



An Interview with Bob Young

Kurt Jacobsen

Excerpts of an interview conducted in 2015 for a documentary.

Let's start as routinely as we can with family background, and your trail from Dallas suburbs to Cambridge and then London.

It's so clichéd I hardly dare say it to you. My grandfather's father owned slaves. My grandfather became one of the richest men in Dallas because he had a lumber yard in a town that was burgeoning. My grandfather was more or less lassoed by my grandmother who was an orphan who worked in China at the time of the Boxer Rebellion. She came back with tuberculosis and therefore my granddaddy, who had lots of money, not billions, but, you know, lots of money, decided as was the thought at that time that they should go and live in the mountains where the air is pure. Think of . . .

The Magic Mountain.

Magic Mountain, thank you. My mother wrote an account of her childhood which is a very moving document. It was typed up for my 70th birthday, a hundred something pages. They lived on this ranch. My grandfather was a monster. When his wife wouldn't sleep with him he got out his six gun in front of the children. And my mother was held responsible for the death of her 16 year old brother because my grandfather became interested in the Farmers' political movement in America at that time and left my mother when she was 16 in charge of her little brother who got ill. My mother rang the doctor who said give him some castor oil. and he died. And they blamed her. Oh, and then when she married my father and they came back from their honeymoon, her sister rang her and said, 'I'm having trouble with my boy friend,' who was somebody who came back from the war shell shocked. My mother, who said she had a terrible time on the honeymoon because my mother didn't know anything about sex - said 'I can't do this now.' That night the boy friend killed himself. She thought she was responsible [for that death too].

Yipes. What a burden.

So they settled in Dallas where my mother's family was prominent - where they could have been debutantes and so forth - In a little cottage surrounded by vast mansions, and, boy, do I mean vast. I showed my partner some pictures of Dallas houses for sale in this suburb and you would not believe it. My High School is one of the top ones in the country and there still has not been a black student there. It's 2015 and still not one Black student in that High School. I don't know how they do it. It must be illegal. Well, I played with a black child until I was 5 when I was told that I couldn't anymore. We had a black servant all through my childhood, through my life. A devoted, absolutely wonderful person who got very politicized in the civil rights movement. I didn't know anybody in

the working class. I didn't even know anybody in the lower middle class. Because you couldn't live in this suburb if you didn't have a certain amount of money. We were in the cheaper houses but I was still going to this wonderful school. And we had a swimming pool 3 blocks away. There was a creek that meandered near the house where I caught crawdads, and swam sometime. It was something straight out of Tom Sawyer.

How do you wind up at Yale instead of SMU?

I was a very good swimmer and I got a scholarship to Yale which was the leading swimming school at the time. So I went to Yale. I had never heard of trade unions, except that there the Unitarian minister in the neighborhood gave me *Talking Union Blues* to listen to. My father said 'What are you looking at that for?' He worked for a company that made cotton gins. Trade unions were beyond the pale. My father used to say, 'You know what that president's real name is, it's Rosenfeld.' That's the atmosphere I grew up in. The people locally bankrolled [Joe] McCarthy. So ultra-right was common sense. So when I actually heard Pete Seeger, who used to come to Yale, it had more influence on me politically than any other single event. And I also met these New York intellectuals like Andre Schiffrin, who became a famous publisher at Pantheon, and Joel Kovel. You know him? And I was the local hick. They used to talk about Botticelli, I never heard of Botticelli. They'd be rattling off names that I never heard of. I was so ill-informed, so unread, that I used to read Classics Illustrated comics in High School when they assigned novels.

So did I on occasion.

Good for you. My first teaching assistant was Richard Rorty, and he took me under his wing because he saw something there. I don't know how but he saw something because I got a zero in my first test and they gave me a carrel in the library and put me in the philosophy section. I used to wander up and down the aisle pulling books off the shelves and quoting them in my essays. Completely innocently I got engaged in self-education. I went from zero to being in the top ten percent of my class, then the top ten people in my class. and I did nothing but work. I had no girl friends till my third year. And I was just loving it. I was reading books way over my head, like Cassirer and Alfred North Whitehead and *The Great Chain of Being*. You know, really proper senior level ace texts. And for some reason I was so excited I managed to read them.

