



From Findhorn to Meditation Mount:

An Interview With Roger and Katherine Collis

by Sharon Hall

Meditation Mount overlooks the paradise that is the Ojai Valley. From its eagle's perch on a hill at the far east end, one can gaze on groves of orange trees and the ragged peaks of surrounding mountains. A pair of hawks rode the thermals on the day I visited; the glorious views and peaceful setting were a comfort to my mind. It is easy to see why the founder, Florence Garrigue, chose this spot for her grand vision. A follower of the teachings of Roberto Assagioli* and the Arcane Society, Florence was one of many in the tradition of Light Workers and Theosophists who saw group meditation as a vehicle for helping the world.

The overall goals of Meditation Mount in Ojai, California have stayed true to their origins. And, with the arrival of the new Mount directors in 2009, it is as if a new, revitalizing energy flows through the property. Under the inspired leadership of Roger and Katherine Collis, and their Board of Directors, the Mount is undergoing a transformation. I had the opportunity to speak with the couple before they left for a visit to Scotland. We sat on the back deck enjoying the spectacular views from their temporary home on the Mount, in bright April sunshine. Recent rains had brought out the flowers; the air hummed with life. They lived here before, and their warmth and enthusiasm for the Mount is evident. I wanted to know more about how they had ended up back in Ojai—and Meditation Mount—30 years later. Roger had directed some of the early programs here; their youngest was born in Ojai. I was curious about the years in between, particularly the Findhorn years, and how the couple had first gotten together. Katherine was born and raised in Santa Barbara. Her parents were followers of Krishnamurti, who lived in Ojai. She attended his first school in England, Brockwood Park. Roger was born in England and was attending the Rudolph Steiner school, Emerson College. When he was 18, Katherine, 16, they met when she toured Emerson as a prospective student; Roger was on the touring committee. The rest, as they say, is history. The young couple were married at Findhorn and spent the next 3 years there with founders Peter and Eileen Caddy, and Dorothy Maclean. What they learned and experienced still informs and guides much of their philosophy; the emphasis on community, on group experiences, and on spiritual connection to the natural world.

SH: You were at Findhorn the same time as the Caddys and Dorothy Maclean. What was it like to be part of that experience?

R: We were very close to all three. At Findhorn, you had the human interaction, the community, and the sense of embodiment; you had the relationship to Nature, to the soul of this world—and to the

non-physical aspects of this world as well. Then the relationship to the sacred, the God within, or whatever one calls that place inside oneself. So you had the sacred, humanity and Nature. That was the three-legged stool Findhorn rested upon.

K: We had yogis and Scottish ministers, atheists, and Buddhists... but, the practice was to go into the silence. In that silence was this essential place that exists in all traditions. Things just flowed from that place.

R: It under-girded all the work at Findhorn; the gardening, the arts, the educational programs...this idea of something far deeper trying to express itself, and also express through the creativity of each person.



Roger and Katherine with Eugene Friesen at his March concert at Meditation Mount.

According to Katherine and Roger, it was the communal experience, the sense of inter-connectivity that was so important. Also, that for a community to be strong required individuals to be strong and centered. "That is one thing Findhorn was able to teach in those early times", Roger noted. What the couple took with them to the Mount is the sense of a special place, "Where there can be a focus on what's emerging; what a new consciousness might look like".

SH: It's exciting for those of us who live in Ojai to feel the energy up here now. How is change manifesting, and what's your vision for the future on the Mount?

R: It's going to manifest in three ways; one is via innovative educational programs, reflecting the fullness of the human spirit in the world. This in the arts, in education, in meditation—in taking spiritual principles and discovering ways they can be applied in the everyday world. We're not spiritual beings in a physical world; we are spiritual beings in a spiritual world. Everything is spiritual; we have to take responsibility for that and have the self-awareness, and a sense of connection and community that allows us to share this fully.

K: We started last year to test the waters. It's been a process of working closely with the board, other members, and with the community. We've interviewed people locally; we did a strategic plan. Through this process we've come up with 6 different areas that seem to be pretty clearly focused and we've been experimenting with the programs.*

SH: Like the Ojai Economic Forum in September. I remember everyone sort of woke up and said, "That's happening at Meditation Mount?"

R: Yes. We've had to deal with images of the Mount as it being exclusive, inhospitable, somewhat insular... We're trying to open it up, create consistency in terms of programs, make the Mount a

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(Meditation continued from page 15) member of the community, so people can feel a sense of being welcomed, participate, suggest programs. We're also looking for better ways to be good stewards of the land. We want to show how good husbandry, care, love of the land is an element of the spiritual work. The Mount has not historically done that. It's seen itself as doing meditation, but what we're trying to say is that meditation also comes through action.

K: And, that meditation inspires action.

SH: There's a flow in and out.

