



We Confront Werner Erhard With Our Awareness Of His Manifestation Of What We're Clear Is A Big Scam

LET THEM EAT est

By Suzanne Gordon

Illustrations by Jeffrey Seaver

AN EVENING AT THE WHITE HOUSE IS NOT AN unusual event for Enud McGiffert. As the wife of Assistant Secretary of Defense David McGiffert, she has been there many times. But one particular evening, May 1, 1978, stands out in her mind. Mrs. McGiffert had gone to the majestic building on Pennsylvania Avenue to attend a performance of a play presented by her daughter's elementary school, whose students included Amy Carter. Before the performance, President and Mrs. Carter greeted children and parents on an informal reception line. It was then that Mrs. McGiffert drew open the curtain on her own personal drama. She stopped, said hello, and then she simply could not refrain. She had to convince Jimmy Carter of the significance of a new "experience" in her life—the Hunger Project, the latest venture of Werner Erhard's est. For est, or Erhard Seminars Training, which began as one of the evangelistic human potential movements of the '70s, had recently expanded its horizons from the self to the world. Werner Erhard had inaugurated a campaign that, he promises, will end hunger on the planet within the next two decades.

As Jimmy shook Enud McGiffert's hand, she smiled and began her tale. "I just want you to know," she told him, "about the Hunger Project. There are 100,000 people out there who really just want to totally serve you and do anything you want them to do to end hunger and starvation on the planet in the next 20 years." The people standing behind her pressed her on. She could not decipher Carter's reaction.

All through the play, anxiety ate at her. Had she done the right thing? Poor man, she thought, he can't even stand on a reception line without someone pestering him. After the

play, as the parents gathered in the White House dining room for refreshments, the President walked up to her. "Now, where were we?" he asked, smiling his famous smile.

Enud McGiffert was thrilled. "I want you to know," Carter went on, "that I know about your group and will call upon you when we have our plans ready."

Mrs. McGiffert, an est graduate and enrollee in the Hunger Project, was not the only one pleased with Carter's response. Upon hearing of the incident, est Public-Relations Manager Brian Van der Horst beamed. It was nothing short of a miracle, a miracle that would delight Werner Erhard. For if one man will spark America's movement to end hunger, many loyal est supporters believe, it is Werner Erhard, founder of est—a man who has transformed thousands of Americans' experience of themselves, has "made it work," and who has not only now gone on to forge a campaign to end hunger on the planet but also, in the process, will show us how to "complete" our lives and make the world our "context rather than our condition."

Until 1977, Erhard's activity was based on a training system where some 250 people sit in a hotel ballroom for two weekends to hear Erhard or one of his trainers combine techniques as varied as Eastern mysticism, Dale Carnegie and behavior modification so that they can heal their souls. The going price for this is \$300. The training takes place in a distinctive upbeat estian language whose phrases pepper the statements of both Erhard and his disciples, (see box, p. 44). Est's expansion into the field of hunger is significant not only because Erhard has initiated it, but also because it is one of the first attempts so far by one of the "self"-oriented movements of the '70s to address social or political issues.

To assure the eradication of hunger and starvation within the next two decades, est created the Hunger Project as an independent, nonprofit organization and gave it a \$400,000 interest-free loan. Est's tax-deductible arm, the est Foundation, bestowed on the Project a \$100,000 grant. This money financed a series of 12 "presentations" in urban centers across the nation, where Erhard "presented" the idea of ending hunger to 40,000 Americans. In a slide show and lecture, he and his resident hunger expert, Roy Prosterman, tried to "get at" the first principles of hunger and starvation. He then "gave" the Project to those Americans who, after paying \$6 to attend the show, demonstrated that they wanted to take "personal responsibility for being the source of the Project and ending hunger and starvation on the planet in the next two decades."

[Who Gets the Money?]

