

Pavel's Pick:
Transformation: The Life & Legacy of Werner Erhard
A Documentary

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For the BLEEPING Herald

So whatever happened to Werner Erhard?

In the 80's it was hard to avoid knowing about him. People attended his Erhard Seminars Training, known as "est," in *legion* in all of the major cities and it sometimes felt to people like me, living in New York City at the time, that these people were hard to get rid of – it seemed they were hell-bent on recruitment, and they wouldn't take "no" for an answer. Even those of us who were interested in transformation found it hard to avoid the "newly empowered." There was even a disparaging name for them. They were called "est-holes."

Producer/Director Robyn Symon, former staff Producer with PBS and a two time Emmy winner, does a wonderful job separating the myth from the man and brings us up to date in answering the question – whatever happened to this past cultural icon, now all but forgotten? In her new documentary, *Transformation: The Life & Legacy of Werner Erhard*, which premiered in April at the Palm Beach International Film Festival, I was pleased to see that Symon does not shy away from the controversies which swirled around this man, resulting in his walking away from est and going underground, while also managing to honor the work of one of the key figures in the Human Potential Movement. Anyone who has an interest in the power of the mind and in personal transformation would do well to see this film, as it presents an unbiased look at a volatile and creative period in American Pop Cultural History and elucidates the reasons for this innovative leader's departure from the American scene.

In the 70's and 80's Werner Erhard, pioneer of the multi-billion dollar personal growth industry was known for his boot-camp approach to "waking people up," getting "off their bullshit," and finding their true selves. In his seminars, he raised his voice, confronted the myriads of people who were invested in their "stories," and initiated transformational experiences in the lives of the participants, transformation in relationships with their families, and likewise in businesses, corporations, and the educational sphere.

The first part of the film is an exploration of some Erhard's ideas, but the origins of those ideas could have used a more detailed exploration, especially for those of us interested in transformation. There is the mention of some early courses Erhard had taken with Scientology, and an oblique reference to the German Philosopher, Heidegger, and San Francisco reporter Don Lattin says in the documentary, "it was a mixture of Eastern philosophy and the power of positive thinking, but he packaged it in a way that was very appealing to Americans." But to attempt to explore his ideas in the confines of 62 minutes would be a challenge for anyone. Producer/Director Robyn Symon agrees: "This was the most challenging project I've done trying to communicate in a few minutes the essence of the ideas that take a weekend seminar to understand. The ideas are powerful tools that can help people examine their lives and live more powerful lives which benefit them, the people around them and by their extension, the world – a world that works for everyone."

The film, perhaps because of my own training, does not go deep enough into the *origins* of Erhard's ideas, although it does document nicely how some of his ideas have since found their way into the American vernacular and consciousness. Perhaps that is a subject for another documentary. *Transformation: The Life & Legacy of Werner Erhard* serves best as a look at the man himself with all of his blemishes and his reasons for leaving the US in 1991.

A great deal of the footage is from the est era. It's a time warp that brings you right back to a time where the counter culture was at its hey day and the styles of dress and hairstyles do bring you right back. There is rare footage of actual est seminars, which, at the time were controversial and now, seem somewhat quaint to those of us who have done so many courses over the years.

In those days, Werner was characterized as a brash, always "on task" confident leader, with piercing blue eyes that caught you like a laser, and smooth skin that made him appear to be unflawed, knowing, and somewhat robotical in demeanor. I remember watching him on television in those days and thinking it looked "too perfect." It was impossible to find the humanity beneath the smooth glassy surface. That he was super-successful as a businessman was often noted with distrust in the press and once the major media opened fire on him, he was self-admittedly, an easy target for parody.

Symon chronicles his undoing which centered around a *60 Minutes* expose, where his character is pretty much relegated to the media catchall dustbin of another charismatic "Cult Leader" as well as a line drawn from his early Church of Scientology connections to the all-out attack from that organization upon him as a man, who had changed his real name and left his family even as his trainings espoused personal responsibility and integrity. Having seen the media trash other Human Potential Movement Icons in the 80's like JZ Knight, who I was close to, gave me an extra added dose of compassion and sympathy. I would love to have seen more on the trouble with the Church of Scientology and their attack on Erhard, as well as the real reasons for it, but that may be another story completely, as neither Symon nor Erhard name names.

