

A MEMORIAL TRIBUTE TO RALPH METZNER:
SCHOLAR, TEACHER, SHAMAN
(18 MAY 1936 TO 14 MARCH 2019)

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Photo of Ralph Metzner taken in 2012 by Sophia Metzner (reproduced with permission).

Ralph Metzner was a visionary alchemical explorer, rigorous academic scholar, and uniquely gifted shamanic teacher. His contributions to transpersonal psychology, consciousness research, and contemporary psychedelic studies are myriad. Throughout his life he engaged in deep study of mind, and he distilled his findings into words and practices he communicated to others through his many writings, teachings, and counsel. The study of consciousness, now an acceptable topic of investigation in mainstream science, will surely benefit as ideas he explored continue to penetrate into academic discourse. And the growing contemporary field of psychedelic science – currently undergoing a blossoming of clinical and neurobiological investigation – has been and will continue to be profoundly influenced by Ralph’s contributions over the last more than half-century.

Ralph was born in Berlin in 1936. His father was a book publisher and his mother, who was Scottish, had worked for the League of Nations. Nearly 83 years later,

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Ralph died quietly and with grace at his home in Sonoma, California, following a relatively short (about a year) encounter with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis. He is survived by his wife of thirty-one years, Cathy Coleman; their daughter, Sophia Metzner; a stepson, Eli Jacobson (and his wife Sabrina and son Gracian); two brothers, Robin and Ken; two half brothers, Guenter Metzner and Otto Metzner; and a half sister, Anna Metzner. Ralph also had another son, Ari Metzner, who died in a bicycle accident at age 8 in 1974.

Following World War II, Ralph moved from Germany to Scotland, where he attended Gordonstoun, a school in northeastern Scotland founded by German educator Kurt Hahn, whose philosophy of education included cultivation of responsibility for society at large, and respect, compassion, and service to others. Hahn also founded Outward Bound. Ralph went on to matriculate at Oxford University, where he studied philosophy and political science. Following graduation from Oxford in 1958, Ralph came to the United States to attend graduate school in psychology at Harvard University. After a couple years studying behaviorist learning theory and psychoanalysis, dominant forces in academic psychology at that time, he encountered the research project of Harvard faculty members Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, who were conducting an innovative investigation into the psychological effects of psilocybin. Psilocybin had recently been identified – by Albert Hofmann of the Swiss pharmaceutical company Sandoz – as the primary psychoactive chemical in psychedelic (genus *Psilocybe*) mushrooms. Ralph had his first psychedelic-drug experience in March 1961, about which he would later write, with deep sincerity in the preface to his *Maps of Consciousness* (1971): “I shall always be grateful to Harvard for providing me with that extremely educational experience.”

Ralph joined the psilocybin research project, although he and other graduate students were informed the following year by senior faculty in the psychology department that they could not use psilocybin-related research in their doctoral dissertations. In part this related to deep opposition to a paradigm that drew upon the study of subjective experience rather than measurement of behavioral action. American psychology at the time was only beginning its emergence from decades of domination by behaviorism. And perhaps even more egregious was the fact that the researchers in the psilocybin project were generating ideas and protocols via taking the drug themselves. This was considered by some to be an unacceptable manner of conducting scientific investigation.

While continuing to participate in psychedelic research, Ralph also engaged in another project in reward-delay learning and used that work to complete a doctorate in clinical psychology. He followed with an NIMH postdoctoral fellowship in pharmacology at Harvard’s medical school. Shortly thereafter, his mentors were famously dismissed from Harvard – a testament to the power of psychedelics to shake up the psyche and potentially lead to problematic consequences when this power is not effectively contained and channeled.

Ralph, together with Leary and Alpert, moved to a communal living setting in Millbrook, New York, where they continued their exploration of the impact of psychedelics on consciousness. By this time psilocybin had become difficult to

obtain from Sandoz and their primary focus of exploration had switched to LSD. From these investigations came Ralph's first book, a collaborative project together with Leary and Alpert (and inspired by Aldous Huxley) based on a translation of Tibetan texts known in English as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. In Tibetan spiritual traditions, these texts have been interpreted as a guide to negotiating the intermediate state (*bardo*) between one life and the next. In *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1964), the *bardo* prayers were reformulated by Ralph, Leary, and Alpert as guides to using states of consciousness experienced during a psychedelic trip for psycho-spiritual growth. It was and is a beautiful notion, poetically executed.

Their communal research program at Millbrook eventually dissolved, and Leary went on to become a provocative activist for social change, proponent of personal exploration with psychedelics, and highly visible lightning rod for targeting by establishment powers. Alpert journeyed to India, connected strongly with Hindu spirituality, and returned to America as Ram Dass. He authored a widely read book – *Be Here Now* – and through his lectures and writings contributed to introducing ideas from Asian spiritual traditions into American culture.

Ralph moved to California where he assumed a position as a staff clinical psychologist at Mendocino State Hospital in Ukiah, California – an institution for the “criminally insane” and other chronically mentally ill, housing nearly 2,000 patients at the time. Subsequently, he worked as a staff clinical psychologist at Kaiser Permanente, Stanford University, and Fairview State Hospital in southern California.