WHAT, PRECISELY, DOES THE HUNGER Project plan to do to end famine and starvation? The Hunger Project does not, you see, *do* anything about ending hunger. That's why, Erhard tells anyone who asks, it is a difficult idea to grasp. The Hunger Project does not advocate any particular solution to hunger—like land reform, food self-sufficiency or the wresting of power from landowners by peasants. Nor does it ask its enrollees to make "dehumanizing gestures"—like sending money to anti-hunger organizations. Above all, the Project does not want its members to feel guilty about the deplorable situation that causes, each year, the death of some 15 million people all over the world. Rather, it asks them to view hunger and starvation as a "wonderful opportunity," an opportunity to "make a difference in the world."

To create such optimism, Erhard counsels us to examine our "positions" about hunger and starvation. This is the first step in "getting" the Project. Once we examine our attitudes, we will discover that two prevail: one, we think hunger and starvation are inevitable; two, we think that to end it, we have to "do" something, support a particular "position." But these things, Erhard assures us, are not the case. Hunger and starvation are not inevitable. We have the technology to eradicate them. And positions merely make matters worse—by engendering opposing positions.

What the Hunger Project literature—a slick collection of Werner Erhard's sayings, photographs and aphorisms gleaned from hunger experts and their writings—counsels is a process of de-education. For anyone confused by the complex issues of the day, this has enormous appeal. "Rather than knowing more and then more as you go along," Erhard counsels, "you will need, instead, to be willing to know less and then less—that is to say, to become somewhat confused as you go along. Finally, you will have struggled enough to be clear that you don't know. In the state of knowing that you don't know, you get, as a flash of insight, the principle out of which the answer comes."

What forces caused hunger in the first place? Erhard is vague about this. "Call them political forces, if you like," he advises generously. "Study the political forces and you will see that hunger and starvation on the planet are the inevitable result of those forces. . . . If you don't like the politics, do it with economic forces. If you don't like the economics, do it

with sociological forces. Psychological forces. Philosophical forces. Or if you prefer, a combination of them."

So far, 180,000 people have enrolled in this project to make the world "work"; they have made more than 30,000 tax-deductible contributions, which have totaled \$883,800. Almost none of this money goes into the mouths of hungry people, for that would, remember, contribute to the "dehumanization" of the world's hungry. This money goes, instead, toward the continued communication of the Hunger Project to an ever-expanding sector of the American public: it produces the Hunger Project quarterly newspaper, *A Shift in the Wind*; it helps pay for office space and slide shows and films. Less than one percent of the Project's money, \$2,500, went to a well-known British hunger organization called Oxfam. But the essence of the Hunger Project is workability, alignment, communication and more communication.

And here he is now, Werner Erhard, founder of the Hunger Project. Here he is on the stage of the San Francisco Cow Palace, or that of the Felt Forum in New York, communicating the Hunger Project to thousands of Americans. The auditoriums are enormous, so we have two Werners before us—the man on stage, and above him, bigger than life, a videotaped image on a huge screen. Or here he is in Washington, gathering hunger experts together to convince them that ending hunger is an idea whose time has come. Or there he is in India, talking with Prime Minister Morarji Desai, and then quick, we have to catch up with him as he jets to the Franklin House, his Victorian mini-mansion on Franklin Street in San Francisco. Wherever he is these days, the Hunger Project is on his lips, for it's a project that comes from his very intimate experience of the souls of the thousands and thousands of Americans with whom he has had, he says, a very meaningful personal relationship.

The est staff, the Hunger Project staff, the Hunger Project Council, the est Advisory Board, the Hunger Project Advisory Board, est assistants and volunteers all echo Werner's language when "communicating" the Project. And they all claim that, except for the seed money, the Project has nothing organizationally to do with est and that Werner Erhard has magnanimously taken months off his busy schedule to help Americans end world hunger.

A six-month investigation by *Mother Jones* and the Center for Investigative Reporting of Oakland, California, however, has revealed a far different set of goals for the Hunger Project:

- Werner Erhard is using the Hunger Project not only for self-aggrandizement but for promoting the for-profit corporation he founded, as well. The Hunger Project is a thinly veiled recruitment arm for est. Hunger Project volunteers have said that est-trained Hunger Project staffers have pressured them until they agreed to do the \$300-a-shot est training. Others told of being asked to lend their cars or provide other services to est.

