SELF & SOCIETY, 2017
VOL. 45, NOS. 3–4, 289–297
https://doi.org/10.1080/03060497.2017.1356101

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

From civil rights and R.D. Laing to Zen: the therapeutic practice of Dr Leon Redler

Jacky Ivimy

Playwright and environmental activist

ABSTRACT

The author describes the life work of Dr Leon Redler from his early days as a Civil Rights activist in the US to his current work in the UK and South East Asia in collaboration with SOAS, exploring consensual ways of empowering groups. The article outlines his close collaboration with RD Laing over the Kingsley Hall experiment and the 1967 Dialectics of Liberation Congress alongside his work with the Archway Community and the Philadelphia Association, plus the 'Anna' controversy over the use of pills versus therapy for those in states of mental distress. Also described is Dr Redler's journey towards a wiser understanding of these states of distress via his own personal experience and his arrival at a therapeutic practice based on a detached loving concern for the 'Other', influenced by the existential philosophers Levinas and Derrida together with his discovery of the practice of Zen and Zazen. The material is taken from conversations with Dr Redler, his own written account of his life and philosophy, film of the Archway Community and other written and filmed interviews and accounts, plus the author's personal experience of therapy with Dr Redler.

Writing this article as a former patient of Dr Leon Redler (b. 1936), I've discovered that his Wikipedia snapshot – *a doctor of medicine, a psychiatrist, a psychotherapist, and teacher of the Alexander Technique* – needs much adding to it. His radical past and his current experimental projects in London and in South East Asia are all aspects of his life's work with people in distress. This rich range of experience along with the profound influence of Zen on all his work should make him known for much more than being a colleague and close friend of the maverick psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1927–1989), but that's perhaps the most obvious place to start.

Experimental asylums and visions of a better future: Kingsley Hall, the Archway Community, the Dialectics of Liberation Congress

Redler's collaboration with Laing dates from the time of the famous Kingsley Hall experiment (1965–1970) and the other 'asylums' that sprang from that. Laing's idea of creating an asylum, a place of refuge

CONTACT Jacky Ivimy jivimy@gmail.com

> where there are people around who have got themselves together sufficiently that they won't be thrown into distress and panic by other people's distress and suffering and are prepared to give the help which people want, a safe place to be when you feel a bit scattered where you don't need to be frightened, you don't have to do very much … (*Asylum* 1972, a film by Peter Robinson)

arose from his profound belief that there are no clear bounds between sanity and madness, states of being we all might well go through at some time in our lives. The distinction between analyst or therapist and patient, what he saw as the gulf in power where the doctor always knows best, is therefore essentially a social construct. It followed that the mental hospitals as they were set up in his day, primarily treating symptoms and with enforced interventions, were unhelpful places for those in search of either healing or some understanding of the state of mental distress.

To put this into practice, in 1965 Laing and colleagues opened Kingsley Hall in London's East End, where there was the freedom for those in the medical profession who were looking for different ways of caring and others in need of such care to live together on equal terms, where psychotic states were seen as at least potential journeys from which people could emerge into a deeper self-understanding. Those who volunteered to help, whether psychiatrists, therapists or students, played no formal roles and were unpaid. The community managed to last five years before Laing's declining involvement, the strain on the psychiatrists left holding it all together and the increasing hostility of people living round the Hall caused its collapse.

Redler, who had joined Laing in 1965 and played an active part in the whole Kingsley Hall experiment, then set up another asylum together with two colleagues. The Archway Community (1970–1979, Redler leaving in 1975) in north London was established in two adjoining houses due for demolition, partly for residents needing a place of refuge when Kingsley Hall shut down. By a lucky chance, in 1972 the filmmaker Peter Robinson chose to make a film of that project, so we have a visual record of those experimental healing relationships in action.

At first, *Asylum* (1972, a film by Peter Robinson) seems to confirm most people's fears about what the locals saw as a houseful of nutters. There's a sense of chaos, walls scrawled all over with weird slogans like FAITH-FULL YET WITH BEAST, a great hole where a door should be, someone wandering round in strange jerky movements, inmates apparently detached from each other, unclear who's in the house for what reason. But presently the scene sorts itself into a community, with the volunteer carers as calming, listening presences, those in distress themselves responding to others in distress by giving comforting hugs, a big friendly dog and a small kitten very much part of the company, lovingly prepared communal meals centred on a great stew pot.

