her divorce agreement from Werner, Ellen Erhard is not free to talk about her marriage. Celeste and Adair, however, were interviewed by the Independent Journal in early December.)

"Our relationship with our father was based on fear," says Adair, who is now 26. "We were petrified of him. It was the kind of fear that you feel in your stomach. The only way I can describe it is to say that it's the feeling that you might lose your life."

"Any good memory I might have of my father," says Celeste, 28, "is completely overshadowed by fear."

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## Daughters

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They recall no semblance of a normal family life. They and their brother lived in San Rafael with their mother while their father lived at Franklin House.

"He didn't know us at all," says Adair, "he'd even forget our names."

Much of their interaction with their father took place at scheduled meetings where agendas, reports and time sheets — the various ways he and his staff kept track of the children's activities — were reviewed.

They do not remember a single pleasurable family event — no dinners at home, no days at the beach, no family picnics. The one exception was a football game that they say was staged for photos for a book about their father.

### 'We were puppets'

What they do remember is being treated like props in their father's life. "We were puppets, used to promote his image," says Celeste.

(According to Adair, a recent example of this was her father's request that she "drop in" for a visit on his yacht in Sausalito while he was being interviewed by Jesse Kornbluth, a writer from Venice Fair. "I would never drop in to see my father, that's not the kind of relationship we ever had. But he wanted to make it look like a normal family.")

Most of their contact with their father took place at monthly "family" meetings at Franklin House which also included staff members. It was at such a meeting that their mother was brutalized.

They say it started out the way most of them did: Dinner was prepared by Erhard's chef and served by his assistants, volunteers who worked for Erhard's organization. Celeste and Adair say their four half-siblings were there, their father's brother, Harry Rosenberg, and several Erhard staff members.

"At these meetings we would go around the room and each of us would have to say something about our lives, sort of like a big encounter group," says Adair. "That night, after dinner, when it got to the talking part, Dad accused Mom of having an affair and asked, 'What are you withholding?' (According to Adair, Erhard had a special category called "perpetrations and withholdings." Infidelity came under this category — other people's infidelity, that is. Although Erhard's own infidelity is discussed in court documents filed by former staff members, it was never a topic that was open for group discussion.)

"He accused her of undermining him, of gathering allies against him," says Adair.

### A matter of control

"He wanted her to surrender to him, to commit herself to him completely," says Celeste. "But she never completely surrendered. She kept back something of herself and he couldn't tolerate it."

"He was a control god, a total control monster," says Celeste.

Adair and Celeste say that when

## Previous troubles of the 'King of Transformation'

By Nikki Meredith

Independent Journal reporter

Werner Erhard under siege is not new.

Since the early 1970s, the "King of Transformation" has been the subject of numerous magazine and newspaper articles, much of it criticizing his simplistic answers to complex human problems, his lavish lifestyle and questionable tax practices.

But accusations in a recent barrage of media attention have been much more serious.

In the Marin Independent Journal's two-part series in June, former devotees described Werner Erhard as an authoritarian figure who presided over an organization that had many characteristics of a cult.



ERHARD: Under criticism

They said he was considered god-like and referred to as "Source" and that he required a pledge of eternal servitude from those who became trainers within the organization.

One man talked of being hit by Erhard while many others talked about verbal assaults by Erhard and others in the organization. In a paid advertisement that he subsequently placed in the IJ, Erhard countered that hundreds of current and former employees deny the accusations of abuse. The ad included a statement by a Catholic priest disputing the claim that Erhard wanted to appear god-like.

In November, San Francisco Focus Magazine printed an article which centered on Erhard's failed attempts to win acceptance by San Francisco's high society. It also included accusations of abusive employee practices. In response, "friends of Werner Erhard & Associates" placed an ad in the San Francisco Chronicle maintaining that the Focus article's characterization of company treatment of employees was false.

In November, West, the San Jose Mercury News Sunday magazine, published a two-part article

which included interviews alleging that Erhard forced his wife to participate in group sex and also that he generally mistreated his family.

The CBS program, "60 Minutes" plans to air a segment later this month which, reportedly, takes a critical look at the man, his personal relationships and his enterprises.