R: Yes, and that flow is critical to the Mount now and to its future. The notion that this is a sacred place has not been there in some ways. It's been conceived of as a place for distribution—of energy and of blessings. That's what the full moon meditations are about; the Mount as a point of light and love, generativity and power. What we want to understand is, how we can be generative in daily life; how can the atmosphere here can be generative, and how can we invite spirit in to be a partner with us. What we want to do is give a voice to these deeper, spiritual components that are there, and do it in such a way that has some intellectual rigor to it, some discernment.

Katherine's approach to the work is based on the Principles that support all work on the Mount: group endeavor, spiritual approach, essential divinity, goodwill, right human relations, and unanimity. These principles can be found carved into the

rocks lining the walkway to the Viewing Point that overlooks the Ojai Valley. They are also in process of forming the educational programs based upon 6 tracks, which already serve to guide the programs offered: the Art and Science of Meditation, Principles and Practices of Group Work, Applied Ageless Wisdom, Integrating Seasons and Cycles of Life, Seeding Cultures of Peace, and Transforming Global Systems.

K: To me, all of this expresses itself through very specific tracts of programs. We're looking at developing our website into a global portal. So our mission can really be of service. It answers the question, what is meditation; what are the types of meditation. We already know the health benefits from the medical community; we know the benefits from the perspective of creativity, and human capacities. We're also looking at the practices and principles of healthy group work, and of community building. That's part of the mission; group endeavor, right human relationships and creative group meditations. Historically, the Mount has focused on group meditation.

SH: What about the idea of the Mount as a kind of "think tank"?

R: I think the idea of a think tank is what we've been playing with since we've been here. In a think tank, you incubate new ideas, things emerge, projects...some could be based here, some could have application in the world. The Mount is an incubator of innovation and creativity. We just want

to do it more mindfully so people can join with us in that incubation process.

SH: Tell me about some of the teachers and programs now being offered.

K: Last night, we had a number of people here as part of a series with Ed Bastian, who is a wonderful teacher. He works with different spiritual teachers from different traditions. They sit together in their practices, and go into their contemplative traditions. Most of these practices are not ones people know about. They've been on the side of the mainstream religious beliefs and practices.

R: In May, we're doing a program called, "Death, the Great Adventure"; about the notions around death and dying.

K: It's part of "Understanding the Seasons and Cycles of Life", one of the 6 educational tracts.

In Fall, we're doing an aging conference, a new forum on aging, and also probably a follow-up to the economic forum.

R: In terms of teachers...David Spangler has been here 3 times. He's one of our core faculty. Because he was co-director at Findhorn, he has a background in community and group work, but he also has his own spiritual experience and research that he's been doing. He's kept true to his work since 1971, when we first met him.

K: He calls it, "Incarnational Spirituality."

It's about expanding our notion of the self; that the experience of being human has very particular gifts and qualities that are a part of the sacred.

R: He's also a friend. We draw on people that we know. Like Jean Shinoda Bolen. She's a friend, and very supportive of what we're doing, and would be part of our advisory group. Once we've pulled together our educational thrust, we will create an advisory committee, council or whatever we call it, to advise us informally, but these people will also become core faculty around which we can build new programs.

K: We can't do all this ourselves; a lot of it is collaboration.

SH: That's the great thing about it—that you want to do it that way; it's exciting, and it's probably the only way it will really work.

R: It's all about recognizing our inter-dependency; how we need to help each other, and groups need to help each other. It's a co-incarnation; otherwise, we wouldn't all be here together.

K: And then there's the financial challenges a lot of organizations are now facing.

In the past, Meditation Mount was established as a distribution center; it was a publishing house. That's what it was established to be, and that's what the original founders intended. Money was provided for that purpose in the form of endowments. Now, the Mount has to learn how to be self-sufficient—which is a blessing and, as Roger says, "Gives us a chance to build our muscles". Locals have a chance to give back through the "Friends of the Mount" program, those who come to walk the land, be quiet, and feel replenished.

K: When we were here back in the 70's, the main building had type-setting and mimeograph machines. The Mount produced booklets on the writings of Roberto Assagioli,* about spiritual psychology.

But, the situation is pushing all of us into collaboration. It's a good thing. We're looking at funding strategies for the educational programs; the website, and the greening of the Mount—support for the land, and for sustainable practices. We need funding for all that.

R: The land support is also for new environmental technologies, so we can

transition away from fossil fuel, etc. And, to show how that's done—so that we can be a demonstration site in all ways.

K: We want it to be an inspirational center, a demonstration center. But all of that is about helping people feel that the Mount is theirs, that the Mount belongs to a community of people.

SH: And how's your board doing with all the changes?

R: Very positive. They're excited, and supportive. In many cases, they are heading up committees to make it so.

