

First ISPA Conference Keynote Address

Deborah Szekely

First, I must begin by thanking each one of you and Bernard Burt in particular for making one of my husband's predictions come true. Edmond Szekely, a remarkable man whom I met in Tahiti in 1934 and who died in 1979, had he been asked would have told you that an event like this was inevitable. He would have quoted Victor Hugo in saying: "An invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come."

I accept this honor on his behalf as well as my own. Edmond Szekely intuited that the laws of the earthly mother and the heavenly father can be ignored for just so long, that the time would come when man to survive would recognize these as facts of life.

You are gathered here tonight descend from an ancient profession: the caretakers, the healers of antiquity. Greek and Roman literature speak of "mens sana, corpus sana" — healthy mind, healthy body. The first real fitness resort that I am aware of was built just outside of Rome by the emperor Hadrian almost 2000 years ago. Today, tourists visit the ruins of the great baths, arenas and amphitheaters where the senators and gladiators would gather to spend their afternoons in sport and serious discussion of the issues of their day.

It was inevitable, too, that science and reason would accept their synergy and recognize that we are descendants of early man. For reasons, we were seed-gatherers, subsisting on grains and legumes, trekking from one watering hole to another very much like the birds and the beasts. Our bodies were prepared for the constant search for food upon which our very survival depended. Life was a natural balance of movement and rest in an environment of fresh air, fresh water and fresh food. Nature did not foresee the evolutionary development of the brain and the consequences that changed every single aspect of human life except the body and nature herself.

Rancho La Puerta, which opened in June 1940, was a direct offspring of a series of health camps that the Professor, as Edmond Szekely was known, held each year in a different country beginning in 1935. These held on the banks of a river or lake were his replication of the camps of the Essenes known but much conjectured). People would climb mountains, meditate, eat raw foods, exercise in water and on land, read esoteric books and listen to the Professor's daily lectures, departing a week later with the conviction that good health of mind and body was theirs to achieve.

I attended several of these camps with my mother, a registered nurse and vegan who, as she was wont to say, "saw the light." In 1926 she became the dedicated vice president of the New York Vegetarian Society alongside Bernard MacFadden. That I am here tonight began with her, for by 1930 she had decided that Brooklyn in the midst of the Depression was not what she had come to America for, and so she talked my dad into moving us to Tahiti, where we were to remain for almost five years. My life thereafter seems to have followed a preordained path with Rancho La Puerta still one more health camp, but this time I, a recent bride, was chief cook and bottle-washer. I milked the goats, cared for the vegetable gardens, taught calisthenics and at night by the light of a kerosene lamp wrote letters to everyone I had ever met extolling the virtues of the Essene School of Life, our name during the first dozen years of our existence, while my husband wrote his books and lecture to the guests. With the war on in Europe and cut off from my husband's publishers, we had to survive on an outside income of \$30 a month. We charged \$17.50 for the full weeks, bring your own tent. Ten years later, our rates were at the munificent sum of \$25 per week.

It was during these years that the spa health-day of today was developed. With only the countryside and a river, I had to invent ways to fill the guests' day. We alternately exercised and danced to music from a hand-cranked phonograph, did yoga breathing, invented or rather adapted Father Kneipp's water pack to herbal wraps to relax overstressed muscles and, as we found out later, to accelerate the dispersal of lactic acid build-up from unaccustomed exercise. We experimented. We tried every form of therapy. Each morning we hauled sea water and kelp from the ocean 20 miles away for the Sumerian baths. We imported algae and mud

from Central America. We gave colonics, acidophilus implantations, we grew our own herbs for aromatherapy, herbal inhalations and infusions. We scoured the health literature of Europe and tried every form of diet, homeopathy, as well as megadoses of vitamins and minerals.

Eventually, we discarded them all and focused on what brought the true and lasting results: a full week in a glorious garden environment, fresh air, happiness and laughter all balanced with healthy movement, relaxation therapies, plus organically grown foods from our own farm.

