

# R.D. Laing

## IN THE 21ST CENTURY

July 17-22, 2024

**ASILOMAR**  
Conference Grounds  
Pacific Grove, California

**SYMPOSIUM SPONSORED  
& ORGANIZED BY**

Free Association, Inc.,  
San Francisco, California

**FACULTY & ORGANIZERS**

Nita Gage, DSPS  
James Norwood, Psy.D.  
Michael Guy Thompson, Ph.D.

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**WHAT IS DEATH?**

A FIVE-DAY SYMPOSIUM AT



R. D. LAING wore many robes in his career including psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, philosopher, social critic, author, poet, and mystic, and at the peak of his fame in the 1970s, he was the most widely-read psychiatrist in the world. Arguably the most controversial psychoanalyst since Freud, Laing's meteoric rise in the 1960s was the result of his rare ability to make complex ideas accessible with such best-selling classics as *The Divided Self* (1960), *Sanity, Madness and Family* (1964), *The Politics of Experience* (1967), *Knots* (1970), and many others. Laing's impassioned plea for a more humane treatment of those in society who are most vulnerable catapulted him into the vanguard of intellectual and cultural debate about the nature of sanity and madness, and inspired a generation of psychology students, intellectuals, and artists to turn this disarming Scotsman into a social icon.

This year we will turn our attention to perhaps the most seminal question that is associated with existential philosophy: the meaning of death, our mortality. We all know that we are going to die, sooner or later. But we do not know when or how. Martin Heidegger once made a distinction between death and demise. He suggested that demise is the physical incidence of dying, but that we live our death, every day of our lives, and how we live our death has a profound impact on how we live.

We are inviting our presenters to reflect on their personal relationship to death, how it impacts their life, and what experiences they may have had that have transformed their relationship to death, and to life. In previous symposia we have explored the meaning of sanity, therapy, authenticity, love, happiness, spirituality, ethics, and healing. This year our annual **R.D. Laing Symposium** will convene at the **Asilomar Conference Grounds** in Pacific Grove, California (instead of at Esalen, which is not available to us this year). We previously convened at Asilomar in 2017, when Esalen was obliged to close due to flooding in Big Sur, so we know it well. It is an excellent alternative to Esalen, sandwiched between Monterey and Carmel on the Pacific Coast. It is not as expensive as Esalen yet affords extraordinary opportunities for exploring the local area. This year our Symposium is not open to the public, but is restricted to an invitation-only basis, limiting attendance to twenty-five participants, including presenters. We should all have a superb time together in this new venue!

Among the questions we will explore:

1. What do we think happens to us after we die?
2. Do we fear our death, or are we indifferent to it? Or do we look forward to it?
3. Are we guided by religion or philosophy when we ponder our death?
4. Do you believe that you completely perish at death, or that some part of you survives?
5. Are your thoughts about your death terrifying, or do they enhance your lust for living?

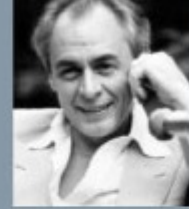
Join us for five breathtaking days at Asilomar on the Pacific Coast to explore how we can promote more humane and effective ways of helping those suffering from anguish of living.

—MICHAEL GUY THOMPSON, NITA GAGE, JAMES NORWOOD

**CELEBRATING THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE R.D. LAING IN THE 21ST CENTURY SYMPOSIA!**



# R.D. Laing in the 21st Century



## WHAT IS DEATH?

**Asilomar Conference Grounds, Pacific Grove, California • July 17–22, 2024**

Symposium Workshop Co-Organizers & Faculty: Nita Gage, DSPS • James Norwood, PsyD • Michael Guy Thompson, PhD

**CELEBRATING THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF R.D. LAING IN THE 21ST CENTURY SYMPOSIA!**

### WEDNESDAY – JULY 17

6:00 – 8:00 pm

**Michael Guy Thompson, PhD, Nita Gage, DSPS, and James Norwood, PsyD**

*Welcome! Catered Dinner!*

We will spend this initial, catered and invitation-only dinner event to inaugurate our annual get-together, this time at the Asilomar Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove. We will take this opportunity to renew old acquaintances and talk about our upcoming week's activities. This dinner event will NOT convene in Asilomar's Dining Hall, but instead at a private meeting location: Surf and Sand, located near Triton, the Meeting Hall where all of our presentations will occur.