The story of how Erhard has transformed himself again and again has become a familiar New Age legend: He was once a car salesman named Jack Rosenberg who lived in Philadelphia with a wife and four children. In 1960 he deserted that family and ran away to California with a woman named June Bryder. He changed his name to Werner Hans Erhard and she changed hers to Ellen Erhard. (Somewhere along the line he has also called himself Jack Frost as well as Kurt VonSavage.) Werner and Ellen had three children: Celeste, Adair and St. John.

In California Erhard sold encyclopedias, got "enlightened" and then in 1971, founded est (Erhard Seminar Training) — self-improvement seminars that combined a variety of teachings in-

cluding Scientology, Mind Dynamics, Dale Carnegie and Zen.

The original est organization has had several transformations of its own, one of them occurring in 1985 when, in response to declining enrollments he abandoned est and created the Forum. It was hoped that the Forum, a watered-down version of est that stresses personal effectiveness over enlightenment, would be more attractive in the success-driven '80s. But enrollments in the program have continued to decline. Erhard has also established various other profit and non-profit enterprises.

Meanwhile, relationships in his personal life continued to reconfigure. In 1973, he reconciled with his first family and hired his first wife as his employee.

Ellen and Werner separated in 1982, but the bitter divorce did not become final until 1988. One of the conditions of the divorce agreement was that Ellen not discuss their marriage.

According to Adair Erhard, her mother was willing to agree to keep silent because she was so eager to resolve the situation.

of them.

During this period, Adair and Celeste recall, their mother was put on what sounds like a Steppford Wives-inspired "rehabilitation" program. Erhard appointed someone to be with her at all times. Her weight was watched, her "withholdings" monitored and her contact with her children restricted. She was not allowed to have money or to drive a car. Part of her rehabilitation was to be the family maid.

"I came home from school one day, and Mom was scrubbing the kitchen floor," says Celeste. "I said, 'Hi, Mom,' but she didn't look up, she just kept scrubbing. The guardian said, 'Your mother is not allowed to talk to you.'"

Why did her mother submit to this treatment? "She was typical of abused wives," says Adair. "She didn't feel that she had a choice."

"She was brainwashed," says Celeste, "and so were we. Most of the time, we felt like he was right and we were crazy."

Celeste and Adair say there was never anyone they trusted when they were growing up because they believed that everything always got back to their father. "We were even afraid to tell Mom because he could always beat the information out of her," says Celeste.

### Using E meters

Their lives were managed by Erhard's staff. If it was ever suspected that they were lying, they were forced to take a type of "lie detector" test. The device used is made from a tin can and is called an E meter. It

originated with the Scientology movement and is said to measure an individual's true emotional reactions.

"At the time, I don't think we realized how crazy our lives were," says Celeste. "After all, it was normal for us."

Celeste and Adair both admit to having had emotional problems for which they have sought therapy. Adair, who was divorced last year, now lives in Novato with her mother and her 15-month-old daughter and is learning to be a personal fitness trainer. Celeste is married and working in a clothing store in San Rafael. They say their brother, who is married, lives in Marin and works at a lumber company.

One of their motivations for seeking help has been to ensure that they don't repeat the abusive patterns established by their father. As part of that goal, both have tried to get him to acknowledge the ways he mistreated them and their mother. "I confronted him about a year ago," says Celeste. "I wanted him to admit that he had affairs, that he had physically and emotionally abused our mother and emotionally abused us."

"His reply was, 'How could I emotionally abuse you, I wasn't even there?' I said, 'Dad, you have an awful long reach.'"

Adair says after she finished college, she went to see him to talk about what he had done to their mother. "He said what happened to her was a nurturing experience."

For Celeste, his refusal to acknowledge what he did was instrumental in her decision to go public with her story. "He would have had to do so little. Any little gesture would have been enough."

"We're never going to be his daughters," says Adair. "I finally had to admit that to myself."

Given that, they say they feel an obligation to themselves and to the public to tell the truth.

Because he has presented himself to the world as a great humanitarian and an expert on human relations and because he has made a great deal of profit from this "perpetration," they feel people have a right to know who Werner Erhard really is.

"I think public figures have a responsibility to be who they say they are and he isn't," says Celeste. "I'm not after revenge, just exposure."

"I won't lie for him anymore. I'm not going to embellish his image or keep his secrets any more."

"His whole way of living is a farce," says Adair. "My Dad did this damage and now he has to take responsibility for it."

Both Celeste and Adair say that telling the truth about their father is "a purge, a cleansing."

"This is not about getting him, this is about ending something for ourselves," says Celeste.