For much of the film, Redler, who had overall oversight of the house, is an absent but potent presence in a slogan neatly written on the wall – LEON HAS A GOOD BRAIN – and described by violent Richard as 'sort of like a black belt – not in fighting, in psychiatry'. Meanwhile the film follows a couple of stories that look like models for Laing's theory about the destructive potential lying within the nuclear family. There's beautiful young Julie, the pet of the house, who first appears as lost in another world, barely able to move without help, apparently suffering some inconsolable grief. An uncle claims her back, her problem to him being that 'she hasn't learnt from her mother what she should have learnt – to be a woman'. Returned after great efforts and comforted by the

whole household, by the end of the film Julie is able to hold a friendly phone conversation with her mother, and is last seen hopping into a taxi to pay her a visit.

The second story concerns upper-class, near catatonic Jamie. This time it's his father (strangled voice, Old Etonian tie) who arrives to take him home. A gentle suggestion from the psychiatrist that Jamie's state might have something to do with their relationship gets a brush-off: 'I'm afraid it's too complicated for me, all that'. Instead, Dad's found his son a woman who'll help to 'give him a little bit of kudos. There's always the danger he might go – another way … '. Jamie, unable to make a decision for himself that crosses his father, is last seen being bundled off to catch the train for Scotland.

Finally, Dr Redler appears, to join the other house therapists in a conference which includes the silent but watchful presence of R.D. Laing, his quizzical mobile face half sage, half satyr. The meeting is to discuss what to do about David, the most maverick of all the patients with a sweet, gentle presence, Julie's comforter when she's in pain and a hopelessly scrambled, possibly brilliant mind, who talks non-stop at huge speed in a word salad, recognizable phrases appearing for a moment then engulfed in the onward torrent. David has recently started hitting the other men in the house, patients and therapists alike, and Richard is threatening to hit back. Redler takes over: David, he tells his colleagues, has multiple split personalities and together they've hypothesized that these fall into three categories: He, She and Boy. He seems to be the bodily person, She refers to herself as Temperance Israel, Guardian Angel, Blondie. An introjected mother, says Redler, taken into himself to look after the little boy he feels himself to be. David has punched Redler on the head a couple of times recently, and has been talking about nuclear explosions. Action needs to be taken.

A whole house meeting is convened, everyone sitting round on the floor in a circle, backs to the walls, Redler as the facilitator. Another of the therapists argues with David about his violence towards him, suggests that if he can't control himself he'll have to go back to hospital, and gets an ever wilder response as 'explosion', 'nuclear reactor' erupt out of the word storm. Redler intervenes, crawling across the carpet to be eye to eye with David. He holds his hand, tells him he's hitting out at new arrivals in the house because they're his younger brothers, competing for their mother's love. Or Redler's.

A dialogue: Redler speaking, David very attentive, replying in whirling words:

R: Either we consider you responsible for your actions or you're not responsible. If you're not responsible you can't stay here.
D: … … .
R: David, I love you. That doesn't give you special privileges in the house.
D: … … .
R: It's not just you. There are other people involved.
D: … … .
R: You don't trust me to take care of that little boy because he's been so badly hurt – so truly hurt …
D: … Ark Royal … Can't get through …
R: David, do you want to get through?
D: … … .
R: Is this a ceasefire? Will you be willing to make peace?
D: … … . *(diminuendo)*

R: Will you give me your word that you won't hit people? Yes or no?
Pause.
D: Yes.

And the last scene with David shows him responding to a questioner slowly but perfectly clearly.

However, this story is more complex than the film shows. David's condition had been diagnosed by hospital psychiatrists as a biochemical disorder needing phenothiazine antipsychotics. Contrary to the myth, Laing had never been opposed to using drugs where they could help, but in keeping with the ethics of the asylum experiment it was house policy that patients had the freedom to manage their own state, including choosing to see an outside psychiatrist and take prescribed drugs or not. David largely chose not to take the drugs and was having occasional calm periods even while drug-free, though he was at risk of being picked up by the police and returned to mental hospital when he occasionally left the house and wandered the streets. Where his hospital consultant had seen this as equivalent to withholding vitamins from someone dying of a deficiency disease and charged Laing and Redler with negligence, they saw the antipsychotic drug as a chemical cosh with seriously harmful side effects including Parkinsonian symptoms and even lasting brain damage while simply functioning to dull him down, getting nowhere near whatever was the real cause of his problems. This illustrates a deep division between ways of dealing with mental distress that continues to this day.