6:00 – 8:00 pm

#### **SPECIAL CATERED DINNER FOLLOWED BY FREE EVENING.**

*Catered Dinner in the Surf and Sand venue located near the Triton Meeting Room. (See attached Map of Asilomar: G5)*

*Please feel free to hang out at the Lodge, or at our Triton Meeting Room, or join Michael, Nita, and James for after dinner cocktails and conversation at the Engineers Cottage, where they will host informal drop-ins each evening.*

### THURSDAY – JULY 18

10:00 – 11:30 am

**Michael Guy Thompson, PhD**

*Living Your Death?*

(moderated by James Norwood)

Michael will review his personal relationship with mortality, and the events in his life that confronted him with his fear of death, and his struggle to accept it. To this end, Michael will talk about his mother's suicide, his year in Vietnam as a young intelligence agent, his journey with R. D. Laing and Hugh Crawford at Portland Road, London, and the profound impact that Heidegger's distinction between demise - the literal death of our bodies - and our everyday experience with death itself - which we live every day - had on Michael's efforts to embrace his fear of death.

11:40 am – 1:00 pm

**Astréa Ribeiro**

*The Role of Fantasy in Life and Death*

(moderated by Nita Gage)

Does fantasy enhance life, or does it diminish it? Could fantasy save us or destroy us? If fantasy is a form of escape, can it nevertheless direct us towards life, and even enhance it? These are some of the questions that Astréa will seek to explore with us this morning, with a view to appreciating the profound nature of our relationship with death, and especially with life.

1:00 – 4:00 pm

#### **Lunch Break and Play Time.**

*Lunch at the Crocker Dining Hall... then enjoy the rest of the break to relax, enjoy the Asilomar Grounds, and smell the ocean. You might also want to explore the local sights in Carmel or Monterey. And Pacific Grove has an outstanding restaurant: Wild Fish! Please return to the afternoon portion of today's program promptly at 4:00 pm.*

4:00 – 5:00 pm

**Rinat Tal, MD**

*Death and Transformation in the Psychotherapeutic Relationship*  
(moderated by Nita Gage)

The path to transformation is mysterious and entails a change in the relationship that we have with our own self. The death of the old self is essential in making room for a new self to emerge. Rinat will use this time to explore what this process is like for us, and for our patients.

5:00 – 6:00 pm

**Stanford Rosenberg, PhD**

*Death, Dreams and the Imaginal*

(moderated by Michael Guy Thompson)

Sandy will review his personal mythology, at the ripe old (young?) age of 80!

6:30 – 8:00 pm

**Dinner Break – followed by a FREE EVENING!**

*Dinner in the Crocker Dining Hall... Please feel free to hang out at the Lodge, or at our Triton Meeting Room, or join Michael, Nita, and James for after dinner cocktails and conversation at the Engineers Cottage, where they will host informal drop-ins each evening.*

**FRIDAY – JULY 19**

10:00 – 11:00 am

**Nita Gage, Shannon Simonelli, Daniel Norwood, Heather LaFace, PhD... and Workshop Participants!**

*All-Day Breath Workshop — A Tribute to Laing's Famous Workshops from the 1970s (moderated by Nita Gage)*

**Part I: Breath Work**

*Healing and Breath Work in the Tradition of R. D. Laing*

Drawing from her own extensive experience moderating such workshops, Nita Gage will facilitate an opportunity for anyone who is interested in participating in this exercise to access mild altered states via guided imagery and deep breathing. This workshop is intended to simulate the kind of workshops Laing was famous for initiating in London among his students in order to gain greater awareness of the potential for expanded modes of consciousness readily accessible to us. This one-hour introduction will presage a two-hour morning session in which participants will participate in a breath work experiential exercise.

11:00 am – 1:00 pm

**Breath Work**

*Experiential Exercise (moderated by Nita Gage)*

**Part II: Breath Work Experiential Session**

Nita will facilitate the chance to experience states of expanded consciousness elicited via deep breathing and other Shamanic exercises, followed by the opportunity to process these experiences in a warm and safe environment. We will repeat this exercise in the afternoon portion of this all-day experiential exercise.

1:00 – 4:00 pm

**Lunch Break and Play Time.**

*Lunch at the Crocker Dining Hall... then enjoy the rest of the break to relax, enjoy the Asilomar Grounds, and smell the ocean. You might also want to explore the local sights in Carmel or Monterey. And Pacific Grove has an outstanding restaurant: Wild Fish! Please return to the afternoon portion of today's program promptly at 4:00 pm.*

4:00 – 5:00 pm

**Breath Work (continued)**

*Experiential Exercise (moderated by Nita Gage)*

**Part III: Breath Work Experiential Session continued...**

In this 90-minute session Nita will continue to facilitate the chance to experience states of expanded consciousness elicited via deep breathing exercises, followed by opportunities to process these experiences in a warm and safe environment.