The Hunger Project has nonprofit status—which gives it the ability to receive tax-deductible contributions. But this use of a nonprofit organization to recruit customers for a for-profit one is in violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of Internal Revenue Service laws.

- In various cities across the country, Erhard's disciples have organized a "Hunger Project Seminar Series" at \$30 per enrollment. Yet the proceeds go, not to the Hunger Project, but directly to est.

- The official claim that est and the Hunger Project are

organizationally separate is a fabrication. Careful examination reveals that top personnel pass through a revolving door from est to the Hunger Project. In many cities, the Hunger Project is housed in est offices. Est graduate bulletins advertise Hunger Project events. The three initial directors of the Hunger Project, Michael Chatzky, Robert Dunnett and Mark Schiavenza, all work out of the law firm of est lawyer and offshore tax-haven expert, Harry Margolis, (see box, p. 52). In addition, Dunnett was vice president of Erhard Seminars Training, Inc., when that was est's corporate name, and Chatzky was one of the directors of California Aesthetics, which was once the sole shareholder in est. The Hunger Project's current vice president, John Emery, and the secretary-treasurer, Helen Nahm, are both on the est Advisory Board. The Project's resident hunger expert, Roy Prosterman, the man who does the traveling hunger road show with Erhard, receives a grant from an est foundation, which helps support his own hunger consulting work.

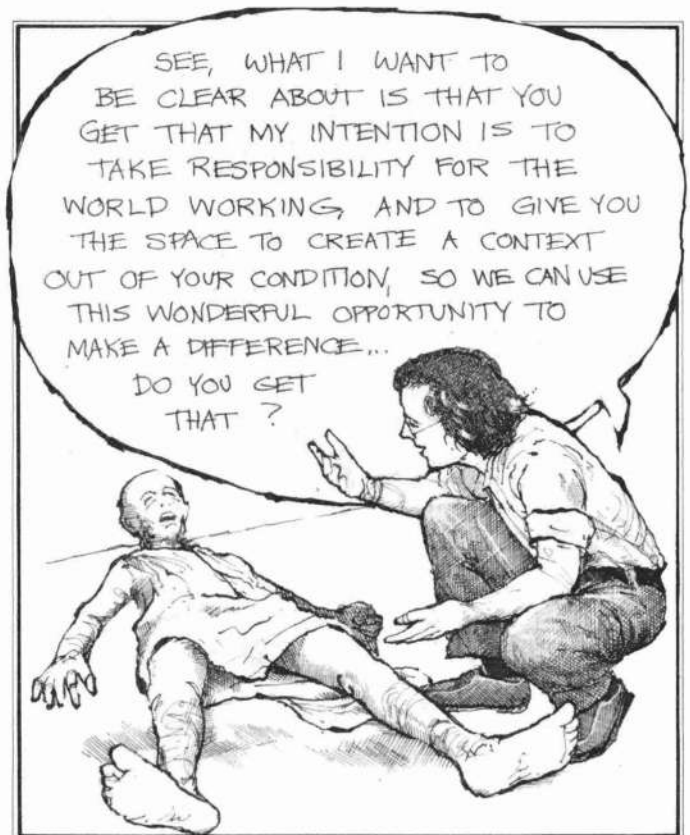
As we shall see, Erhard will deny some of these charges in his uniquely estian way in an interview.

[No More Struggle]

ERHARD'S FOUNDING OF THE HUNGER PROJECT, a little over a year ago, was a stroke of genius. Though the est movement has been growing rapidly, Erhard had been getting increasingly bad reviews. There had been a number of newspaper and magazine articles criticizing his movement's obvious authoritarianism and its devaluation of independent thought. There were also questions about whether, with tens of thousands of people paying up to \$300 a crack for est training, Erhard was using the consciousness movement to make himself a tidy personal fortune. Erhard needed a good promotional weapon to fight back with and, in the Hunger Project, he found it.