So you go from Yale to Rochester Medical School. Any sign of Freud there?

My medical school was dominated by psychoanalysts so I was steeped in psychoanalysis from the day I set my foot in the door of Rochester. And then I went to Cambridge to work on ideas from Freud's *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. There is not a word of psychoanalysis in my thesis, and yet that is the whole reason I wrote it! Then I went back to it in the 1980s when I got depressed when I was in London. The plug was pulled on a project I was involved with, making documentaries. I went back into it strictly as a patient. My partner had a job at the Tavi so I suddenly got inspired to get involved with psychoanalysis. My mentor in this said, come and work with me. I did and the rest is history. In five years I was a Professor. I'm telling you about a series of opportunities - chance favors the prepared mind, of course - but I had opportunities which really were

openings out for me. And I'm still at it .

Could you go back to your first experience at a mental institution during a Summer off at Yale, and how it affected you?

Well, my mother was mentally ill. I was planning to become a psychiatrist, or so I thought, and there was a wonderful opportunity to have a taster. I went to Arizona State Hospital which was one of the old-fashioned bins like the movie *The Snake Pit*. And it was dreadful. Except for the admissions ward and the old folks ward, all the others were custodial places. If a patient didn't eat fast enough they were not allowed to serve themselves and would have the food shoveled down them. And if you, as I did, sat down beside them and say, 'I'll sit with you while you eat,' they ate perfectly civilly and happily. If they said 'I want to be alone to take my bath' they were not allowed to do so, and you had three people struggle with them to have a bath. And I said to them, 'What is it about this struggle to have a bath?', and they said, 'I want to be alone.' I left them alone and it was all right. The [institutions] were used to bullying people. The wards were locked. I administered shock therapy, which went out of fashion. It's now back in fashion, by the way.

People were very crazy in these places because there weren't any drugs to mitigate their personalities. And that Summer two drugs came in, Thorazine and Reserpine, and transformed the place. They unlocked the doors. People became civil, etcetera. But they weren't the miracle drugs they were made out to be any more than Prozac was in a later generation. So this place became a more humane institution. But you do know that not very long after this period - roughly the mid-fifties - they closed down all the old hospitals, claiming they were making the world a better place but put nothing in their place. So the people now inhabit park benches and ordinary hospital wards. So it's objectively worse. Better to have the old bins, in my opinion, than to have the nothing we have now.

There were at the time some people, like Searles and Bion and others, who were interested, or becoming interested, as the case may be, in talking cures.

But it wasn't widespread. It was little islands around the place. I read a book when I was a Yale which had a title which was later adopted as a title for a movie, *Rebel Without a Cause*. And it was a hypno-analysis of a criminal psychopath. And I read another one called *My Six Convicts*. So in England you had these people who behaved well with one or two or a dozen patients but they didn't affect the institutional culture. There was one exception to this, a man named David Clark whom I knew at Cambridge, He was the superintendent of the local mental hospital and he was ace in his humaneness. I published his autobiography, by the way, and it was not anything earthshaking. They were just civil to the patients. They dressed in their own clothes. And no one forced them, and they gave them good food. No one was allowed to hit them. In one of the wards I worked there was a guy who was like Carr, the floorwalker in *Cool Hand Luke*, who took the knobs off the television, and in order to get a knob you had to give him a cigarette. It was just demeaning, straightforwardly demeaning. God, was that man well cast.

Let's continue the journey. Why was England so attractive?