I used the terms “happiness and laughter” — I must expand on these. If you were a guest reflecting upon a recent visit to the Ranch, you would think of what great fun it was.

An unforgettable time was July 1949, when at nine years old we first appeared in the press. My excitement turned to tears when I read the three-part story which labeled us a cult. The reporter, with heavy sarcasm, wrote in the San Diego Union — and I quote:

“The Professor insists that human health begins with healthy soil which means good food. Health also depends to a great extent, he emphasizes, on good climate and right thinking. ‘The soil here at the Essene School is good because no commercial fertilizers are at best a temporary soil tonic, but in the long run they deplete the soil because they drive out Nature’s soil cultivator — the earthworm. As for poison sprays, they are unnecessary if the soil is healthy. Besides, their poison seeps into growing vegetables and fruits by a process of osmosis.’ Szekely insists that one of the causes of human illness is the eating of fertilized vegetables that have been mass-produced for the commercial market. ‘They lack the minerals essential for health,’ he declares. ‘I am advocating that every family have a miniature garden in which to work a few minutes daily, preferably in a bathing suit. These gardens yield good vegetables and the one who works them gains moderate exercise in the sun... But I warn my students that 20 minutes of exposure to the sun is all they need. Most Americans bake themselves on weekends on the theory that they soak up enough vitamin D to last. This practice is generally harmful even when there is no sunburn.’

“As for climate, Szekely has kept a record for 5 years of clear days at his place... ‘I found that we have an average of 304 days of blue sky a year,’ he reported. “The best sun record in Europe is that of The Riviera, which can boast 287 days of blue sky a year. The Riviera has become famous as a region of health, and yet we here have a better climate. History shows the importance of climate: All the first civilizations developed around the Mediterranean basin as in Egypt and Greece.’

“As Szekely explains his ‘preventive’ system it emerges as a formidable synthesis of many components. It’s incredibly complicated arcane strikes the visitor coming upon it new to a health club to end all health cults. Its catch-all vote-getting allure seems enough to make Father Divine turn green with envy and the late John Alexander Dowie, who founded Zion, Ill., roll over in his sarcophagus. Szekely has mixed a bewildering compost of science, physical culture, Gnostic religion, Old Testament lore and — let it be whispered softly — perhaps a wee drop of snake oil. (Szekely has a crystal ball in his study).

“He draws upon archeology, meteorology, horticulture and Darwin’s study of soil structure, anthropology, philosophy, chemistry, pathology, art and literature — all tinted by the Professor’s second preoccupation: a search for ancient wisdom...

“He is intensely interested in the symbolic meaning of ancient rituals. How the wisdom of the ancients is related to modern health, he did not make clear to this Philistine reporter though he labored patiently to do so. Meanwhile, the visitor found himself wondering if somewhere concealed in the all-embracing Essene system there might not be some trace of voodooism or umbilical contemplation.”

This, of course, was 1949, and I should not have been upset, for the reporter expressed the official dogma. Fortunately, our guests did not agree; they returned year after year with their children, and today their children’s children continue to come. Gradually, the world began to accept the simple logic of right eating, right thinking, right living. The Ranch (we had to drop the name “Essene School of Life” because the government of Mexico insisted if it was to be called a school it would have to have an official curriculum) operated along the theory of serendipity, which the dictionary describes as an “apparent aptitude for making fortunate discoveries accidentally.”

A great example is the happy choice of Tecate as our site. Yes, Edmond picked it for the climate — the best in America and a prerequisite for a year-around resort, while not a must for a temporary summer health camp — but he did not know that Mount Kuchumaa, looming to our north, was and is known as a spirit mountain long beloved by the Indians, who believed that energy flows from within and allows those who visit her access to higher levels of consciousness. I have always felt somewhat superstitious about our mountain and give much credit for our success to its magic.

