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est: Communication in a Context of Compassion

FORMAT OF THE EST STANDARD TRAINING

The est Standard Training is approximately 60 hours long and is usually presented on two successive weekends: two Saturdays and two Sundays, beginning at 9 A.M. and ending after midnight, when the trainer observes that the results for that day have been reached. "Breaks" are usually taken every four hours and there is usually one meal break during the day. People eat breakfast before and some have a snack after the training day. Included in the \$300 tuition are pre-, mid-, and post-training seminars. These are each about 3½ hours in duration, and take place on three weekday evenings—one before, one between, and one after the training weekends.

Approximately 250 people take the training together at one time, seated in a hotel ballroom. Chairs are arranged theatre style, facing a low platform on which a chair, a lectern, and two chalkboards are placed. Everyone wears a nametag printed in letters large enough to be read from the platform.

In accord with the Presidential Introduction to this issue, these annual volumes will include, whenever appropriate, one or more chapters on popularly accepted movements of psychiatric interest. The following is an account of est not previously available in the psychiatric literature, written by the founder of est and an est research consultant. It has been edited to conform to *Current Psychiatric Therapies* standards.

CONTENT OF THE TRAINING

In est there are four principal topics addressed in the training—*belief*, *experience*, *reality*, and *self*. Trainees have the opportunity to examine their experience of each of these topics in three ways: (1) lectures by the trainer, (2) "processes" (guided experiences, usually with eyes closed, and (3) sharing—communications from individual trainees to the trainer and/or to the class.

The following chart presents these schematically:

| | Topic | Process | Sharing |
|-------|------------|---------|---------|
| Day 1 | Belief | Body | Yes |
| 2 | Experience | Truth | Yes |
| 3 | Reality | Center | Yes |
| 4 | Self | Mind | Yes |

Trainees realize early in the training that the trainer is not actually "lecturing"—i.e., presenting conceptual information—but presenting the trainees with a chance to "look and see what is so for you in your own experience" about the topics discussed. Similarly, trainees soon realize that "processes" are opportunities to examine the records of previous experiences in the privacy and safety of their own experience (or "space") and that, as they wish, they may or may not share what is so for them.

Day 1

On day 1, after an assistant has read the ground rules to the trainees, the participants spend the remainder of the day observing the role of *belief* in defining their experience of living. The purpose of the est training, which is carefully read and examined in detail, is the transformation of one's ability to experience living so that problem situations clear up just in the process of life itself.

The trainer's "attitude" seems to trainees to be one of uncommon certainty—as if to say, "This training works. I say only and exactly what I mean. Pay attention if you want your money's worth. See if what I say is true for you. Don't *believe* me. Look in your own experience. It's up to you."

The trainer says unusual things, each designed to present trainees with an opportunity to examine whether the statement is true for the trainee. Examples are:

“Anything truly experienced will disappear.”

“What you resist will persist.”

“The truth believed is a lie.”

“Understanding is very low on the scale of experience—creating your own experience is very high.”

It becomes clear to most trainees very early that they are in the presence of an individual who is engaged in an astonishingly candid confrontation of the full range of human experience, in a way that does not fit easily—if at all—into the trainees’ preconceptions. This style of confrontation itself becomes a demonstration of the topic under discussion. The trainer seems completely beyond “point of view,” able to speak as easily from one trainee’s viewpoint as another’s without seeming to have one of his or her own. In addition, where the trainer seems completely able to re-create each and every trainee’s sharing, an individual trainee seems stuck *only* with his or her own point of view. This inability to speak except from within one’s point of view, at least from *some* point of view, *is* belief, the trainer says.

The discussion of belief lasts several hours. Trainees begin to wonder, Is it possible to speak from *no* point of view?

The trainer then describes what a “process” is and assists trainees to prepare to “do” one. Trainees are informed they will be asked to close their eyes and “take what comes up for you” as the trainer asks them, for example, “Locate a sensation in your right foot. . . . Fine. Now locate a sensation in your right calf. . . . Good,” and so on through the body.

The trainer explains that there is no right or wrong way to do a process. Whatever the trainee becomes aware of is fine. To observe what one is aware of in one’s body, a person engages in the process of “observing,” or noticing, not only *what* one senses, but also *that* these “senses” *are* amenable to “observation.”

A short “process” is done, locating body sensation. It lasts for 15 or 20 minutes, after which trainees “share.” They are asked to stand after being recognized by the trainer and to use a microphone and to say whatever they would like to say. They may relate an experience, or comment on some aspect of the process, or ask a question. These are addressed to the trainer or to the class, but not to the sharing of other trainees. In this way trainees are encouraged to focus on their own experience and are reminded that the training takes place in the privacy of one’s own “space,” not in interchanges with the group.