I came to England for two reasons. One of them is that I was too poor to go on Junior year abroad like so many of my University contemporaries. And I really wanted to go abroad. The other is that my wife was mentally ill and I couldn't carry on with medical school. You can't be a medical student and look after a young child because your wife can't handle it. So I made a smart career move and got a fellowship, a colossal fellowship, to go to Cambridge. And when I got there I can't tell you how wonderful it was! Graduate work in Oxbridge you have no obligations whatsoever. I had no lectures to go to, no languages I had to learn, no grades. You have a supervisor. You don't have to go see and see him. I could do anything I wanted. Go to any library in Cambridge. My wife had disappeared by this time. I could take my son to the nursery. Pick him up and then work late into the night. I was a free creative scholar for four years. and I'm still living off the capital I built up over that time. I'm talking about the social sciences and the arts. You're just given the opportunity to do your bloody work and my thesis was published without a change of a single word. There's still in the published version [of *Mind, Brain and Adaptation in the Nineteenth Century*] a misspelling of my supervisor's name. One of my examiners, who was a professor at Oxford, took it to Oxford University Press and it became famous. Not any revisions whatsoever because it was so carefully done.

I don't think that would have happened in America. I don't know how many people felt as liberated as I did but, my God, I did. For me it was academic freedom in the first instance and I suppose after my wife and I parted it was sexual freedom, Because I had an American friend in London who had parties all the time and he would say at the end of the party, 'Anybody who doesn't want to go to bed with the person they're dancing with, leave now.' I'm not kidding.

Sounds like the Sixties were well under way.

But the next thing to say to you is that the antiwar movement was an earthshaking matter for me and my friends. and everybody had their different take on it. I was in something called the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science, and we were talking about the use of university computers to plan bombing missions. It eventually covered all aspects of the human sciences, the social sciences and the hard sciences because all sorts of academia were coopted. We set out to fight it and then we realized it wasn't just the division of labour, it was consensual framework of the social sciences and eventually the hard sciences [which needed criticism], which is what I was doing and still am. And all of that was a consequence of the presumption of the Vietnam war years, that they thought they owned the ideological and conceptual framework of the universe that represented this planet. And there were people - [Defense Secretary Robert] McNamara comes to mind - who were terribly repentant about what they did And other people who were shame-faced about it. And there are people in the middle like Al Gore who try to have it both ways.

How does Darwin, of all people, figure in this liberation?

I eventually left Cambridge in the 1970s so I could work with this movement. It changed what I thought, what I wrote. I wrote manifestos - first about my discipline which was

Darwin at that moment in my life. I relooked at how Darwin should be thought about. Lo and behold, he thanked a political economist, Malthus, for the heart of his idea and I said this in Cambridge and the guardians of Darwin's corpse, or whatever, said who does this guy think he is? They don't want to know. The theory of population created the model for the concept of natural selection. It's amazing. So I went around saying these things. I was a good scholar so they couldn't naysay me. The Wellcome Trust were very shocked they got somebody who was drifting into Marxism. I'm not talking about communism, but about Marxist theory of knowledge and so forth. We had a conference on self-management and science, for example. Labs are hierarchical institutions. We said, Why is it that way in science.? Why does the supervisor get his name on every paper you write? I don't know if its true in social science but it's true in natural science.

And you know how they throw ropes on a elephant if it's misbehaving? I didn't have any ropes on me from my past anymore. I came from perhaps the most reactionary place in America outside of the Deep South, Dallas. To come from a framework like that and to go and change it to something more leftwing you got these ropes on you. Your thinking isn't as rich as it could be. Pardon my immodesty but my thinking is as rich as I could ever make it because I'm here [in the UK], not there. When the war ended the liberatory aspects of it in the academic world disappeared like a puff of smoke. You must know this from your own experience.

I do.

It's very hard to be a leftwing intellectual in America. Maybe its impossible. I don't know. There aren't many intellectuals in America talking with a full-throated left of centre, never mind ultra-leftist, epistemology in research. Don't you think?

Very few slip through, unless they do safe post-modern gibberish. People like Chomsky are miraculous exceptions.