In talking about the fear Celeste and Adair grew up with, Bob Larzelere says, "We were all frightened but the difference is that those kids didn't have any choice about whether to be there. The rest of us did."

their mother didn't respond, Harry Rosenberg pushed her off her chair. "It wasn't that my father said directly, 'hit her,'" says Celeste, "it was more like, 'handle this Harry.'"

(Rosenberg, through Erhard's media representative Bill Barnes, declined to comment on these allegations.)

At this point, they recall their older half-sister, Clare, saying, "Please stop doing this," and their father saying something like, "Shut up or the same thing will happen to you."

With Ellen lying on the floor, curled into a ball, they remember Gonneke Spits, one of Erhard's closest aides, pulling her hair.

(Spits also declined, through Barnes, to comment on these allegations.)

Adair and Celeste then remember another aide, Raz Ingrasci, kicking and smacking their mother.

(When contacted, Ingrasci, who left the organization eight years ago, denied ever hurting Ellen Erhard, but said, "It is unfortunately true that I witnessed things that I am ashamed of and it is also true that I was treated in ways that I am ashamed of, but I never hurt anybody. I never kicked anyone.")

That night, Ellen stayed at Franklin House while the children were brought back to their home in San Rafael by an Erhard appointed female "guardian."

The second night the guardian drove them back to Franklin House. They were ushered into the same room where they had dined the previous night, but this time the chairs were set in a circle, encounter-group style. Once again Ellen Erhard was pushed out of her chair. "Dad made her get down on her knees and he yelled at her to stop withholding," says Celeste.

Then Bob Larzelere started to strangle her. Clare tried to hide St. John's eyes.

"I was in shock," says Celeste, "I screamed, 'Stop it, you're going to kill her.' I remember my father saying, 'Sit down or you're going to get it.'"

### He wanted volunteers

Larzelere doesn't recall the exact words Erhard used but he does remember, in essence, how he came to choke Ellen. "Werner was accusing her of infidelity, and he wanted somebody other than himself to make her tell the truth. Werner didn't ask me to hurt Ellen, he asked for volunteers. I was acting as his lieutenant. That's what Werner did, he got other people to do his dirty work so his hands would be clean."

"When I volunteered, there wasn't any question about what I was going to do. The idea was to choke her until she told the truth. I knew I wasn't going to permanently damage her, the idea was to scare her, but it was unbelievably scary. Usually, people whose breath is cut off struggle, but she didn't. She sort of fainted and collapsed to the floor."

Larzelere says it is frightening to him that no adult present, including Erhard, at any point, told him to stop. "Presumably, I could have killed her, and no one would have intervened."

"What I did to Ellen was such a horrible thing. Werner didn't make me do it, it was my choice and I wasn't able to forgive myself for a long time. I'm incredibly ashamed of what I did, but I wasn't the only person who gave up my power to Werner."

"I was numb for two or three days, and then it finally dawned on me to ask the question, 'How did I get to the place where I could do such a

thing?'

"I allowed myself to do things I would never do now or would never have done before."

(According to Berkeley sociologist Richard Offhs, leaders of cults or "high control" organizations are able to get otherwise law-abiding individuals to perform violent acts because they have established a morality that is higher and more powerful than secular law. "These people still know what's right in the secular world, but it doesn't stop them from responding to the special world in which they are enmeshed.")

Although Larzelere saw Ellen Erhard after that incident, he doesn't recall ever talking to her directly about it. "I think Ellen and I both had an understanding that we were both powerless. We shared a mutual powerlessness."

Larzelere says the way Erhard treated Ellen was a reflection of the chauvinistic tenor of the organization, although the public stance was egalitarian. "The organization was all masculine energy — even the women trainers were macho women. There was little respect for women. The feminine side of human experience, like love, like compassion, was not important. What motivated people was fear, fear of punishment and fear of losing Werner's approval."

For him, the night he choked Ellen was the beginning of a drawn-out decision to leave Erhard and, in 1979, he finally did.

### Two-year separation

The night of the choking incident, Erhard told Celeste and Adair that their mother would no longer be living with them because she could no longer "trust herself to tell the truth." They aren't sure of the exact dates, but they believe they were separated from their mother for two years while the "guardian" took care

# The Afremow/Erhard connection

Charlene Afremow first met Werner Erhard in 1971 when she was involved with Mind Dynamics — one of the earliest enlightenment-en masse programs in the Bay Area.

