Praise for *Talking Back to Dr. Phil*...

“At last someone is taking on Dr. Phil with good sense and great humor. Life isn’t a sixty-minute show where people just come in for the laying on of hands. Life is about working it all out with family, community, and love. Good for Mr. Bedrick to decide to pull off the gloves and have an emotional slugfest with an over-the-high-school bully. *Talking Back to Dr. Phil* is a must read. But not at dinnertime...you’ll be laughing too hard to eat.”

—NIKKI GIOVANNI, Poet, Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech University, seven-time NAACP Image Award recipient

“David Bedrick understands that real change or transformation requires challenging accepted dogma and then approaching problems with compassion and curiosity. He is a great advocate for stopping the madness of body hatred and dieting.”

—JANE R. HIRSCHMANN and CAROL H. MUNTER, Authors of *Overcoming Overeating* and *When Women Stop Hating Their Bodies*

Praise for *Revisioning Activism*...

“Teacher, counselor, and attorney David Bedrick is the ideal guide to lead us through new doors of activism. His diverse background allows him to freely pull together issues such as shame and conflict in relationships, and the social sufferings of racism and sexism, all the time urging us to see and create the world anew. His new book, *Revisioning Activism*, helps us critically think and feel through a world in need of individual and social change, bringing depth, brilliant insights, and new strategies to heal ourselves and the world around us.”

—ARNOLD MINDELL, Ph.D., Author of *The Deep Democracy of Open Forums* and *Sitting in the Fire*
“Bedrick is a 21st century healer who acknowledges and honors the often epic struggle shared by individuals and groups who triumph over trauma. His theoretical framework is only one significant aspect of the skill and wisdom with which he addresses some of the most central issues of contemporary times. He deploys a psychology of transition and transformation for its potential ability to help individuals, organizations, and even nations navigate the shifting terrain of our changing times.”

—ABERJHANI, Poet, historian, and co-author of Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance and author of The River of Winged Dreams

“As one who has journeyed eastward, marched with MLK, studied and taught psychology and theology, I deeply appreciate Revisioning Activism’s contribution in service of sanity, justice, love, and mercy. Bedrick’s clarity and heartfulness deepen and enrich. He is a true treasure in our midst.”

—HERBERT D. LONG, Th.D., Dipl. PW, Former dean and Francis Greenwood Peabody lecturer, Harvard University Divinity School, and adjunct faculty member, Marylhurst University

“We are living in precarious times that often leave us holding our breath and wondering when the other shoe will drop. Covering a broad range of topics and social issues while delivering a fresh perspective, Bedrick has produced a powerful, thought-provoking work. His essays are filled with valuable insights that will enlighten, inspire, and challenge you on multiple levels. It’s a gift of awareness, courage, and hope that you will savor and turn to time and again.”

—MARY CANTY MERRILL, Ph.D., Author and editor of Why Black Lives Matter (Too), President & COO, Merrill Consulting Associates, LLC

“I’m so glad David Bedrick wrote this book. In the vein of James Hillman’s We’ve Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World’s Getting Worse, Bedrick’s insightful, challenging, and brilliant collection of essays in Revisioning Activism is an even more powerful clarion call to see individual suffering through a social lens. With unflinching courage, Bedrick looks at tough issues—sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia—and doesn’t just challenge us to see how society and psyche are intertwined, but provides solutions. Throughout the book, he provides stories, examples, and insights into what can be done. This is something that activism all too often misses. In this way, Bedrick truly revises activism. He doesn’t only call for a better world; he gives us a bridge to get there, offering us powerful new ways of thinking and doing to make the world he’s envisioning.”

—JULIE DIAMOND, Ph.D., Organizational consultant, coach, and author of Power: A User’s Guide

“Revisioning Activism is a rare read that reveals the essential connections between individual psychology, social history, and societal marginalization. These essays provide a needed education as to how marginalized groups are targets for projection and systemic annihilation, and compromise everyone’s mental health. Since his first book, Talking Back to Dr. Phil, Bedrick continues to speak to the societal obsession with “normalization” and how this misses the uniqueness of who we are, dampens creativity, and limits our collective growth. Bedrick’s passion is palpable, his personal stories compelling, as he gives voice to an activist-oriented psychology that brings together personal work with world work.”