So what I got in coming to England was freedom. And then I got to exercise my freedom in exploring Lukacs, Gramsci, and so on - and I'm still not done thinking about these things. Absolutely thrilled. And you have an effect on me. You'll say, what about this guy? Then you say, why are you reading that rubbish? I sometimes sneak off and read them anyway. I sense that I don't know the geography of the academic world [anymore] because its conformism is so well-established. You don't know that these people are creatures of some interest. You know, by contrast, I had a close friend who fracks and we can't speak to each other now. And he has no iota of doubt about what he is doing. He was president of the class, the head cheerleader. They're all working for his company and they are all rich as Croesus because they went to the right university, got into the right fraternity, and went into business in Dallas. And I could have done that. Somebody said, if you work for me I'll make you my heir, and when he died he had 800 million dollars. I got no regrets, by the way. Maybe I answered a broader question than the one you asked but that's what it did for me. Still is, by the way.

I want to ask you about R. D. Laing because of the novelized account Zone of the Interior of him written by someone we both know, Clancy Sigal. Were you aware of Laing's work when you came to England?

He must have qualified in 1960. Would that be right? I qualified in 1960 but I wasn't here in London. I was in Cambridge. It wasn't one single set of institutions because Scotland was different from the South and psychiatry was different from psychotherapy and both are different from psychoanalysis. Laing was in a very conventional setting at first and then moved into an extraordinarily facilitating one with people like Winnicott and Masud Khan and so on, who were themselves characters. And they qualified him over other people - I'm talking about psychoanalysis now - over other people's protests. Just as Winnicott had qualified Masud Khan over other people's protests. And he turned out to be a bad egg, a very bad egg. So I'm trying to say there were two worlds. There was a world of psychiatry, which I'm not familiar with really though I know people who have been through it, and then the world of psychoanalysis where he was treated as the brilliant young man.

When did you become aware of Laing?

I read *The Divided Self* when it first came out, and, by the way, I wrote a review of it which you are welcome to. And I was very impressed. I probably read it in 64 or 65. I had studied philosophy at Yale and I liked the idea of combining existentialist thinking with psychiatry and liked the idea of freeing things up. I had worked in one of the most horrible psychiatric bins in the gap between my third and fourth years at University so I knew the world he was talking about and it was breath of fresh air. The thing we have to say almost immediately is, it painted a picture of what you could do with the freedom that he offered that turned out not to be - I won't say not to be true - but not as facile, as excellent as he and Esterson and others thought. It's much more refractory. We're now fighting a drug industry that wants to stamp out talking therapies because you can't package them into pills. Psychiatrists nowadays sell pills. and psychotherapists don't have the right to prescribe, so it's changed a lot, mostly for the worse. Most psychiatrists hand out pills and see 4 to 5 patients an hour and that's because they can make four to five times as much money as if they were a psychotherapist seeing somebody at one an hour.

Going back to Laing, he was very, very liberating. and was very charismatic and people followed him - I don't know - not necessarily slavishly because there were people like Clancy Sigal who were critical, and Joseph Berke who turned out to have a longer shelf life, if I can put it that way. He is still treating mad people with talking therapy. which is practically unheard of these days. I know. I do it. Laing's charismatic personality had a good side and a bad side. And the bad side eventually took him over.

Did you visit Kingsley Hall?

Yes, but only recently, Kurt. I was never there during Laing's time. What interesting - and my take is very biased - about Kingsley hall is that Joseph Berke was never in the centre of Laing's followers although he was deeply influenced by him. And he's the one who took a properly mad person and worked with her, the smearing of shit on him and so forth, 24/7 sometimes, and this woman Mary Barnes became a very well-known and admired painter. They wrote a book together. A best seller. *Two Accounts of s Journey Through Madness*, It's called. And he was just influenced by the ambiance of Laing and then without it being any partnership at all he just went off and worked with this woman.

It's the best thing that came out of Kingsley Hall so far as I'm concerned.

Clancy Sigal eventually came to you with this tell-all yet kind of sympathetic satire on Kingsley Hall.