There is another story involving both R.D. Laing and Leon Redler that continues to hang heavily over R.D. Laing's name and reputation. *Anna* (Reed, 1977) is a fictionalized account by the husband of his wife's psychosis. 'Anna' had been seen by Laing, who then passed her to Redler to treat as his patient and she was under his care when she set herself on fire, dying six weeks later. The author effectively blames her death on what he understands to be Laing's theory that people in psychotic states can find their own journey to recovery without medication. He fails to give the key detail that she had been in a mental hospital and had discharged herself against the doctors' advice, refusing ECT and probably also medication, the day before she took that terrible action. Laing's take on this tragedy was that the woman, granddaughter of a prominent officer close to Hitler, had developed paranoid feelings towards the Jewish Redler and this was ultimately an action of aggression. Redler doesn't concur with that, but adds that 'in responding to people in extremes of mental suffering, wherever and however, there are sometimes tragic outcomes'.[1]

R.D. Laing's great contribution to therapeutic practice was surely the way he responded with compassion and understanding, simply as one human being to another, to those in apparently unapproachable states of mental distress; perhaps also his trust that the person themselves could start the journey towards healing with the help of companionship on the way and a safe place to be. He also saw a wider picture than was then widely acknowledged: many of our mental problems as embedded in our violent, competitive, acquisitive society, 'a civilisation apparently driven to its own destruction' (Laing in the film *Asylum*, 1967) and a family setup that can pass its damage down from one generation to the next.

The big problem with Laing's theories in practice is that this entails a generosity of self-giving on the part of the healers that would tax a saint. As Redler remarks in the film:

'Though what we want to create is very simple, it seems to take a lot of effort … '. It was probably inevitable that such a challenge to the existing order couldn't last and sooner or later rules, formal structures and some kind of hierarchy would have to return. Nonetheless, those early experiments opened up a space that for a moment was a glimpse of a better way of living, one based on our common humanity where the usual barriers between people dissolve into companionship: the vision that has inspired utopian communities through the ages, to be defeated each time and to rise again in a new shape.

This feeling also ran through the Dialectics of Liberation Congress (July 1967, Roundhouse, London), dreamed up by the group of colleagues round Laing and organized by Redler's friend and colleague from the US Dr Joseph Berke (b. 1939) with help from Redler and David Cooper (1931–1986) (filmed by Peter Davis as *Anatomy of Violence*). Stars of the counterculture as diverse as Beat poet Allen Ginsburg (1926–1997) and Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael (1941–1998) – invited by Redler – along with the visionary scientist Gregory Bateson (1904–1980) assembled at the Roundhouse to debate the roots of violence and how together we can live the good life, make a better world. Discordant, often fractious as the event was, it nonetheless inspired many of those who attended to hold onto the vision and to go out and change what they could for the better.

Childhood, studies, the Civil Rights Movement, working with R.D. Laing

Leon Redler's temperament and his own childhood experiences drew him to share Laing's visions. Brought up in Brooklyn in a conventional Jewish family, he tells of feeling cut off, his mother seemingly emotionally unavailable. The background to his early years was the Depression, when his father lost his business, and World War II (1939–1945), which brought the appalling knowledge of the Holocaust. He recalls living with distress, despair and disempowerment that led him to thoughts of suicide, along with the idea of running off to survive alone in the forest (which may have been for him the seed of an idea for some place of asylum). He found some inspiration and comfort in the wisdom of the Hebrew prophets, their teachings on justice, on the possibility of a turning round from evil to good, on caring for the vulnerable and the stranger.

When, aged 13, Redler broke his arm, he assumed hopelessly that it would stay broken forever, and its mending by a doctor determined him to follow that healing profession. The early 1960s were radical times, living under the threat of the Bomb, in the savagery of the Vietnam War and the turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement, and while at medical school he responded by taking action, picketing the White House for three days while fasting over the resumption of nuclear testing, trying to raise opposition to his school being used as a nuclear shelter and refusing the call-up at the risk of going to jail. He then joined the Civil Rights Movement in the South, tending (under threat) demonstrators beaten up by the police, including taking care of the future Congressman John Lewis (b. 1940) at the Selma march where he sustained a serious head wound.

A meeting with R.D. Laing in New York in 1964 plus his interest in the work of Maxwell Jones (1907–1990) and his therapeutic community at Dingleton Hospital (1962–1969) brought Redler over in 1965 to work with Jones in Scotland and then to join Laing in London where he was setting up a more radical and experimental community at Kingsley Hall. Here, working alongside his friend Joseph Berke, he became a student, colleague and in time close friend of Laing's, whom he now describes as 'a source of profound teaching,

an enlightened being – not one without flaws, not absolutely free and clear, but well on the way' (*Just Listening*, 2001, p. 102).