Before they leave for the night, participants are asked to locate in their lives a “persistent unwanted condition” and to return with a

phrase describing it in the morning, when they will "observe" it during the "truth process." The trainer points out that by "persistent unwanted conditions" are meant such things as (1) minor headaches, (2) uncomfortable feelings or emotions, and/or (3) considerations or evaluations of others' experience. The trainer notes that the truth process will assist them to uncover the role of belief in these conditions.

Day 2

After some opening sharing, the trainer outlines the "anatomy of an experience" and discusses the fact that inherent in the nature of most experiences are sensations, perceptions, thoughts, feelings and emotions, attitudes, points of view, mental states, considerations, evaluations, judgments, and images from the past. Trainees discuss their persistent conditions (or "items") with the trainer, who reminds them that "a completely experienced item will disappear."

Then for approximately 90 minutes, the trainer asks trainees simply to "observe" what they become aware of as he instructs them to "look at" what sensations are associated with their item, then what perceptions, then what thoughts, and so on through images from the past.

After this process most trainees share that their item has disappeared—that their belief in the condition is the cause of its persistence, without which the "condition" vanishes. In short, trainees find they have begun to "observe"—i.e., to transcend belief. The shift from *conceptual* to experiential reality has begun.

During the evening of day 2, there is a long two-part process called the "danger process" during which trainees are given the chance to "observe" the fear or acute embarrassment most people feel when really being with another or others. This process reveals the pretenses or systems of personality people usually hide behind or confuse with who they genuinely are. As before, trainees become increasingly aware that anything *completely* experienced disappears. Most depart from the session elated and joyous, experiencing what they believed could not be experienced—an open, undefended, expanded experience of their natural ability to experience living.

Day 3

On day 3 the trainees begin to observe what is real in their lives. In a profound "dialogue" with the trainees, which lasts some 6 or 7 hours (with a break), the trainer conducts a conversation with trainees—pressing them to *look*, to observe, really to examine the criteria they

use to determine what is real in life and to note which issues they allow to define and determine the course of their lives. To their astonishment, and frequent dismay, trainees discover that they tend to regard *things* as real and themselves (their selves) and their experience as *unreal!*

The trainer points out that the source of this self-unreality, and of the unreality of their own experience, lies in the trainees' commitment to (belief in) an epistemology which defines *things* (matter/energy in space/time) as fundamentally real and constitutive of reality—which, therefore, defines experience, communication, relationship, love, and ultimately *self* as unreal, imaginary, and of questionable value.

In the two extended processes which comprise the remainder of day 3, the feasibility of a shift in trainees' fundamental orientation to reality is presented. In a series of enjoyable experiential exercises, trainees are assisted to "experience completely" this persistent unwanted epistemology that defines things as real and experience as unreal.

Day 4

The trainer announces on day 4 that the *real* training will now begin, starting with a 6-hour "eyes-open" process called the "anatomy of the mind." Carefully, thoroughly, completely, with an irrefutable and inescapable logic, trainees create an experience for themselves that propels them first *into* and then irrevocably beyond the way they have contextualized (experienced) all prior experience. At the end of this process, in a part of the training called "getting it," trainees experience a transformation—a shift in the *nature* of experiencing—from thinking that things (the *contents* of experience) determine and define what one experiences (mind) to experiencing self as the context, or source, of the *way* they experience.

Suddenly, they become aware of their power to experience life not as a victim, but as a whole, responsible being.

Suddenly, they get the point. They are who they are! They *are* what they seek—whole, complete, and entire, lacking no thing, perfectly what they are.

And the world? Suddenly, it glistens with a fresh and open luster, filled with opportunities for participation, perfectly what *it* is. The search is over. I am. I am the context of my being me. I am the cause of my experience.

At this point in the training the trainer and the trainees share an especial intimacy in that they are now "in on" the same reality, the

transformed reality of selves awakened to their formerly unawakened selfhood. Their now common domain is so unspeakably simple, so obvious, so unchanged, so light filled and real—it is hard for them to contain their enthusiasm for simply being who they are.

Still—the trainer counsels—there is “more.” Now that trainees are willing to experience transcendent to the once binding automaticity of their former content—determined “points of view,” it is possible to examine “the autonomy of the self.”

“After a break,” the trainer says, “We’ll talk about self as the source of the experiences of responsibility and satisfaction—the willingness to experience one’s self as the cause of what one causes. Then we’ll talk about sex, love, and relationships.” The “space” of the room is now one of delight and celebration. The “secret” of est has been revealed: What is, is, and what isn’t, isn’t! It is an amazingly freeing realization, which restores to trainees their natural ability to be spontaneously and naturally what they naturally and spontaneously *are*. Trainees no longer hope to be. They *are*. And now they “know” it.