Well, as you know it's not in print in this country and that's because it let cats out of bags, including a plan to put LSD in the water supply, which wouldn't have made a particle of difference because you can only put it into distilled water. But that was the kind of stuff that revolutionaries, in inverted commas, were thinking of getting up to. Clancy is very charismatic too and a very curious - as in curiosity - person. I read that book and liked it a lot, partly for mischievous reasons. and he got in touch with me at some point when I was a publisher at the time and asked me to re-publish it. And I re-read it. When I went to Joseph Berke he said, 'You won't be allowed to do that. We'll sue you.' Here I am a tiny little publisher with no lawyer and no backup for anything. I just said I can't possibly do this. When I told Clancy, he was very offended. It was as if I failed to join the revolution. And I felt wounded that he couldn't appreciate my position. I admired his work. Don't get me wrong. I suppose I just thought he was egocentric and couldn't make the imaginative leap to see why I couldn't publish something nobody else had published for as long as that. There must be a reason. Its interesting because Joseph Berke didn't take part in any of the naughty things that Clancy's book refers to. I don't know what else to say about it. I gather Clancy has just written another book. I ordered it, on Hemingway. Anyway, I'm looking forward to it. It sounds like classic Clancy looking at a rebel sympathetically. and I expect to be enlightened by it. He hasn't written much fiction, has he of late?

Screenplays and memoirs mostly.

How old is he?

Eighty-seven, I think.

He has a right to slow down a little. I'm slowing down a lot. I will say this. I met a woman who had been one of Clancy's women who gave me the impression that she felt hard done by him. And I think Doris Lessing didn't feel treated wonderfully.

As she related in great detail in The Golden Notebooks.

He's in there, isn't he? So I wonder if he's a bit egotistical and can give women the space they deserve, if I can put it that way. Is he in a relationship now, do you know? Yes? Well, people change.

He's got a teenage son.

For a man in his eighties that's not bad going. Well, I have a daughter who is 18 so I must have been 60 when she was born.

You're scaring me.

Well, there are few better experiences out there if it works. I have a son with 2 BAFTAS as well by the way.

So what's your biggest gripe against Laing and his gang and what's their biggest merit, if any?

There was a kind of - you'll think I'm an old fart for saying this - a lack of gravitas about it. I think the [Kingsley Hall people] lost the respect of a lot of people. And I have a feeling, Kurt, and I speak as someone who worked psychotherapeutically with schizophrenics, I have a feeling they led people to underestimate what a hell of a job that is. Really, it's heartbreaking. For example I see several people five times a week which is if they are in full analysis. And the problems with the parents and the problems with the patients are terrific. I've had a patient jump out a two story window. These are really, really difficult things to do. The idea that there is a charismatic solution is mistaken in my opinion. And I have a feeling he thought there was a charismatic solution. I have a soft spot for him but I lost respect for him, I have to say, because he blotted his copybook. Is that fair?

The blots are all people seem to recall these days.

Well, look. The larger picture is mental patients were badly treated. Mental institutions were bins. I recently re-watched *The Snake Pit*. Over half the state mental hospitals of America were revamped as a direct result of that one book and movie. So there's a change in the institutional setting of the mental hospitals. But before this change got anywhere near completing the thing it ought to have done, the government said, 'I know what we'll do. We'll close these places and we'll replace it with care in the community.' And they did the first but not the second. So now these people are sitting on park benches. and that's horrible. Corrupt politicians behave that way, don't they? There's no mental institutions in this country. There's just empty buildings and a lot of selling off of property. I wish I knew what was happening in America. I wouldn't be surprised if it was the same. Do you know?

Exactly the same thing and it probably started earlier. What is worth retrieving from Laing?

The respect for the patient. Believing what the patient says. There's a guy named Peter Barham who wrote a book which I republished. He wrote a book about the history of the closing of the asylums. He's a remarkable man. Very gentle man and he said, in the wake of Laing, Don't think that psychotic people rant. Listen to what they say. Interpret it as if you were interpreting them as a psychoanalyst, not just as someone who tolerates their idiosyncrasies. and you will find out what is going on in their unconscious. Do not fail to attend to what these people say.

Still looks like a revolutionary thought.