Erhard took a Mind Dynamics course and soon was leading seminars himself.

Later that year, Erhard founded Erhard Seminar Training, more commonly known as est. In 1975, he hired Afremow who became an est trainer and then a leader of the Forum, a subsequent version of est.

To become an est trainer, Afremow had to promise that she would work for Erhard "forever." Although she believed her relationship with Erhard and the organization was everlasting, she was fired in 1988.

On Dec. 22, 1988, she filed a \$2 million wrongful termination lawsuit against the organization.

"Charlene was fired because she openly challenged policies that she felt were exploitive and detrimental to the health and well being of the staff," says her attorney, Andrew Wilson.

In court affidavits Afremow, 54, claims that the work and travel schedules were exhausting, and, as a result, in the beginning of 1988, many members of the staff were getting ill. She also says she and other women staff members had complained about the fact that women were not promoted to executive positions within the organization.

On April 28, 1988, at a Forum Leaders meeting, Afremow raised the issue of demanding schedules. She said she wouldn't continue following policies that were harmful to the well-being of staff and wouldn't support other people following them either. She was fired by Steve Zaffron, the head of the Forum leaders, at that meeting.

"At the time of that meeting, Charlene had worked more than 12 hours a day for 25 consecutive days," says Wilson. "In essence



IJ photo/Frankie Frost

**ANDREW WILSON:** Representing Charlene Afremow in her \$2 million wrongful termination lawsuit

she was fired because she was saying you've got to stop working us so hard that we can't do our jobs right."

Werner Erhard & Associates, through its media consultant, refused to comment on the case, but in court affidavits the organization claims that Afremow provoked her own firing, had a

volatile temper, used abusive language and needed "rehabilitative counseling."

In addition to wrongful termination, Afremow is also claiming age and sex discrimination and the intentional infliction of emotional stress. The trial is set for Oct. 9.

— Nikki Meredith

# The life and times of a transformation guru

Werner Erhard under siege is not new. Since beginning his reign as the king of personal transformation in the early 1970s, his entrepreneurial packaging of New Age philosophies has been criticized.

The first mind-altering program Erhard developed, est, was a combination of a variety of teachings including Scientology, Mind Dynamics, Dale Carnegie and Zen.

It promoted the ideas, among others, that we are all responsible for our own experiences and human beings are entities separate from their thoughts, beliefs and emotions.

In 1985, he abandoned est which was suffering from declining enrollment and created the Forum — a watered-down version that stressed personal effectiveness over personal enlightenment.

The sessions of both est and the Forum often produced strong emotional reactions, and Erhard has been frequently assailed by some mental health professionals who believe his programs apply manipulative techniques that, at best, produce intense, peak experiences with no lasting gains and, at worst, psychotic episodes.

As a result, several law suits have been brought against him alleging such things as emotional harm from "educational" programs. Erhard has denied any connection between his courses and emotional or psycholog-



AP photo

**ELLEN ERHARD:** Werner's second wife, at the time of their divorce in 1985

ical damage. To date, these cases have been settled out of court.

For years, the press delighted in recounting Erhard's earlier life as Jack Rosenberg, used car salesman who abandoned a wife and four children for another woman. Then his second wife sued for divorce. Before the case was settled, Ellen Erhard told the media that "Werner's ego and public image are the most important thing in the world to him."

For the last 15 years, his lifestyle — the enormous motor yacht he lives on in Sausalito, the fine wines, the Cuban cigars, the collections of art and Japanese antiquities — have reinforced the belief that he has already amassed a personal fortune while claiming that he hasn't.

(At the time of his second divorce, Ellen Erhard's lawyer, Verna Adams, was quoted as saying, "I'd like to buy Werner for what he says he's worth and sell him for what I think he's worth.")

In 1985, Forbes magazine published an article suggesting that Erhard's for-profit "educational" enterprises were employing questionable tax schemes and that his non-profit endeavors, like the Hunger Project with its end-hunger-in-this-century promise, were long on grandiosity and short on accomplishments.

Between 1971 and 1979, the companies that preceded Werner Erhard & Associates — first Erhard Seminar Training which became est, "an educational corporation" — depreciated what they called the "body of knowledge" in their corporate tax returns.

The IRS reportedly found the write-off excessive. Erhard's lawyers took the IRS to court. A spokesperson for the company says the case is still pending.

— Nikki Meredith