Examined carefully, of course, the Hunger Project is not a new departure for Erhard, but merely an application of the familiar est approach. Consciousness is everything; distribution of wealth and power, nothing. The Hunger Project takes one of the most potent political issues of the day and totally depoliticizes it. The persistence of hunger, Erhard says, is not primarily due to an economic system in which rich get richer and poor get poorer (of which Erhard is a part, as est money finds its way to offshore tax havens). Rather, it is due to the lack of will, to attitudes, to bad intentions.

The emphasis is on the positive. Don't think about the depressing facts of hunger or the causes of starvation, think of the hunger issue as the chance of a lifetime—a way to have an impact on the world. All this talk of impact neatly brackets the starving and the dying. They appear in beautiful color pictures in Hunger Project brochures—but the needs of middle-class Americans eclipse their reality. The people who flock to est, the Hunger Project and the other consciousness movements have just escaped a decade of disillusionment where political action promised social transformation. This promise was not fulfilled. Similarly, the '60s and early '70s were an era of journalistic exposés that revealed widespread corruption: Watergate, the CIA, FBI provocateurs, the list is endless. But again, information has not led to transformation. The more people learn about how bad things are, the more powerless they feel. Erhard realizes that



his fans want to feel both powerful and needed. "The idea [of the Hunger Project] germinated itself from my experience of people with whom I was interacting, primarily people who had been through the training," he explains. So Erhard creates a way for them to *feel* like they're having the impact they know they've lost.

[SOIPs]

HUNGER IS ONE OF THE SEXIER ISSUES IN WASHINGTON, D.C., this year. No one is for it, and everyone is against it. Hunger is consequently a perfect issue around which a President with lagging popularity can mobilize public support. Recently, Carter appointed a Presidential commission on the subject. Like all Presidential commissions, it includes a "non-partisan" assortment of college presidents (Steve Muller of Johns Hopkins), millionaires (Sol Linowitz), scientists (Jean Mayer), Republican and Democratic senators and representatives, and, among others, entertainer Harry Chapin and singer John Denver—the latter, an enthusiastic backer of est.

Denver is unfailingly helpful. His greatest contribution, aside from his coming role in the Presidential Hunger Commission, was a film he financed and narrated called *I Want to Live*. He sang the theme song, which centered around the lines: "I want to share/ I want to give/ I want to live." The film also included the opinions of such luminaries as Hubert Humphrey, U.N. Representative Andrew Young and various hunger experts, who spoke about the possible solutions to the hunger problem. Ending on a rather vulgar note of self-celebration, Vice President Walter Mondale congratulated Denver on his great personal commitment. This film is

a staple of Hunger Project promotion.

Werner Erhard has promptly gone to work trying to propagate his ideas to the Presidential Commission's members and others in the White House. President Carter's son Chip, for example, represented his father at a three-day Hunger Project symposium at the Tarrytown, New York, Executive Conference Center in September. Chip Carter seems to have swallowed Erhard's pabulum undiluted: "If my father can go from being almost unknown to being President in four years," he was quoted as saying by *The Washington Post*, "we can certainly end hunger in 20 years."

Harry Chapin and est regulars John Denver and Valerie Harper (TV's *Rhoda*) were also among the 100 guests at the Tarrytown symposium. Harper has also been active in the Hunger Project. She has served on the est Advisory Board and is a member of the Hunger Project Council. Her public effusions about est have been innumerable. On national television and in magazine articles, she has thanked Werner for transforming her life. Now, she enthuses about the Hunger Project, (see box below). She participates in events to promote the Project—a soccer game here, a speech there, a gathering at her house—or to help Werner meet the important people.

Because of hunger's non-partisan appeal and President Carter's interest, a campaign to end hunger is a natural way in which Erhard can appear to be "doing good" while cultivating powerful connections. A number of key people have

paved Erhard's road from San Francisco. These people are known in est lingo as "Sphere of Influence People" or "SOIPs"—types who have taken the training and are later courted to help aggrandize Erhard. Although est would not admit whether or not it had constructed such a category as SOIP, internal documents prove that it has. ("New York SOIP Participants," begins one of them. "The following people have responded and *will* attend the Reception: 1. Paul Albano, Asst. V.P., Chemical Bank. 2. Dave Andrews, V.P., Chase Manhattan Bank. 3. Dick Aurelio, heads Daniel Edelman. 4. Polly Bergen, Actress. 5. Josh Reynolds, Guest of Polly Bergen. . . ." This list of 33 names is followed by a list of those who "*will not* attend the Reception," and finally a list of people who haven't answered yet, identified by connection to SOIPs if they are not ones in their own right: "Senator and Mrs. [Jacob] Javits, Mrs. Javits is a grad . . . Edith Rivera, Daughter of Kurt Vonnegut. . . ." and so on.)

