

Healing Oneself

Ellen Watson's Esalen Journey

BY REBECCA JONES





Twice widowed and once divorced, 36-year-old Ellen Watson arrived at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, battered physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Making matters worse, she was desperately worried about her mother and her aunt, who suffered from schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, respectively. A longtime and active Episcopalian, she found little peace even in the words of the liturgy she could recite by heart. Her inner life was in turmoil, and she could find no rest. What she found at Esalen—an introduction to the somatic arts, massage and yoga, dance and breathwork—changed her life.

Ellen Watson enjoys a traditional Balinese dance. The Esalen Massage practitioner created the MovingVentures School (MVS) to offer somatic education programs in inspiring locations around the world. MVS offers full scholarships to locals in developing countries.

Photos courtesy of Ellen Watson.

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HEALING ONESELF

The renowned California retreat center has been at the forefront of the human potential movement since the 1960s. Today, 24 years later, Watson is still at Esalen, now in the role of teacher, and she's committed to bringing the peace she found in bodywork to other struggling young women—those for whom a class at a pricey retreat center on the Pacific Coast is out of the question.



“Learning to lay one’s hands on another with heart and skill is one of the great gifts of the world.”

Ellen Watson, Esalen practitioner

“Through the loving touch I experienced through Esalen massage, I began the somatic healing process,” says Watson, now 60. “Learning to lay one’s hands on another with heart and skill is one of the great gifts of the world. That’s part of my mission, passing this on.”

A LOVER OF BREATH

It’s that sense of obligation to share what she’s experienced herself that has driven Watson for the last two and a half decades.

“I arrived at Esalen for my own personal healing,” she says, during a 6 a.m. telephone interview. (The early morning time slot was the only one available in her very crowded schedule.) “I didn’t go because of my mother. I went because of me. And when I arrived, I had the good fortune to study with a psychiatrist who could answer

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many questions for me in my quest to understand my mother's challenges. And for my own reasons, I stayed."

She initially signed up for a 10-day retreat. She was so smitten, she closed her successful Atlanta importing and retailing business and moved to Big Sur, earning a living and paying for Esalen classes by working there as a cook. "I used Esalen as a university," she says, "and I worked my way through school."

Eventually, she completed 1,000 hours of training in bodywork and later received certification in Holotropic Breathwork (www.holotropic.com), a technique pioneered by Stanislav Grof, MD, as a way to deepen consciousness, recall lost memories, and trigger greater spiritual understanding. She stayed on at Esalen as a teacher, but now also offers workshops, retreats, and trainings around the world.

"In the somatic arts I found peace," she says. "I became a real lover of the breath. I love how breathwork quiets the mind. I began to experience peace through the cessation of chatter, of negative self-talk. I had been feeling like I was bombarded with negative self-judgment. But my work at Esalen brought about the release of a lot of anger and tears. I began feeling expansive rather than contracted."

Esalen did something else for her, too. It broadened her worldview. "Before coming to Esalen, I was a typical provincial American," Watson says. "I hadn't traveled outside the U.S., other than to Mexico. But Esalen afforded me a doorway to the world because so many people from around the world come there. It opened the door for me to be invited to teach in many places."

A NONPROFIT PATH

In 1996, Watson created Moving Ventures School, a nonprofit organization dedicated to training students in holistic and preventative healthcare, including massage and



Ellen Watson poses with Wayan Nuriyasih and her staff. The Balinese healer was mentioned in *Eat, Pray, Love*, and is a recipient of a MovingVentures scholarship.

bodywork, yoga, dance, and meditation. For several years, she's been teaching these classes on the Indonesian island of Bali, a destination that lures paying students from around the world, drawn to Bali's gentle climate and breathtaking scenery. But in addition to the paying students, Watson provides full scholarships to needy Balinese to take the month-long basic training or advanced training, so they can earn a living as massage therapists at one of the island's spas.

"Once they have a certificate in Esalen Massage, that opens the door for them to work on the island, or outside the island," Watson says. "On the island, they can quintuple their income in a year. Off-island, a well-trained Indonesian bodyworker with an Esalen certificate can easily get a good job virtually anywhere. Our star student was able to get a two-year contract in Bermuda. With the money he earned, plus tips, he was able to go back to Bali and build a house for his wife and children, and he's now been able to open his own spa."

One of Watson's former Balinese students gained no small measure of fame when she was written about in the *New York Times* bestseller *Eat, Pray, Love* (Penguin Books, 2006). In it, author Elizabeth Gilbert

chronicled her friendship with Balinese healer Wayan Nuriyasih, the recipient of a MovingVentures scholarship in 2004. Nuriyasih is one of about 50 Balinese who have received MovingVentures scholarships in the past three years. Hundreds more have paid their own way.

Among the most recent group of scholarship students: four students from Bumi Sehat, a local clinic in Ubud, Bali. The clinic provides free assistance to hundreds of marginalized and low-income women and families throughout Bali and Aceh each week.

One of the Bumi Sehat scholarships went to I Gusti Rai Mas, a 60-year-old man who volunteers at the clinic. Rai Mas had already studied reiki, and often attends difficult childbirths at the clinic, sending reiki energy to help the delivering mothers through challenging moments.

Another scholarship recipient was Nyoman Suderki, a young Balinese mother of two who instructors describe as "a gentle soul, with great hands, needing more formal training to improve her massage skills." Suderki now uses her massage training to support her family.