Symon interviews Erhard's family members, his mother who was quite broken by his departure, his peers, est seminar participants and a smattering of experts, and fills in details most do not know and reveals more about this man's character and we see that perhaps he had not ultimately strayed so far from his own philosophy after all. Her interviews with Erhard, (his first since leaving the US 15 years ago right before the *60 Minutes* expose) now 70 years old, with a face that still looks younger, but with the lines only pain and its partner wisdom can accrue, reveal a man who in his older years, is still involved with his passion for transformation on this planet, work which he continues to do under the radar of the media, to which he may go to his grave with a healthy dose of mistrust.

We now see him traveling constantly around the world, still staying clear of the US, working with people on both sides of the Irish Catholic and Protestant divide in Northern Ireland as well as the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict. Symon says, "While he admits he can still be difficult at times, I think people will see Werner Erhard as a compassionate human being with faults, living his work; not an ego-hungry maniac bent on building an empire - but a man making a big difference in so many lives all over the globe, which was his intention all along." Could this man have just possibly

made his life about personal transformation and the seemingly ever-elusive desire for World Peace?

I would like to know more about his personal relationships. There is no mention of anyone close to him in whatever country he now calls home, and he comes off a bit like a wandering monk, although an updated and modern one, still well-dressed and professional-looking. Although he probably wants to protect anyone close to him from the media glare due to his past experiences, it makes him seem like the proverbial island that no man ever really is.

Nowadays, with on-air radio hypocrites seemingly finding redemption as a matter of course, and with the constant hypocrisies of the current administration in office stealing the limelight whereby even film reviewers like Roger Ebert take task with the ultimate destination of Flight 93, you gotta wonder why people like Erhard have not been given their just due.

Symon's documentary is a step, and a very crucial step in re-examining the work of a pioneer. Thought of as a fad of the 70s & 80's, the groundwork done in the est seminars is still very much in the mainstream both in the United States and around the world. Just the other night, I saw a comedy with Queen Latifah, where one of the buzz words was about "creating possibility." That the brothers Wachowski who are responsible for the "Matrix" trilogy were Landmark Graduates has been well-documented. And that is only the filmic representation of the Erhard work. Symon's film also covers other ways in which his work has trickled down to and emanated throughout much of the culture, places as mainstream as Harvard Business School.

Turned off by the est movement in the 80's, as far as Erhard's influence goes, I am a case in point. I decided to take the Landmark Education trainings about five years ago when my sister called me one day to tell me that she was "out of integrity" with me in that she had never paid me her part in a car rental we had agreed to over a year before which I had forgotten about and she wanted to make good and that it was through her study with Landmark Education (the training platform now with over 50 offices around the globe Werner Erhard literally gave over to his employees in 1991, while taking on his past debts) that she realized the importance of her word.

Since then, both my mother and my younger sister have done the trainings, a sort of "kinder and gentler" approach to personal transformation that we all have gained greatly from. I have also heard from some BLEEPers who have been so happy to find a place to practice their intention to transform their lives. For me, it was the impetus for developing a career where I could take all I knew in 20 years of metaphysical work and make it active in the world. This new career is one I can be proud of, as it is based on integrity which continues to keep me in awe with my growth and my ability to impact my world and is leading me from my work in the BLEEP to new horizons in a foreign country where my role is to help get the knowledge of the latest in mind research and quantum physics out to the world.

So Werner, wherever you are, my hat is off to you. I still don't know if I have to separate the message from the messenger, as this film is not definitive in any way, but it certainly serves as a beginning of a conversation about personal responsibility and transformation and for you - it is obvious to me that you have left an indelible mark, and certainly a lasting social legacy of personal and thereby social transformation.