All along, Ralph continued his scholarly activities, editing a periodic publication – *The Psychedelic Review* (1963-1971) – and a book – *The Ecstatic Adventure* (1968) – addressing the psychological and societal impact of psychedelics. While Ralph's initial connection with transpersonal psychology was catalyzed by years of intense exploration with psychedelics, he quickly expanded into other territory. His quest throughout was to draw upon the rich bodies of knowledge and wisdom emergent from European and Asian spiritual and mystical traditions and bring this to bear to both expand a modern science of mind and develop and disseminate practices conducive to psycho-spiritual growth and healing.

In 1971 he published *Maps of Consciousness*, a work of scholarly and personal-practice investigation into a variety of esoteric divinatory and psycho-spiritual traditions – including the *I Ching*, alchemy, tarot, and astrology – speaking to the deepening of one's capacity to explore the territory of mind. For Ralph, it was always about how to apply the knowledge and practices learned from these traditions to reduce suffering – at the individual, societal, and planetary levels. His interest in applying the results of personal transformation to planetary health is articulated in his 1999 book *Green Psychology: Transforming our Relationship to the Earth*, and is the stated mission of the Green Earth Foundation, an organization created by him and his wife Cathy.

In the early 1970s Ralph studied actualism, an esoteric yogic teaching of working with inner light, from Russell Schofield at the School of Actualism in southern

California. Ralph was among the pioneering teaching staff of actualism. He was an active member of the actualism community for nearly a decade, and this served as a foundational aspect of his work and his own practice throughout his life.

In 1975 Ralph took a job as professor at a small graduate school in San Francisco known at the time as the California Institute of Asian Studies. In 1980 the school's name changed to the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) and the institution grew in size and stature. Today CIIS is at the forefront of psychology graduate training programs encouraging and supporting investigation of frontier areas of humanistic and transpersonal psychology and consciousness research.

Ralph served as professor on the CIIS faculty for three decades. He took on positions as academic dean and academic vice-president, during which time he contributed to the expansion of the school and its programs. I had the good fortune to meet Ralph in the early 1990s, and thereafter paid a number of visits to his classes at CIIS, offering instruction and facilitating discussion related to neuroscience and psychopharmacology.

Continuously, Ralph researched, taught, and wrote – in academic settings and in widely delivered lectures, seminars, and workshops. His teachings were profoundly influential to a large number of psychotherapeutic practitioners, and the web of his students is vast. And to his last days, he maintained a small psychotherapy practice.

Ralph's work with psychedelics that began when he was a graduate student at Harvard continued throughout his life. He worked with and wrote about the powerful psychotherapeutic utility of MDMA (methylenedioxy-methamphetamine) in the 1980s, well before it became an illegal Schedule I controlled substance. In the early 1980s, he proposed the term “empathogenic” to describe the distinctive “heart-opening” quality so often associated with MDMA and distinguishing its effects from those of other psychedelics. Only now, after decades of perseverance, is the psychotherapeutic use of MDMA again becoming accepted in academic clinical science.

For three decades, prior to it becoming an illegal Schedule I substance in 2011, Ralph researched the psychotherapeutic utility of 5-methoxy-dimethyltryptamine, a psychedelic substance present in a number of Amazonian plants and also in secretions from the Sonoran desert toad (*Bufo alvarius*). He summarized a number of his methods and observations related to working with this substance in his book *The Toad and the Jaguar* (2013).

Ralph was a gifted and prolific writer. During his lifetime, he wrote 22 books and more than a hundred published essays, journal articles, and book chapters. A few representative books (in addition to the five already mentioned) are: *Know Your Type: Maps of Identity* (1979); *The Well of Remembrance: Rediscovering the Earth Wisdom Myths of Northern Europe* (1994); *Sacred Mushroom of Visions: Teonanacatl* (2005) (editor); *Sacred Vine of Spirits: Ayahuasca* (2006) (editor); *Roots of War and Domination* (2008); *Alchemical Divination* (2009); *Birth of a Psychedelic Culture: Conversations about Leary, the Harvard Experiments, Millbrook and the Sixties* (2010) (with Ram Dass & Gary Bravo); *Allies for*

Awakening (2015); *Overtones and Undercurrents: Spirituality, Reincarnation, and Ancestor Influence in Entheogenic Psychotherapy* (2017); and *Ecology of Consciousness: The Alchemy of Personal, Collective, and Planetary Transformation* (2017).

When he was in his 60s, he learned to play jazz piano and recorded an album of songs he composed and sang – *Bardo Blues, and Other Songs of Liberation* (2005). He also recorded two other albums of spoken poems and storytelling – *Spirit Soundings* and *Völuspa* – accompanied by music composed and played by friends.

He wrote poems and published a book of poetry – *Diving for Treasures* (2015) – and another book of poetry in translation – *Eye of the Seeress, Voice of the Poet* (2011). His last published book – *Searching for the Philosophers’ Stone: Encounters with Mystics, Scientists, and Healers* (2018) – describes his relationships with and gratitude for important teachers in his life, and appeared in print only weeks before he died.

In the days immediately prior to his death, Ralph posted small notes near his bed in which he had written: “intention → attention → awareness” – reminders to remain alert and aware along his dying trajectory – and a testament to the shamanic advice he frequently offered in working with visionary states: stay connected with your intention, your ancestors (those who have gone before, those who have mapped the terrain), your ground, and your light. Good medicine, indeed.

Ralph leaves a legacy of written scholarship and teaching, and a very widely distributed circle of students and friends, deeply grateful for what he gave to the global community of transpersonal psychology. Thank you, Ralph!

Gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā.

The Author

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