Throughout much of Redler's early years working with Laing, his childhood distress found other forms and he describes at times suffering from deep feelings of helplessness, impotence, falling apart, but also feeling unconditional love and joy for the first time holding his new-born daughter, and finding himself released from depression around the time of a failed marriage through taking Ecstasy and through a healing sexual encounter. Social drugs were beginning to be in wide use, from medical school with amphetamines and barbiturates for concentration and then sleep, through Laing's practice of sometimes treating his patients with LSD as a way to expand their consciousness, to the widespread use of cannabis. Ultimately, Redler says that discovering Zen (a school of Buddhism influenced by Taoism and focused on meditation practice) and the practice of Zazen (literally 'sitting meditation', a means of insight into the nature of existence) gave him something he could trust and eventually he got through with the help of Ronnie Laing and other analysts, his own family, friends, patients and Zen masters. Though he adds: 'It's always possible that therapists are stuck too, as I certainly was and still may be' (*Just Listening*, 2001, p. 247).

The Philadelphia Association, the School of Oriental and African Studies

In 1964, Laing and colleagues had founded the Philadelphia Association (PA) to offer radical alternatives to current mainstream therapy, and Redler became a member in 1972. It was then a place that drew people to learn and debate about everything that could help to throw light on the nature of suffering: not just the disciplines of psychology, psychiatry and psychotherapy but philosophy, anthropology, sociology, poetry, music, the arts and also attentiveness to the body, the breath and movement through practices like meditation and yoga, besides experimenting with rebirthing practices.

But eventually problems started to arise between those who were happy to follow these new lines of enquiry and others who wanted a more conventional association with accreditations. In the early 1980s, the PA took a different path; some difficult times followed and Laing resigned while Redler withdrew as an active member.

Laing's resignation was influenced by a marriage break-up when he became extremely difficult to be around: 'like a raging bull', as Redler puts it. This also affected his long-term friendship with Redler and they effectively parted. Redler had never felt the relationship was really broken, at least on his side, but Laing's death in 1989 made that parting final.

In 1996, Redler returned to take over Laing's former role as Chair of the PA, its Training Committee and Faculty for a few years. He was made an Honorary Member several years ago. Redler has been openly critical of some of the PA's projects, ways and means, to the point where he was accused of unethical conduct towards its house therapists and taken to a tribunal, where he was cleared of all charges. However, many in the PA have seen his open criticism as destructive. Redler himself sees his actions as 'necessary and responsible speaking out against potential mystification and dysfunction', but also adds that these problems are common to a great many organizations, large and small.

While continuing with the psychotherapeutic practice he has maintained for many years now, Redler is currently also working in collaboration with colleagues at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, on research projects to do

with groups becoming empowered to find their own ways of problem solving. The groups are very varied and include research students, the population of a hospital ward including doctors, nurses and patients, and rice farmers on the Mekong Delta, while their problems are equally varied, as linked with, respectively: loneliness, isolation and stress; a hierarchical structure; and bile duct cancer caused by eating raw fish that carry a carcinogenic parasite. Avoiding the usual imposed top-down solutions, this is a grassroots and holistic approach that encourages people to solve their own problems, find out the information they need for themselves and come to consensual agreement using techniques such as 'just listening', and also to explore other complementary healing practices such as Chi Kung (Qi Gong) – a system of coordinated body posture, movement, breathing and meditation – and yoga.

Psychiatric practice: existential, phenomenological and ethical

In 2001, Redler co-authored with friend and colleague Steven Gans (b. 1941) a book on ethics and therapy with the punning title *Just Listening* (Gans & Redler, 2001). In it he talks about his own working methods as being simply ('just') listening to whoever comes to him for help with an evenly hovering, unprogrammed attention, 'letting the other arrive at finding and speaking with their own voice' (*Just Listening*, 2001, p. 38). The listening, he says, also has to be *just*, and to 'do justice' to the Other.