John Denver and his manager, Jerry Weintraub, as well as Valerie Harper, have given Erhard an SOIP entrée into Hollywood. Est enthusiasts Buckminster Fuller and Dick Gregory provide other ties. But the real help comes from people with government connections.

For example, take Roger Sant, former Assistant Administrator of the Federal Energy Administration under President Ford. Sant has also been a member of the prestigious San Francisco businessman's group, the Bay Area Council, a director of the National Security Bank and a frozen-food

"Brenda, Brenda, I Just Got Manifested!"

What attracts a talented, busy and hitherto sensible person to Werner Erhard and his Hunger Project? Mother Jones' Mark Schapiro called Valerie Harper, star of TV's Rhoda, to ask her a few questions, and found her so eager to talk he could barely get a word in edgewise. Here is a condensation of her response:

WELL, FIRST OF ALL, THE HUNGER Project is each one of us. It's not like I joined an organization and now I'm a member of this group called the Hunger Project. In our world you have to say, "What is the organization?" And of course there is an organization, but the actual work of the Hunger Project is individual responsibility. It does manifest and it's not a solid thing, it's not an object, as human beings are not objects. So the Hunger Project lives in each person who chooses to have it be there. And so, since I've been participating in the Hunger Project, a lot of things in my life have altered and my own personal power has expanded.

"What the Hunger Project is, is affording one that opportunity to create an idea's time coming. You see, there's only one way that an idea's time comes, and that is not through organization or money or political action or group stuff. It comes through the individual. So what the Hunger Project is,

is an alignment of individuals, each doing their particular, individual thing. Now Wilbur and Orville Wright created the airplane. Now, what it looks to us—and now we'll talk physics for a minute—it looks to us like Wilbur and Orville built a plane and then flight occurred. So that's the Hunger Project. The way an idea's time comes is individuals create it. Individuals create—again physics—a critical mass of agreement about an idea, and then out of that, things manifest. You got that? You don't have to believe it or understand it, but just kind of get the sense of what I'm saying.

"Werner Erhard has formulated the Project. He has . . . I'll tell you what he did, literally. He personally took responsibility for ending world hunger. He said to the Advisory Board, and I was at the meeting, 'That's what I want to do.' And there was tremendous static, and we all said, 'Now wait a minute, Werner, what are you doing? What are you talking about?' He said, 'This is an est organization, our organization will continue, will fill trainings, will keep giving people a chance to nurture, expand their lives, etc. If the training's something they want to do, fine. If it isn't, they don't, and we'll keep providing it. That's our work as an est Advisory Board. I'm just telling you that I am per-

sonally taking responsibility to end the starvation on this planet by 1997.' And I remember standing up and saying, 'But Werner, listen, I was taught as a child, and I believed, that it will always be with us. There will always be the starving throngs because it's part of the world, the Middle Ages, for all time—much further back than the Middle Ages people have starved.' And he said, 'I would put to you, Valerie, that you holding that is contributing to hunger. Your responsibility is not if you ate pizza this afternoon.' And I got it so clearly, and I began to see.

"The clearer I get about starvation, the more I can take responsibility for it. So, in one sentence, the Hunger Project is a project of communication and enrollment, and by enrollment that does not mean that you pay a fee and you're in and you have a card. It means that you enroll and then you enroll to enroll. You enroll people yourself. I'm sure you'll speak to other people about this. I'll send you material and I think you'll like it. I have exactly the person for you to call to get some material. Brian Van der Horst is the public information office, the office of public information for the Hunger Project. Well, now wait a second, I'm giving you the wrong thing, honey, hold it, he's with est, that's not right. . . ."