—DAWN MENKEN, Ph.D., Psychotherapist and author of Speak Out! and Raising Parents, Raising Kids
“Revisioning Activism takes us into uncharted territories and breaks through the classical boundaries of politics, health, spirituality, and social divides, with an incisive underlying and unifying vision of these disturbances making us more whole. His love for language and his courage to call out his truth makes this book a great and stimulating read.”
—MAX SCHUPBACH, Ph.D., President of Maxfxx and the Deep Democracy Institute

“David Bedrick has a refreshing and often underappreciated understanding of what it takes to achieve greater success with weight loss and healthier living. Most people know that to be healthier, they need to improve their diet and increase their exercise; but sometimes that is an impossible task. Bedrick understands this and realizes it is more about the psychology of weight loss and what drives the individual person to eat what they eat, and how to uncover those deeper meanings. His years of experience and passion for the topic will certainly yield incredible results.”
—ADAM PUTSCHOEGL, M.D., Fellow, Pediatric Cardiology, Mayo Clinic

“Revisioning Activism offers a radical take on common personal and societal problems that invites us to illuminate our private thoughts and feelings as well as the social context in which these problems arise. Covering topics as diverse as racism, body image, and forgiveness, this book will challenge your belief systems, open your eyes to new perspectives, and bring depth and heart to any process of change.”
—GAIL BRENNER, Ph.D., Author of The End of Self-Help: Discovering Peace and Happiness Right at the Heart of Your Messy, Scary, Brilliant Life

“Bedrick’s compassion and understanding of the human condition brings me back to his teachings time and time again. Whether discussing gender, race, body image, or sexual inequality, he speaks to the heart of the matter and impresses upon us the strength of overcoming our own inner ‘Goliath.’ Rather than running from our fear, frailties, and so-called flaws, Bedrick empowers us to find the wisdom in our wounds and use it to our advantage. David Bedrick is a powerful, humble, and astute teacher. I highly recommend this book!”
—CRYSTAL ANDRUS MORISSETTE, Founder of the S.W.A.T. Institute and author of The Emotional Edge

“From collective social justice to the psychological shadow carried in each of us, Bedrick makes a convincing case for a new sort of activism. Urging critical thinking, less moral judgment toward others, and much more inclusivity, he offers provocative ideas, well-told stories, intelligent and heartfelt observations about the human condition, along with plenty of suggestions for how to get started. A wake-up call for therapists, counselors, and psychologists, as well as a primer for anyone who cares about making a real difference—beginning first with themselves. This is an important book.”
—MELANIE HARTH, Ph.D., Psychotherapist and “Living From Happiness” public radio host
REVISIONING ACTIVISM

Bringing Depth, Dialogue, and Diversity to Individual and Social Change

Essays By
David Bedrick, J.D.
"We are who we are because somebody loved us.
To be is to be loved."

—Cornel West & BMWMB, Never Forget: A Journey of Revelations
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Acknowledgments

I must begin by acknowledging the true companionship Lisa Blair, my partner, marital and otherwise, brings to me each and every day. Her tender heart and tireless creative spirit gift me with an ever-present spirit of deep belief in myself, including my writing. She has read, edited, and formatted, countless times, each of the essays in this book, and dialogued with me about the ideas until they arrived in the state you, the reader, find here. I grew up in a rather brutal world; Lisa teaches me, every day, that life can be different. It’s been thirteen years—I am slowly learning.

My body and soul were brought into a humble consciousness, about who I was as a white man and as a Jew, by four black elders. First, Maya Angelou’s voice, grown in the years of silence following her childhood rape, was perhaps the first true voice I ever heard. So that is what a human being is capable of, I thought. I too want to follow the path of my own humanity. Second, the dark intelligence of Etheridge Knight’s poetic presence nourished me in his Boston apartment, affirming in my Semitic features and the rhythm in my rendering of his poems, the color in my body and soul. Etheridge taught me that desperation was part of the human condition; he taught me not to be ashamed of being a “cracked vessel.” Third, James Baldwin’s eyes seared through America’s façade while still
loving her. I committed to keeping track of America’s blind innocence since reading the letter he wrote to his nephew over 25 years ago. Baldwin’s father teased young James about his bulging eyes, leading James to lie with coins on his eyes, hoping they would recede. Thank G-d those eyes accepted their calling and not his father’s jealousy. Finally, scholar, activist, and writer June Jordan showed me to the door of the essay. Jordan’s social brilliance and lyrical power keeps reminding me of the soaring possibility of voice and education through writing.

