

Trick or Treat: The Divided Self of R. D. Laing  
Joseph H. Berke  
Arbours Crisis Centre, London

Tricks emanate from the depths of the trickster, an archetypal figure, part myth, part man, part psychic reality. As myth the trickster bears a striking resemblance to the alchemical image of Mercurius with his fondness for sly jokes and malicious pranks -- tricks of the trade so to speak.

Typically the trickster is half animal and half god. He can change form and function within the blink of an eye, and quickly inhabit the position of saviour or devil, as in medieval fetes when the trickster appeared as "the ape of God."

In human form the trickster demonstrates a mercurial temperament with sudden shifts in mood and mannerisms. One moment he can be warm and affectionate, lavishing emotional treats on all and sundry, while the next, he can be cold and hostile, devoid of contact, detached and distant. His bestial side loves to shock and inflict pain, but he can also turn gracious and heal with a soothing sound or unspoken glance.

As a psychic truth, the trickster has long been identified with the "shadow side of the self," like a dark cloud or envious impulse. But this is also a reality waiting to be overturned, whereupon it can become a benevolent endeavour, a treat, waiting yet again to become a trick. For the trickster, change is the game, confusion, the aim. Having spent some years studying and working with R. D. Laing in the mid 1960s, and many more years reflecting on the events that had occurred, I think the term "trickster" provides an apt description of this Scotsman in his many manifestations and transformations. Moreover the term succinctly subsumes the phrase that Laing popularised, "the divided self."

Two examples come to mind about the mercurial nature of Laing, both as healer and bedeviller. The first relates to a lecture he gave in Vancouver, Canada, in 1988, a year before he died. A video of the talk was later shown on TV under the quixotic title, "Did You Used To Be R. D. Laing." In it he discusses a consultation he did with a middle aged man who was "very depressed, suicidal, in the depths of despair." Instead of beginning with the usual psychiatric history, he asked the patient, "When was the last time you were happy," followed by, "Can you scan back over the last twenty four, or forty eight hours, or more, to a time when you felt ok?"

The man replied that he enjoyed going for walks and whistling. Laing asked him for the tune and began to whistle with him. Subsequently they both began to tell each other jokes. Laing intimated that by the end of the session both of them had become friends and were having a good time. Then Laing pointed out that fifty minutes had

passed and that the session was over. The man went to the door, but his face dropped after he suddenly remembered why he had come for the meeting, to get help for his depression. He complained he hadn't gotten his monies worth. Laing replied that for fifty minutes he had forgotten his despair, wasn't that worth the period they had spent together? Here was Laing the trickster at his best. His treat was to trick a suicidal person out of his despair.

The second example comes from my personal experience. In 1965 I moved to London from New York to be with Laing. Very quickly I was literally thrown into the deep end, both with regard to the relationship that I established with Mary Barnes (eventually described in the book we wrote together, *Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness*) and to the general turmoil at Kingsley Hall. By the spring of 1966 I felt confused, depressed, and close to the edge. So I turned to the person for whom I had turned my life upside down for help. In particular, I wanted to see him in therapy. After hearing my plight, he suggested that I meet with John Layard, an elderly Jungian analyst (and anthropologist) who, like Laing and myself, was also living at Kingsley Hall. In fact Layard had also sought Laing's help for depression, and as I ultimately found out, was in therapy with him at the time.

Reluctantly I agreed to see Layard in his cell at the top of the house. He sat on the bed. I sat on a small chair near him. After a bit of chit-chat he told me to come closer and asked me to put my finger on his right temple. I did and was guided to a hole under the skin. He told me that he had once tried to blow his brains out after he had been rejected as a lover by his former friend, the famous poet, W. H. Auden. (Years before Auden had chosen a young boy instead of him. Later I learned that he had been part of a homosexual clique that included Auden, the writer, Christopher Isherwood, and other prominent intellectuals and artists.) Layard continued that he had gone back to his room, put a gun in his mouth, and pulled the trigger. When he came to, he first thought he was in heaven, but he soon realised that he was alive because he felt pain and was bleeding profusely. Evidently the bullet had missed his brain and blown a hole in his skull, a sort of self-trepanation.

Soon after this revelation (he hadn't left any room for me to talk about myself), Layard started to run his hand up my thigh. In response I got up and walked out of the room. The next day I tackled Laing about the incident and yelled at him for referring me to Layard and not himself. He then suggested that I see Marion Milner, a senior psychoanalyst who had written extensively about her work with artists. She, in turn, referred me to Dr. Norman Cohen, with whom I had a long and productive analysis.

One could say, "all's well that ends well," except that I had been very shaken up by the trick Laing had played on me. Years later the same trick begot a "meta trick," that came to light after Laing's death, and after several biographies of Laing had been

published. One was by Bob Mullan, professor of applied social studies at the University of Wales in Swansea. His account was based on taped interviews with Laing in 1988. During this time Laing gave Mullan an entirely fallacious account of the incident between Layard and myself. This was the "meta trick" which reached beyond the grave. Mullan used it in his work (*Mad To be Normal: Conversations with R. D. Laing*) and other biographers have repeated Mullan's passing on of Laing's prank.

On the first occasion I felt paranoid and destabilised. On the second go around I felt angry, but also wryly amused. Was I so important that Laing would lie about me? Was Laing aware of the mischief he was perpetrating? Or was the tale but a further example of a trickster's undifferentiated consciousness and unrelatedness?

But then the thought occurred to me: who was the trickster, Laing or myself? Why should anyone believe my story, save those who have felt Layard's holey forehead? And am I using this account just to settle a score?

More important, could a trick have been transformed into a treat by the passing of time? In retrospect Laing did me a favour by rejecting my wish for therapeutic engagement. He chose to remain aloof from me, which helped me to embark on the painful process of shedding my idealisations of him, and of learning to stand my own ground.

Perhaps the final treat was to let me know I still mattered, even if he had to fudge a story about an "anti-therapeutic" encounter.