5:00 – 6:00 pm

**Breath Work (continued)**

*Breath Work Group Process Session (moderated by Nita Gage)*

**Part IV: Break up into small groups for processing today's experience**



6:30 – 8:00 pm

**Dinner Break – followed by a FREE EVENING!**

*Dinner in the Crocker Dining Hall... Please feel free to hang out at the Lodge, or at our Triton Meeting Room, or join Michael, Nita, and James for after dinner cocktails and conversation at the Engineers Cottage, where they will host informal drop-ins each evening.*

**SATURDAY – JULY 20**

10:00 – 11:30 am

**Douglas Kirsner, PhD**

*The Facts of Life and Death*

(moderated by Michael Guy Thompson)

R. D. Laing begins *The Facts of Life* with Euripides's query: "Who knows if life is not death, and death life?" This morning Doug will explore what lies behind Laing's speculations about the existential realities, uncertainties and conundrums concerning life and death in *The Facts of Life*.

11:40 am – 1:00 pm

**Nita Gage, DSPS**

*Death and Rebirth*

(moderated by Michael Guy Thompson)

In exploring the relationship between birth and rebirth, Nita will talk about the shamanic practices – so valued by R. D. Laing – as a methodology for managing the existential fear of death.

1:00 – 4:00 pm

**Lunch Break and Play Time.**

*Lunch at the Crocker Dining Hall... then enjoy the rest of the break to relax, enjoy the Asilomar Grounds, and smell the ocean. You might also want to explore the local sights in Carmel or Monterey. And Pacific Grove has an outstanding restaurant: Wild Fish! Please return to the afternoon portion of today's program promptly at 4:00 pm.*

4:00 – 5:00 pm

**Heather LaFace, PhD**

*Death and Nonduality*

(moderated by Nita Gage)

In this session Heather will explore the experience of nonduality, which provides clues to experiences that may feel like you're dying, and are also linked to the sense of the infinite and desire, touching on the generative seeds of loss, despair and panic that simulate the "death experience" that has been explored through various philosophical and spiritual traditions.



# WHAT IS DEATH?

SPECIAL THANKS TO ASILOMAR CONFERENCE GROUNDS & FREE ASSOCIATION, INC.

For more information and inquiries, contact Michael Guy Thompson, PhD: [michaelguythompson@mac.com](mailto:michaelguythompson@mac.com)



5:00 – 6:00 pm

**James Norwood, PsyD**

*Death: An Uncertain Proposition*

(moderated by Michael Guy Thompson)

Everything about death – and life – is uncertain. In this session James will explore how living in the constant shadow of uncertainty has shaped his views about what it means to live courageously and passionately.

6:30 – 8:00 pm

**Dinner Break – followed by R.D. LAING DOCUMENTARY FILM!**

*Dinner in the Crocker Dining Hall...*

8:00 pm

**Wisdom, Madness and Folly** R. D. Laing in Conversation with Richard Heffner, convened in the **Triton Meeting Hall**.

Join your hosts, Michael Guy Thompson and Douglas Kirsner, for a screening of this fascinating interview that Richard Heffner conducted with R. D. Laing in 1985, the year that Laing's final book, *Wisdom, Madness and Folly* was published, followed by discussion.

## SUNDAY – JULY 21

10:00 – 11:30 am

**Michael Montgomery, PhD**

*The Apricity of Death: Re-birth and the Life Existential*

(moderated by Michael Guy Thompson)

Michael's talk will draw from personal experience as well as from film, literature, existential, psychoanalytic, psychedelic, and Tibetan sources to try and answer the question: what is death?

11:40 am – 1:00 pm

**David MacBryde**

*When Loneliness Receives the Rivers*

(moderated by James Norwood)

Meandering through poetry (Rilke), literature, philosophy and mythology,

David will review how the analytic journey may be formulated as a meditation, via conversation, about the difference between waiting for death and turning toward death, in all its implications, as a catalyst for living.

1:00 – 4:00 pm

**Lunch Break and Play Time.**

*Lunch at the Crocker Dining Hall... then enjoy the rest of the break to relax, enjoy the Asilomar Grounds, and smell the ocean. You might also want to explore the local sights in Carmel or Monterey. And Pacific Grove has an outstanding restaurant: Wild Fish! Please return to the afternoon portion of today's program promptly at 4:00 pm.*

4:00 – 5:00 pm

**Nina J. Gutin, PhD**

*Death and Its Vicissitudes: Friend, Foe, and Everything In-between* (moderated by Nita Gage)

Nina will describe how her relationship to death, both to her own and that of others, has shifted and changed through her life, and the impact of these experiences on her life and clinical work.