A patience that I am still learning to appreciate was awakened in me by the tremendous spiritual and radical activist vision of Meridel Le Sueur. In 1986 (she was 86 years of age), after hearing her poetry reading, I stepped toward the stage wanting to meet her. She was in the midst of a conversation some feet away when she saw me. She walked over to me, put her arms around me. Unexpected sobs emerged. “Are you still writing?” I asked her, knowing that she published one of the first feminist novels, The Girl, in 1930. “Yes, more than ever.” “Why more than ever?” Her truth entered my being: “I finally know what I want to say.”

In 1992, Arnold Mindell heard my childhood story—really heard it. He took me on as his student and has minded my path and well-being for the last 24 years. To think I have been eldered by his love and psycho-spiritual genius is a privilege that I am still shy to admit having in my life. Arny’s process-oriented psychology flows through everything I have written here.

Growing up with a father too often violent, and a mother ill-equipped to respond, was not the sort of gift I desired. But it is the one I got. That childhood, with years of alchemical cooking, awakened a desire for love and justice borne of that condition. My parents also left me with a kind of inheritance, a deep hope that I would have what they did not. Though their visions were more material than the one that called to me, I know that those visions were informed by the same love that holds every marvelous creation. They are both long gone from this earth, but we still talk often. Their spirits accompany me on my path, making it possible for me to have penned my second book.

In the last two years, my insight about diversity, humanity, and the human heart has been shepherded by Reverend India Elaine Garnett, a woman of grace-full intelligence, worthy of high respect. Thank you, dear friend, for accompanying me with your ever-loving presence.

Perhaps my greatest understanding and compassion has flowed under the tutelage, and urgent needs, of my students and clients, who bring to me their greatest hopes and gifts as well as the truth of their suffering. They have trained my heart and mind, especially those whose difficulties were less amenable to change—they deepened the ground of my being in their life and death.

And how can I acknowledge all that cares for me, without acknowledging the music and poetry that escorts me into states of being beyond words? John Coltrane, T. S. Eliot, Antonio Machado, Rainer Maria Rilke, Joy Harjo, William Butler Yeats, Chicago Mass Choir, Marvin Gaye, The Allman Brothers, Meg Christian and Cris Williamson, Patti LaBelle, and innumerable others. Music and poetry reliably bring the rain when my soul is parched from working too hard and becoming too rigid in my endeavors and ambitions.

Finally, so much is due to a worldwide community of learners who follow a course of individual depth and social awareness. My days are often softened, held, stretched, or engaged in the fires of conflict in ways that remind me of my need for others—that my wholeness is not only an inner project (despite my powerful introversion).
In a sense, I was born an activist. Some of my earliest memories are of moments when I spoke truth to power. But my activism has developed along an unusual trajectory. It’s an activism born more of the mind and heart than of marching feet. An activism expressed not by a megaphone or signs but through teaching, writing, and facilitating dialogue. An activism that embraces our individual and collective shadows rather than oppressing them or fighting against them. A revisioned activism.

During the past three years, I have developed this revisioned activism through teaching, working with individuals and groups, community building on social media, and writing essays and blog posts for Psychology Today, The Huffington Post, and other publications. I see all these venues as opportunities for effecting change. Many of the essays in this book were previously published in these venues.

These essays critique the failure of popular psychology to learn from marginalized people and from the parts of our psyches that are marginalized. They also critique American society’s relative denial of the suffering caused by racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, sexism, and other -isms. They are meant to provoke dialogue.

This Introduction is longer than most, but for a reason. It serves
think about the impact of money—its deeper meaning, the way we let it signify the worth of other humans, and the background societal values that drove my father deeper into fiscal anxiety.