We have indeed been fortunate, and in return we have accepted a responsibility that I urge you to share. The people of our country are an endangered species. In 1977, and I can always remember the year for it was the time of my 55th birthday, President Ford chose me from the members of his Council for Physical Fitness and Sports to be the principal delegate to the fifth International Conference on Fitness. Several years earlier, as a member of President Nixon's conference, I had been invited to make the keynote address on fitness at the White House. Recently, I completed my 20th year of service to four presidents, the last eight as advisor to President Reagan's council. The week-long conference was held at the Unesco Palace in Paris. I sat and listened to delegates speak of their efforts to motivate people. Their interest and that of their governments was to minimize future costs of health care, for children and elders. In my report I quoted the consensus statement, which determined that 15 percent of the people would do it on their own, 15 percent would never do it and the target should be 70 percent of each country's population. Official Washington was horrified at the concept of giving up on the 15 percent, and rather than investigate and compare with what the rest of the world was doing, they allowed the 15 percent who would never do it to become 70 percent of today's population. We talk about health rather than teach self-responsibility for health. Fitness spas will never run out of clients: You have only to watch commercials on TV and observe the rise of the fast food industry.

Now that you have found a united voice, I hope you will stress common sense. On the one hand the official guidelines for health and nutrition recommend severe reductions in fat, protein and salt, and urge consumption of five fresh fruits a

day, while on the other hand breakfast for most Americans is a cup of coffee or a Coke and a sweet roll. Snack stands are everywhere. The situation in a way is pornographic, catering to prurient interests. Soaring health costs are the price we pay.

I have a simple health formula: The body is not a motel where you can check in and check out; it is your one and only home for life. Think of your body as a pen and the new day as a blank page upon which you will start to write your autobiography. Stretch nude in front of a full-length mirror as a personal pledge of allegiance, and visualize yourself as one of your early ancestors, climbing out of the cave or up the ladder each morning. Such visualizations are the foundation of our understanding of Nature. Exercise isn't fun, but neither was plowing the "north forty" a joyous activity. Youth can be pictured as ever-increasing circles of movement, while the process of aging would be drawn as consistent contractions — ever-diminishing motion. Food is fuel, the quality of fuel equals the quality of the energy. One either utilizes the day's intake in full, stores some for a later day or perhaps takes some out of storage. Our guests stand convinced of this simple logic, and 60 to 70 percent are returnees. They come for maintenance, a tune-up, not for repair.

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If you wish to begin the planning of your 50th anniversary, avoid the pitfalls of the latest fads. Remember always that the greatest asset is your staff. They are the lure that will bring your guests back again and again.

We focused then, as we do today, on being the very best in service, and to achieve this we sought and trained the very best of staff. In 1958 we reduced the number of guests at the Ranch from 225 to 150, a number we know cannot be exceeded if any kind of warmth and personal effectiveness is to be achieved. If we were prophets in 1940, then I would hope to be one now, but I fear I am somewhat of a Cassandra — I do not like the direction in which our nation and world are heading. If I were to have a message it would be to have faith in what you are doing, strengthening and educating the people, cleaning up the environment, for the real struggle for the good life is only now beginning.

Many years ago I studied Zen and read that the Zen masters divided the lifespan into three parts: the first third, growing up and getting an education; the second, devoted to marriage, children, money, and the third was the most important — the top of the ladder one might say — when you give something back from all that you received when you stood at the peak and could move in any direction you chose.

Nine years ago I turned 60. I turned my business over to my children and, in taking on new challenges of working with the poor of Latin America and the Caribbean, reenergized myself. From personal experience I can state that again is when there is less to do tomorrow than yesterday, and the secret of the foundation of youth is to know that being is doing. John Donne, the poet, said no man is an island. Never has this been more true. I have always maintained that the word “spa” is an acronym for self-preservation-association. Be assured that if the Professor and I had not invented the modern fitness spa, one of you here would have done so, for the spa fills a real need and it will be you working together who will make the difference for the people and our world.