5:00 – 6:00 pm

**Honoring Our New School Graduates!**

*Break-Out Group Reflection* (moderated by Michael Guy Thompson, James Norwood, Nita Gage)

We will devote this last hour of our week together to honor our three graduates, Michael Montgomery, David MacBryde, and Nina Gutin, and bestow their Certificates of Completion.

6:30 – 8:00 pm

**SPECIAL CATERED DINNER FOLLOWED BY FREE EVENING.**

*Catered Dinner in the Scripps Meeting Room.*

**(See attached Map of Asilomar: G5)**

*Following our Catered Dinner, we will reconvene at the Fire Pit that we have reserved for a closing party and celebration of our week together.*

## MONDAY – JULY 22

10:00 – 12:00 pm

**Michael Guy Thompson, Nita Gage, James Norwood**

*Closing Comments and Audience Discussion!*

We want to spend this last block of time together to review our five days at Asilomar and what it has meant to you and to look ahead to next year, when we will host another five-day experience of *R. D. Laing in the Twenty-First Century*. We will discuss how Asilomar worked out as a venue for our annual meeting and where we should convene next year?

*Good-bye!*

**Nita Gage, DSPS**, trained with R.D. Laing and his associates at the Philadelphia Association from 1974-1980. She left London and returned to America in 1980 and pursued post-graduate education in psychology and psycho spiritual studies. She trained and studied with shamanic teachers and specializes in integrative psycho spiritual healing. Nita is co-founder of the Neurolmaginal™ Institute, [www.neurolmaginalinstitute.com](http://www.neurolmaginalinstitute.com); Director of Healer Within Retreats, [www.healerwithinretreats.com](http://www.healerwithinretreats.com), teaching medical and addiction professionals Neurolmaginal Practices for health and well being. She is the author (with Linda Star Wolf) of *Soul Whispering: The Art of Awakening Shamanic Consciousness*, and lives in Maui, Hawaii.

**Nina J. Gutin, PhD**, is a Clinical Psychologist in private practice in Pasadena, California. She conducts trainings in Suicide Assessment, Intervention and Postvention, facilitates "Survivors After Suicide" groups for the Didi Hirsch Suicide Prevention Center, and is a member of the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Network. She is co-chair of the Coalition of Clinician-Survivors (which supports clinicians after personal and professional suicide losses) and has published articles about suicide loss and postvention. She is involved with several organizations which aim to challenge the ways in which suicidal experiences are conventionally understood and treated. She lives in Pasadena, California and is also a candidate at the **New School for Existential Psychoanalysis**.

**Douglas Kirsner, PhD**, holds a Chair in Philosophy and Psychoanalytic Studies at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He is the author of *The Schizoid World of Jean-Paul Sartre and R. D. Laing* (2003), and *Unfree Associations: Inside Psychoanalytic Institutes* (2009). He lived in one of the post-Kingsley Hall, Philadelphia Association households during the 1970s and has retained a special research interest in Laing's work. His 1980 interview with Laing has recently been published in *The Psychoanalytic Review* (April, 2013). Douglas is also on the faculty of the **New School for Existential Psychoanalysis**. He lives in Melbourne, Australia.

**Heather LaFace, PhD**, lives in Los Angeles where she sees patients in private and group practice settings. Over the past 9 years she has been developing a method for an embodied group process within ecological and self-organizing frameworks. Her current writing and research interests explore paradigm-shifting connections between affective neuroscience, philosophy, and social theory, with a special interest in facilitating our unique social engagement pathways to the experiences we find truly healing. She has served as adjunct faculty at Antioch University Santa Barbara as well as at Pacifica Graduate Institute, where she received her PhD in Clinical Psychology. She is a supervisor and on the faculty with the **New School for Existential Psychoanalysis**.

**David MacBryde, LMFT**, graduated from the California Institute of Integral Studies (where he also teaches), San Francisco, and had a multi-year Lacanian analysis with Phillippe Gendault. With some three decades of clinical experience, his current private practice focus is on working with the schizoid and paranoid personality organizations that are common in the hightech field. He also supervises up-and-coming interns, and trains organizations locally and nationally in client engagement and change-related strategies. David lives in Santa Cruz, California, and is also a candidate at the **New School for Existential Psychoanalysis**.