When I was 12, my mother, with my fervent support, left my father for six months. Perhaps encouraging her escape was an inappropriate role for a 12-year-old boy. But the heart of that boy trying to save his mother is still with me, albeit with more conscious and wise strategies.

A few years prior, I began Hebrew school, where my fascination with justice and activism was activated. When the rabbi said that Jews are “chosen” people, I winced and hurt inside—I could only think of my best friend Jimmy, whom I dearly loved. Jimmy was Italian and Catholic—what about him? Was I better than him? Was he not chosen? As with my father, I began debating the rabbi. Perhaps he could have explained it to me in a way that bore witness to Jimmy’s worthiness and beauty, that honored my love for him, but he did not. I was asked to leave the school.

My parents enrolled me in a new Hebrew school. I was on high alert, ready to challenge the values I found offensive. When I did, I was asked to leave that school as well. Now, as a teacher of some 20 years, I have a particular affection for students who challenge me.

A Nascent Justice Consciousness

I was born in 1955, one year after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, in Brown v. Board of Education, that separate is not equal, and that racial segregation of public schools is unconstitutional. This momentous decision implies a psychological understanding that marginalization itself, even in the absence of any other overt form of discrimination, is injurious in the way it perpetuates the view that some folks are “less than” others.

By the time I was six years old, I was already trying to protect my mother from my father’s harsh words and temper. Of course, I didn’t have the power to do that, but it upset me more to see her victimized than to absorb his blows myself. I knew that something was wrong with him, and even as a young child I took to debating with him about why he behaved so brutishly.

I now understand those early fights as the awakening of my sense of justice. I saw a grown man misuse his power against a woman and children (my brother and me). One of our chief flashpoints was money, which he constantly worried about. I began to think about the impact of money—its deeper meaning, the way we let it signify the worth of other humans, and the background societal values that drove my father deeper into fiscal anxiety.

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In 1969, when I was 14, my parents urged me to apply to Stuyvesant High School, a public school that accepts intellectually gifted students from all over New York City based on test scores. But it wasn’t Stuyvesant’s quality of education that made my parents so adamant—it was the fact that Brown v. Board of Education had resulted in bussing students across town as part of a solution to ending the segregation of schools. My parents fretted that I might get bussed to a “black school” or that many black students would now be bussed to my local high school. I fought bitterly with my parents over this issue, in part because their racist attitudes were so clear to me. It injured me to hear their words. I took it personally, the same way I took my father’s angry words and fists.
moments of healing I’ve ever experienced—and one I would never have expected. Schupbach had linked social reality to personal reality and psychology.

Mindell, the founder of process-oriented psychology, nourished my soul with a psychology that was not based on normalization or preserving the status quo. With his Jungian orientation and connection to the wisdom of shamanism, physics, and Taoism, Mindell taught me that difficult emotional experiences, like depression, cannot be totally separated from the sufferer’s social context. A person with depression may, for example, be dropping down as an unconscious strategy for escaping an oppressive social context. From Mindell I also learned that psychospiritual interventions, such as recommending forgiveness, are not always appropriate for people who are working through an abuse story. Forgiveness can suppress the feelings that naturally arise in response to being harmed.

Mindell also spoke of “deep democracy” (a philosophy of inclusion that not only attended to each person, but also to the diversity of states and feelings people experience) and psychology’s role in furthering democracy in both inner and outer realms. He spoke of addicts, homeless people, and “mentally ill” people as shadows of the city who hold a unique consciousness for the rest of us. He showed me how physically ill people have unseen gifts, and he taught me how to unfold and reveal those gifts as a kind of healing.

Mindell has worked with diverse groups of people on social and global conflicts, from sexism and racism in America to the relationship between “First World” and “Third World” countries. He has brought, into the same room, Palestinians and Israeli soldiers, Jews and Germans, LGBTQ folks and fundamentalist Christians, and other opposing groups. When I began my apprenticeship with Mindell, I was 36 years old and my passion for learning soared. This is what I had always wanted to learn. Since then, Mindell’s teachings have informed my vision of psychology as an activist tool.
I am now on the faculty of the Process Work Institute in Portland, Oregon, and Warsaw, Poland, teaching process-oriented psychology and working with clients worldwide.