The core of the curriculum in Bali focuses on the specific form of massage that evolved over the last several decades at the Esalen Institute. “Esalen Massage was created over 40 years ago, before massage became so popular in the U.S. as a therapeutic and healing modality,” Watson says.

Esalen Massage is a slow-moving form of massage that borrows from a number of sources, including Swedish massage, Eastern medicine, meditation, gestalt practice, the teachings of Ida Rolf and Moshe Feldenkrais, yoga, polarity massage, and craniosacral work. In the end, an “Esalen Massage” becomes as individual as the therapist administering it.

In addition, Watson and the other MovingVentures teachers offer classes in SpiritsDancing, a kind of ecstatic dancing designed to increase

self-awareness, and Dancing with Rumi, a practice that combines the spinning of a Sufi Muslim whirling dervish with the 5 rhythms of Gabrielle Roth. (For information on the work and workshops of Roth and her New York City-based Moving Center, visit www.gabrielleroth.com; Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam, commonly known as “the path of love.”) Students may also take Awakening 101, a multicultural meditation class that combines Chinese, Indian, and Tibetan yoga asanas, or postures.

“Ellen’s class is very different from other massage class,” writes Erika Dewi, another of Watson’s Balinese students who has started her own aromatherapy business on the island. Fearful that her English was not adequate for a live interview, she e-mailed her

responses to written questions about her experiences with MovingVentures.

“In Esalen I found the teacher is not only talking and teaching about massage technique, but is more than that. Especially for the bodywork itself, it’s a lot about how to take care of ourselves and transfer good healing energy to the person on the massage bed.”

Dewi acknowledged that her classes with Watson, whom she calls her “precious guru,” changed her life. “I can use my own body to heal from sicknesses or to keep happy and alive,” she wrote. “I found it very powerful. Spreading out this positive energy and positive thoughts to the universe is giving me what I wish and expect from life.”

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Last December, Dewi gave a 90-minute presentation on “spa spirit” to the Bali Spa Wellness Association. “Basically, I combined Ellen’s teaching about dancing, chanting, meditation, massage, and my own experience,” she wrote. “The therapists were so happy when dancing, chanting with me, that I remembered the same feeling I had on my first class with Ellen ... I feel now that I have a responsibility to share the knowledge that Ellen transferred to me.”

CENTERS FOR DREAMS

Watson continues to expand her vision of what’s possible, and to expand the number—and nationalities—of the people she helps. In 2010, she expects to open a spa academy in Rajasthan, a northern India province.

“It will combine a state-of-the-art movement studio and include all forms of body movement, many forms of touch, squeezed into one academy,” Watson says. “We’ll educate minimum-wage earning Indian women, give them training, come back frequently for more training, so at the end of three years they will be highly-skilled somatic artists.”

“This is something unusual in the spa industry,” she adds. “It’s notorious for underpaying people, for teaching them the minimum amount, so if they want to better themselves they have to go somewhere else. We’re upping the ante. We’re offering them a comprehensive education and a five-year contract. Hopefully the environment will be so pleasant that they won’t want to leave.”

Watson wants to help women who are struggling closer to home as well. For some time now, she’s been working on what she calls “the Dream Center,” a place to train poorly-paid American women in the somatic arts, to give them a skill they can then use to better themselves.

“It’s still a dream right now,” she says. “It hasn’t yet manifested itself anywhere.”

She had hoped the Dream House might open in Columbus, Ohio, but funding for the project fell through.

Undaunted, Watson believes the key to getting the Dream Center back on track may have serendipitously come to her in the person of Susie Seflin, who just signed on to be Watson’s business manager.

“Susie is highly overqualified to be my business manager,” Watson says. “She has an MBA and a law degree. She came to Bali last year and took a training with me, then she went with me to Greece, and she’s been to Esalen twice. She said she wanted to devote her life to helping disadvantaged women. I’m a visionary, and an inspiring group leader and trainer, and I have multitasked myself into a place of ineffectiveness. I’m doing so many things that I’m doing most of them poorly. She’ll run the business for me, and will turn MovingVentures into a highly functioning service organization.”

Seflin, 33, agrees that is exactly what she has in mind.

“I had decided I didn’t want to work at a law firm anymore,” the Los Angeles attorney says. “I knew I wanted to do something like this, but I didn’t know what it was. When I met Ellen, it just clicked. We have opposite strengths, so it’s a good match. Ellen is an amazing teacher and healer, and I’m good at making things happen, at getting stuff done.”

Her top priority will be finding grants that match what the Dream Center can offer. “We’d like to be in a city that has a real inner city center,” Seflin says. “We’ve discussed Atlanta, Boston, Dallas, and Miami. It really depends. There will be cities that will just match. No one’s done this before, but as long as we can find an appropriate space, I think it will be easy to get it off the ground. I’d like to have everything in place by the end of the year.”



Alethea Holsbrook gives massage to a resident of the Senang Hati (Happy Heart) center for disabled Balinese. Photo by Tom Case.

REFRESHED SPIRIT

As for the state of Watson’s once bruised spiritual life, that’s back in balance these days, too. Nowadays she’s an ordained minister of the Center for Spiritual Healing, a California non-denominational interfaith church.

“Faith is still a big part of my life,” she says. “I consider laying my hands on people [a form of] holy communion. Everything I do has to do with working with the spirit. The breath is spirit. And rather than being in a church where we talk about it, I’m involved in doing it. But I’m quite at home in any church now.” **m&b**

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