**Michael R. Montgomery, PhD**, is an existential psychotherapist and clinical social worker. He has practiced and researched psychotherapy in four countries, in private and public settings. He specializes in complex trauma and extreme emotional states drawing from existential-psychoanalytic and dialogical approaches to support healing. He is a regular contributor to the Society of Existential Analysis and is an ordained Buddhist. Michael lives in Boston, MA and is also a candidate at the **New School for Existential Psychoanalysis**.

**James Norwood, PsyD**, a graduate of the California Institute for Integral Studies (San Francisco), PsyD program in Clinical Psychology. James has been studying existential psychoanalysis with Michael Guy Thompson for the past six years and practices psychotherapy in San Francisco. He has been one of the primary people involved in Gnosis Retreat Center, a residential project to provide respite for people experiencing extreme states, and the founding of the **New School for Existential Psychoanalysis**, of which he is Associate Director. He lives in San Francisco.

**Astréa Issler Ribeiro** is a psychoanalyst in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and in addition to a private practice she conducts outdoor sessions with people on the streets. She also has been working at the public psychiatric day hospital and coordinates therapeutic groups. She is also an artist and philosopher.

**Sanford Rosenberg, PhD**, is President of Media Research Associates, and has thirty-five years of experience in Media Psychology. He is a clinician, executive coach, educator, and consultant on media projects including movies, games, and the web, applying the methods of dream psychology and personal mythology to media. Sandy specializes in qualitative knowledge-based research and clinical applications, examining the relationship between language, story, structure, symbol, image, emotion, and experience. Sandy is also a faculty member and supervisor at the **New School for Existential Psychoanalysis**. He lives in Oakland, California.

**Rinat Tal, MD**, is a psychiatrist and psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles. Her work focuses on minimizing medication management with clients with various conditions, including extreme states, incorporating a variety of influences that focus on the transformative aspects of the client-practitioner relationship. She has an abiding interest in alternatives to conventional psychiatry. Rinat is also on the faculty and a supervisor at the **New School for Existential Psychoanalysis**.

**Michael Guy Thompson, PhD**, received his psychoanalytic training from R. D. Laing and associates at the Philadelphia Association in London, and served as the organization's administrator from 1973 to 1980. He is Personal and Supervising Analyst and Faculty Member, Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California, San Francisco, and Founder and Director, **New School for Existential Psychoanalysis**, a virtual two-year training program modeled on his own training with R.D. Laing, in San Francisco. He is the author of over 100 journal articles, book chapters, and reviews, as well as numerous books, *The Truth About Freud's Technique* (1994), *The Ethic of Honesty* (2004), *The Legacy of R. D. Laing: An Appraisal of His Contemporary Relevance* (2015), *The Death of Desire: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (2017 2nd ed.), an extensively revised and expanded edition of the original. Michael's most recent book, *Essays in Existential Psychoanalysis: On the Primacy of Authenticity* (2024), was published by Routledge this year. His current project, co-authored by Douglas Kirsner and Fritjof Capra, is a collection of talks they gave over the past ten years at Esalen, titled *R. D. Laing in the Twenty-First Century* (in press), also published by Routledge. He lives in Berkeley, California.



## ASILOMAR CONFERENCE GROUNDS

800 Asilomar Avenue, Pacific Grove, CA 93950 • (831) 642-4222

[www.VisitAsilomar.com](http://www.VisitAsilomar.com)

### LOCATIONS OF OUR MEETINGS AT ASILOMAR:

**THE TRITON MEETING ROOM (H4 on Asilomar map):** We will convene here for all of our programmed meetings on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

**SCRIPPS MEETING ROOM (D4 on Asilomar map):** We will convene here for our programmed meetings on Sunday and Monday morning. We will also convene her for our Closing Catered Dinner on Sunday Evening.

**CROCKER DINING HALL (F6 on Asilomar map):** We will convene her for breakfast, lunch, and dinner Thursday through Sunday. . . EXCEPT FOR OUR OPENING CATERED DINNER ON WEDNESDAY AND SUNDAY EVENINGS.

**SURF & SAND MEETING ROOM (G5 on Asilomar map):** We will convene here for our opening Wednesday night Catered Dinner.

If you have any questions, email Michael at: [michaelguythompson@mac.com](mailto:michaelguythompson@mac.com)

If you get lost at Asilomar, text Michael at: (510) 717-3132

or James Norwood at: (626) 513-6578