To summarize what happens in the est training, then, we might quote the following:

It is a transformation—a contextual shift from a state in which the content in your life is organized around the attempt to *get* satisfied or to survive—to obtain satisfaction or to protect or hold on to what you have got—to an experience of *being* satisfied, right now, and organizing the content of your life as an expression, manifestation, and sharing of the experience of being satisfied, of being whole and complete, *Now*. One is aware of that “part” of one’s Self which experiences satisfaction—the self itself, whole, complete, and entire.

The natural state of the self *is* satisfaction. You do not have to *get* there. You *cannot* get there. You have only to realize your self and as you do you are satisfied. Then it is natural and spontaneous to express that in life and share the opportunity with others.¹

CONTEXT OF COMPASSION

The very obviousness and the context of the est experience are what make it so difficult to talk *about* est with those who have not had the experience. After all, it seems obvious that what is, *is*, and

what isn't, *isn't*. So, why have 185,000 people paid all that money to find *that* out? And why do they continue to recommend est to their friends? More specifically, how can so *simple* a contextual shift in context be experienced by so many professional psychotherapists—across all the “schools” of therapy—as empowering and enabling themselves and their patients to experience lives in which complete health, happiness, love, and self-expression are *ordinary* and *routine*? Do educators, physicians, clergy, attorneys, and other professionals experience an equivalent empowerment?

The set of all epistemologies is not itself an epistemology, and the context of all points of view is not itself a point of view. The implications of this fact are extraordinarily far-reaching, especially with regard to what might be called the Theory of the Self. On this fact rests the nature of the training and the est trainer's ability to transcend belief about the nature of the self.

It lies at the heart of the est trainer's ability temporarily to adopt any point of view since the context from which the trainers speak is not itself a point of view.

The distinction between context and viewpoint enables the trainers to talk to trainees who know they are not who they think they are. The trainers' awareness that self is context—not content—enables them to experience trainees so intimately that trainees are *moved* by how fundamentally they are “known,” even while they are baffled and initially frightened by the trainers' ability to comprehend them so completely.

Contextual awareness enables and empowers (1) the trainer to present the training as if he/she were both trainer and trainee and (2) the trainee to “get it.” We call this contextual awareness a “context of compassion.”

In short, the trainer and—at some point during or soon after the training—the trainee have actually shifted the very context of self experience from one in which (1) *any* self is a thing, limited and defined by a specific configuration of matter/energy in space/time to (2) a context in which self is not a thing, but a context of contexts, an awareness of awareness, or as the trainers say, an “experienced experience.”

Thus, the apparently paradoxical ability of the trainer to experience the trainee's experience more completely than the trainee derives from the trainer's awareness of his/her ability to experience *any* experience—since no *one* experience can threaten a *context* which enables and empowers *every* experience.

The trainee no longer believes him/herself to be one (or more) of the

contents of experience traditionally associated with "self"—i.e., sensations, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, emotions, attitudes, points of view, mental state, considerations, evaluations, judgments, images from the past, and so on.

Thus, the trainer is able to experience *whatever* the trainee regards as the trainee's "self"—in a context of compassion—that is, in a way which re-creates the trainee's own experience of him/herself *and* transcends the trainee's own self-definition.

The trainer and the training thus come from an awareness that *true self* is not a position in the universe and not an identity assembled out of bits and pieces of prior "experiences." It is a way of *experiencing* the universe, a context not a thing.

This same "contextuality" also accounts for the nature of the benefits psychotherapists and their patients report after taking the est training. Therapists and patients report an enhanced ability to *see* similar to the change in view one would have if one shifted from a car to an airplane. The *contents* do not change; the perspective (that by which we see) is clarified. Trainers admire therapists' ability to unravel the intricacies of patients' often tangled lives, while therapist graduates admire trainers' ability to "know about knowing" and to engage in compassionate communication which holds all differences as essential, hence none preferable.

SUMMARY

The purpose of the est training is the transformation of the ability to experience living, so that the situations one is trying to change or is putting up with clear up just in the process of life itself. Transformation is a shift in the experience of "I am" from seeing yourself as content of experience to seeing yourself as the context of your contextual experience.

Graduates of the est training—whether they are therapists, patients, educators, physicians, attorneys, or people from other walks of life—regularly report that their ability to be, to be with themselves and with others, and to engage with others in a full participation in the opportunities of life have been transformed; i.e., shifted from a thing-determined to a self-determined context. This shift enables and empowers therapists and patients who have taken the est training to experience themselves as the source of their ability to experience each other with absolute compassion.

REFERENCE

1. Erhard W, Gioscia V: est standard training. *Biosciences Communications* 3:104–122, 1977