He agrees with Laing's description of the kind of healing love required from a therapist towards their 'patient' (for want of a better word) as 'letting the Other be with concern and affection' (ibid., p. 55). Redler describes this approach, also influenced by his reading of philosophers Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), as 'existential, phenomenological and ethical', centred on our way of being in this world, on the study of the structures of experience and consciousness and on values. It's a working in the here and now involving unmasking ourselves from the masks we all usually wear, a movement out of the stuck place towards a more open, more lively, wiser, more ethical future. Above all, for all of us it's about taking responsibility of a profound kind for the Other: 'You called? Here I am!' (ibid., p. 156). And as Redler says, today that responsibility must be not only for our fellow human beings but for all our fellow species, the systems that support life and our home planet itself if we're to survive.

In therapy with Dr Redler

Lastly, my own impressions of Leon Redler as a therapist involve also a bit of my own history, starting with a childhood with patches of great darkness, from which I escaped as soon as I could. Bouts of depression sent me to an unsuccessful stint with a group. A bit later I found myself at a complete block, and was lucky to find a wise and caring therapist who in two years got me feeling whole again.

Then a marriage collapse; I needed guidance, and found Dr Redler. His gift as a dream interpreter instantly gave me access to the deep world of 'therapists' dreams', those highly coloured, deeply symbolic visions that stay vivid for hours. But what I wanted was advice about whether to divorce or not, and this I didn't get from him. I see now that he was leaving it to me to make up my own mind, but at the time I got fed up and looked for another tougher therapist.

I found a powerful Freudian therapist/analyst, a relationship probably doomed from the start as given my childhood problems the last thing I needed was a commanding father figure. Quite soon it became what to me was a battle of wills. I was determined not to get sunk into the kind of attachment that was required for this therapy to work, while it was taking all my strength to keep believing in my own view of what was happening. I started to feel I was going mad.

Finally, I phoned Redler to ask if I could come back, and he welcomed me instantly. Back came the dreams that had refused to materialize in the last unhappy therapy, together with feeling that I was safe enough to go deep into the darkness of my childhood. But he also kept me from losing myself in trying to work out what lay behind the darkness, keeping me focused on living in the world here and now, as it is and as I am; as he would put it, moving away from the self-centred 'me' outward towards the Other, towards becoming a better neighbour and citizen. He allowed my whole life into the conversation and was very good at advising even on small day-to-day problems. And the whole structure of our meeting was relaxed, from the comfortable sofa and occasional sharing of cups of coffee to a totally flexible arrangement whereby I could alter times and dates as it worked best for me.

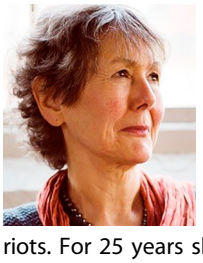
Most importantly for me, I'd started to write play scripts and he went out of his way to put me on the path to developing this further. In the aftermath of the Dialectics of Liberation Congress, Redler had written a radio play in the form of a dialogue, or dialectic, composed from key bits of the main speeches, and he gave the manuscript to me. Inspired by these great visions of radical change for society and ourselves, I determined to bring them back to life for audiences today, and since then the project continues to find other collaborators and develop in many directions, under the name *Dialektikon*.

Therapy is a very intense relationship. A successful one can leave the patient deeply grateful the rest of their life for the therapist's skills, which feel like an outpouring of some vital healing essence, a release of psychic energy by the healer from their own store. The everyday person behind the healer is another matter, with the difference between R.D. Laing as seen by his patients and the story his children might tell as an extreme example. So this account of Leon Redler's life could sound a bit rose-tinted to anyone he may have tripped over in the course of a long, complicated, fruitful life.

Note

1. All unattributed quotes by Redler are from 2017 emails and dialogues with the author.

Notes on contributor



Jacky Ivimy has been working on the Dialectics of Liberation Congress since 2010. In 2012, she produced a free event based on key speeches from the Congress plus an audience debate, playing first to Occupy London. Her play *Dialektikon* updates the Congress story, centring on a young woman learning from the speakers' wise words as well as their disputes how to become a warrior for a better world; the script is currently being considered by two London theatres. Monitored by playwright Bernard Kops, Jacky has also written play scripts on the bombing of Dresden and the Notting Hill race riots. For 25 years she ran a small farm, bringing the land back to health from the degradation of agribusiness practices. She tutors in English Literature and is an environmental activist.

References

Davis, P. (1967/2012). *Anatomy of violence – dialectics of liberation and the demystification of violence.* Retrieved from www.villonfilms.ca
Gans, S., & Redler, L. (2001). *Just listening*. Xlibris Corporation.
Laing, R. D. (1967). *The politics of experience*. London: Penguin.
Reed, D. (1977). *Anna*. London: Penguin.
Robinson, P. (1972). *Asylum*. Kino on Video (film).