Ronald David Laing

1927-1989
Scottish existential psychiatrist who argued that insanity could be a creative and adaptive response to the world.

Ronald David Laing, or R.D., as he was invariably known, developed the theory that mental illness was an escape mechanism that allowed individuals to free themselves from intolerable circumstances. As a revolutionary thinker, he questioned the controls that were imposed on the individual by family, state, and society. Rejecting a physiological basis for diseases such as schizophrenia, Laing argued that madness was a response to insanity in the environment. A very prolific writer, during the 1960s and 1970s Laing became a hero of the counterculture and the “New Left.”

Born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1927, Laing was the only child of a working-class Lowland couple, D. P. M. and Amelia Laing. A precocious boy, he was physically abused by his father and he rebelled against his mother’s fascist anti-Semitic outlook. Musically talented, Laing might have become a professional pianist had his father allowed it. Instead, he read his way alphabetically through his local public library. Interested in the human mind since childhood, after grammar school Laing entered Glasgow University to study medicine and psychiatry.

After earning his M.D. degree in 1951 and serving a six-month internship in neurology and neurosurgery, Laing was drafted into the British army as a psychiatrist. There he made friends among his patients rather than among his fellow servicemen. It was during this period that he began to view psychosis as a potentially positive and justifiable state. After his two years of service, Laing began working at the Gartnaval Royal Mental Hospital and teaching in the Department of Psychological Medicine at Glasgow University. There he began working on his first book, The Divided Self: A Study of Sanity and Madness, completed in 1957 but not published until 1960. In 1956, he moved to the Tavistock Clinic and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London, to study Freudian psychoanalysis and continue his clinical research.

Develops a radical view of schizophrenia

Laing’s view of schizophrenia as an alternative way of perceiving the world created a storm of controversy. Traditional psychotherapists objected to his existentialism; but for many readers, The Divided Self expressed their own alienation from modern society. In The Self and Others: Further Studies in Sanity and Madness (1961), which he revised in 1969 as Self and Others, and in Sanity, Madness, and the Family: Families of Schizophrenics with Aaron Esterson (1964), Laing continued his examination of the origins of schizophrenia. In Interpersonal Perception (1966), with Herbert Phillipson and A. Russell Lee, Laing described his theories and research methodologies. With David G. Cooper, he co-authored a study of the untranslated work of the existential-
Founds communities for patients and therapists

At the Langham Clinic for Psychotherapy in London, Laing practiced Jungian psychoanalysis from 1962 until 1965, when his use of psychedelic drugs, both personally and as treatments for his patients, caused controversy. “The Bird of Paradise,” an extended prose poem included in his 1967 work, The Politics of Experience, was his description of a hallucinogenic experience. The book became a bestseller on college campuses. In 1965, he co-founded an egalitarian community of patients and physicians at Kingsley Hall in London’s East End. Although the clinic was closed after five years, amidst rumors of outrageous behavior, offshoots continued to flourish in the London area. Laing’s dream was that these communities could provide a safe haven for individuals to experience their madness and heal themselves. To this end, he founded the Philadelphia Association to support such communities. At the least, he believed that his methods were superior to the chemical and electrical shock treatments and lobotomies, which were commonly used on schizophrenics. In 1967, while continuing his private psychoanalytical practice, Laing founded the Institute of Phenomenological Studies in London.

In The Politics of the Family (1969), Laing began to apply the theory of sets and mapping used in other social sciences to the social and psychological structure of families. The work was revised in 1971. In Knots (1970), a book of poetry, he examined interpersonal relationships and communication. Following a year of meditation studies with Hindu and Buddhist masters in Ceylon and India, Laing undertook a lecture tour of U. S. colleges, raising funds for the Philadelphia Association.


In all, Laing was the author of fifteen books, including several works of poetry. He was a fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine and was on the editorial boards of the journals Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry and Existential Psychiatry. Laing died of a heart attack in St. Tropez, France, in 1989.

See also Existential psychology

Margaret Alic

Further Reading