And Laing had a lot to do with laying it before us. And I don't think many people would follow Peter Barham's advice. He is not a guru. He's just a man who said good things. I'm giving a talk in a few days about the relation between psychotherapy, psychiatry, and the drug industry. The drug industry is absolutely trying to wipe talking therapies off the map because they want everything to be pills. Pills don't do so much for you, you know. It isn't as if there are twenty new drugs since Thorazine and Reserpine. They tinker with the molecules. There is one good drug for manic-depressive psychosis. Lithium. But the drug

industry is a lot of bullshit. So that was one thing Laing did, he fought the drug industry which got worse rather than better. I wish I could sing his praises more because I did love the man in a certain way but I felt badly let down by him. I mean ,people think I am mad to do psychotherapy with schizophrenics.

So there are things that could be done in the spirit of Laing and should be done. I'm asking myself why I haven't done it, but maybe too late for me. Because there was a place called Chestnut Lodge in Maryland where Harold Searles, the very best writer on schizophrenia ever, and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann worked. And there is a DVD called *Take These Broken Wings*. about the kind of therapy I do with schizophrenics, and they cure them. They cure them. One of them was the woman who wrote *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* and the other woman was a helper in a mental hospital. She is now a full time worker and is well. They had her husband on camera. 'Do you really think she is really well?' He said, absolutely. Why isn't there more of that? The answer of course, is that it costs the earth.

At least.

So I suppose what could be rescued from Laing is to have the kinds of institutions that Kingsley Hall tried to be. But I must tell you Joseph Berke set up something called the Arbour Centre and some other people set up a place in Hampstead. Now the Arbour Centre is closed. And the training is gone. It's a change in the zeitgeist. It's all drugs. Drug companies were fined thirteen billion pounds a year or two ago. It's chicken feed given how much they sell. The top ten drug companies make more money than the other 490 of the top 500 companies in the world. More than all of those. Now there must be something going on there and it ain't cure. The guy who was editor of the DSM-4 has written a book called *Reclaiming Normal* about 'stop pathologising people' because more people are being pathologised because of the drug companies. They want more diagnoses because they sell more pills. You know that in psychiatric training there is no more psychodynamic or psychoanalytic training since about 10 years ago. None. Niente, and that's all going the wrong way, colossally the wrong way. So I could say, under the banner of Laing, we could try to reverse this. But I think the zeitgeist take on psychoanalysis is about the reification of human nature. It's about the people who argue that wealth is good. I'm thinking of that film *Wall Street*, 'greed is good.' And nobody is doing anything about it. That means immiseration further down and the trickle-down thing is not true. It's false. So why did the *New York Review* publish critiques of psychoanalysis? Why did this English professor at Berkeley get listened to?

Frederick Crews.

Crews, yes. So I think its a very large ideological shift for the worse. Because it's against the concept of the human soul by which I mean the inner world. They have no place for the inner world. Psychiatrists won't talk to their patients except to say 'How's it going?' and adjusting the dosage from time to time. I wish I was younger and more brave. I tried with my publishing house to promote some of these ideas.

While the Fifties freed you, at least in the UK, the Sixties are still your touchstone, you've

told me before.

Well, I think it's in my heart still. My response is to soldier on. The people who were most politically active then, they're all professors now and they're all enforcing the norms of the culture. I'm talking culture at the highest level of culture. The 'What is your Ontology?' kind of thing.

You're talking about socially acceptable cynicism. Realists is their preferred term. Is it really any different in psychoanalysis?

Most of my writings since I became depressed are about psychoanalytic theory, hopefully on the most enlightened parts of psychoanalytic theory. When I encounter corruption in my subculture of psychoanalysis I wrote about it, but nobody, but nobody, has ever mentioned those writings. even though I was telling the goddam truth. Psychoanalysis was a radicalizing force for a time, wasn't it, in the 50s? Certainly in my medical school it was. Most psychoanalysts now are conformists. They are probably apolitical or at best liberals. But I don't think it's snuffed out in everybody's mind.

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