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Fund-raising, financial stewardship—the board is engaged and taking responsibility.

Roger, as his wife puts it, is good at fund-raising, among other things. He likes to help people come together and make things happen. Not only in the realm of fund-raising and entrepreneurship, but as a governor-appointed and state official. In this capacity, Roger was involved with sustainability issues and the clean-up of nuclear waste; he helped move forward the verification process for clean-up of a contaminated site in Hanford, Washington, where plutonium and other toxic materials had been dumped from the Manhattan Project. The couple also lived in China; they ran a non-profit, and introduced new ideas—economic and new age-- to the Chinese. "I began to forge relationships with people in Chinese institutes; I made friends with people in their equivalent of state security agencies.... I was there just before Tiananmen Square." It is obvious, and refreshing, to learn they didn't just jump from Findhorn to the rarified air of Meditation Mount with little or no experience of the "real world;" these are people who walk their talk.

R: What I do is that I have a sense of something that needs to be done. It's a sense of potentiality, that's not being actualized. I worked with nuclear issues

and money, because I felt there wasn't enough going there. I also worked in China...We had a non-profit for several years; we did work in China, Russia, the Ukraine, South Africa. We're not what I would call people who withdraw from the world. Although I teach meditation, and I lead meditations, I actually don't consider myself a real meditator in the way that many people are. But, I admire their discipline.

SH: Well, you had both been in that stream. It sounds like you had gone into that stream very young, then into the world and now, you're coming back—which is a wonderful journey because you both have so much to bring. Our magazine goes all over Southern California; what should people know about Meditation Mount?

R: We'd like your readers to know they are welcome to come here—we're open 10am to sunset.

And, to get on the website—there will be a list of programs and other information. And, to get on our mailing list. We send out email blasts a couple times a month, so it's important to subscribe to that list. We also rent out the facilities here; we rent it out for other groups, weddings, ceremonies, memorials--we have people from all over who use our facility. As long as it fits with our mission, we can rent it out.

K: Let them know we have our weekly and monthly programs, but also our forums—like the Economic Forum, and the Forum on Aging.

SH: How about younger people? Are they getting involved?

R: Many spiritual organizations are going through a transformation and for some, it's difficult. It doesn't mean they need to give up their mission or the vision, but they need to understand the zeitgeist, the spirit of the time. Young people understand this zeitgeist; these organizations need to speak to that understanding. We have had young people up here, but the footprint is somewhat limited in what we can do. The Ojai Youth Foundation came up and helped with the garden last year.

K: We do get a lot of young people out on the Point. I ran into 3 guys in their early 20's recently. They told me they come up here all the time. That this is the place where they come and work things out.

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R: Actually, that is important; it's the place that offers sanctuary.

K: And, room. A place for them to discover, listen, integrate.

R: I talked to a woman recently. She said that when she was going through her divorce, this is where she came. Another person's mother was dying and this is where she came, everyday.

K: That's what the intention is—to create that sacred space.

R: If the safety factor is there; the hospitality, the graciousness; and people get in touch with their own self, I think that's powerful. If we can do that and maintain freedom—that's what we want. If you don't have the sense of freedom to explore and play and celebrate, then you don't really have it.

K: All the founders and everyone whose followed have recognized that this is what this land is for, and treated it that way, and have done everything they can to maintain the purity of the space.

SH: That's a good place to end; that pretty much says it all. Thank you both.



Katherine Collis was born and raised in Santa Barbara, California. She is a teacher, counselor, retreat leader and group facilitator, involved in the field of spiritual education for over 35 years. Her professional background includes gerontology, human development, therapeutic yoga, and meditation instruction. With husband Roger, she co-directs Meditation Mount, and is at work on the development of the educational programs. They are committed to honoring the spirit in our world, conveying a positive and hopeful vision of humanity's future, and cultivating a love for the earth and the sanctity of life.

Roger Collis was born and educated in the United Kingdom. He has over 35 years' experience working in the non-profit, government, community and private sectors with a focus on Creating Sustainable Futures. Prior to moving to Meditation Mount he consulted with environmental technology start-ups, and on behalf of humanitarian initiatives. He spent many years involved in high level, nuclear waste clean-up. Roger and Katherine both lived and were married at the Findhorn Community in Scotland, where Roger is a Trustee. He is passionate about bridging the spiritual life to taking action in the world, integrating the call of the soul within each individual to the call and need of the world soul. He is currently Executive Director of Meditation Mount.

For more information on activities and events in Ojai at Meditation Mount, or to get involved, please visit the website: www.meditationmount.org

**Roberto Assagioli was born in Venice in 1888. In 1910 Assagioli, the young medical student, introduced the important discoveries of Sigmund Freud to his professors at Florence. He is best known for his theory of psycho-spiritual psychology known as psychosynthesis.*