My father died when I was 40. Writing his eulogy, I reflected on how his intellectual gifts never flowered because he didn’t have the chance to go to college or otherwise further his education. Because I had always been interested in justice, democracy, and the Constitution, I vowed not to inhibit my own learning, and I applied to law school. I practiced law for 10 years, mostly doing pro bono work through a family law clinic for those who could not afford legal representation. While learning the law helped to develop my understanding, practicing law was unsatisfying to me, as I saw how ineffective the legal system is in influencing the hearts and minds of those who contribute to individual and social problems.

Women have also been my teachers. Many women over the years have opened my eyes to the conditions that women suffer under and through. Some are writers and artists, and many others are students and clients who shared their stories with me. At 46, I began an eight-year teaching tenure at the University of Phoenix. I taught courses in ethics, sociology, psychology, and law, but the class I loved most was critical thinking. I asked students to write a paper about a personal challenge, applying the teachings from class to more deeply understanding that challenge. I was surprised when several of the women students wrote about their struggles with weight loss. As a result, I began a research project where I interviewed 20 women, over time, to further understand the nature of their struggle with weight loss. It became clear to me that internalized sexism was a critical factor in their dislike of their bodies and their desire to change them. Even more importantly, I found that as women become more empowered, they often go off their diet, seeming to sabotage their efforts but in fact rejecting a program that was built, in part, on body shame and hatred. The essays in this book on diet and body image are informed by these women and the stories they shared with me.

My practice and study of psychology deepened in my fifties, when I became more and more distressed by the direction popular psychology was taking. That distress found a target when I began watching the Dr. Phil show, in which psychologist Dr. Phil McGraw practices what I call a “How’s-that-working-for-you psychology.” Too often he moralized and put people down rather than look for deeper psychological understanding. Further, he demonstrated virtually no understanding of sexism and racism when he worked with women and black folks. In response, I wrote my first book, Talking Back to Dr. Phil: Alternatives to Mainstream Psychology. Affirming the need for activism targeting popular psychology, Nikki Giovanni, seven-time winner of the NAACP Image Award, wrote, “At last someone is taking on Dr. Phil.” Carol Munter and Jane Hirschmann, authors of the groundbreaking Overcoming Overeating, wrote that I was a “great advocate for stopping the madness of body hatred and dieting.”

Activism has been defined as vigorous actions to achieve political and social goals. Activists confront institutions that treat people, animals, or the environment in biased or injurious ways. Iconic activist groups include Greenpeace and, more recently, Black Lives Matter, who aim to change both policy and public awareness. People march, protest, speak out, sit in, strike, lobby, petition, block whaling boats and bulldozers, rally against nuclear power plants, and highlight racial injustice. These and other actions are absolutely critical in promoting change in our world.

Perhaps these actions share a common heart—one that seeks to create a more just planet, where voices with smaller megaphones and audiences can be amplified and heard. In this way, activism is
core to a thriving democracy. Nevertheless, there are many opportunities for activism—venues, moments, strategies—that are also available to us, but that we tend to miss.

With this book, I aim to re-vision and expand traditional activism. I explore new insights and strategies that expand the tools available to us, and I hope to honor and empower those who are thus far unrecognized for their heroic work. This could include:

- A woman who is looking in the mirror, no longer blind to her beauty
- A Jewish man who is beginning to understand his family violence in the context of anti-Semitism
- A middle-class white man who is starting to recognize that addiction is not just a problem on the streets or in other families—but in himself, his own family, and the culture at large
- A black teenage girl who is beginning to see through the veil of denial and recognize racism’s stark cruelty
- A media that highlights the use of performance-enhancing drugs by one particular athlete as well as how we live in a performance-oriented culture that promotes coffee, Ritalin, and other stimulants from womb to tomb
- The millions of other people who are starting a dialogue with their family, friends, and social groups, hoping to build deeper relationships and a more loving community

It is time for professionals in the field of psychology—especially popular psychology—to take a critical look at our profession and its complicity in social distress. Mainstream psychology contributes to individual and social problems by normalizing and accommodating society’s status quo, by denying the value of our shadow sides, by encouraging us to project those shadows onto “others,” and by ignoring the effect of social injustice on the psyches of people of color and other marginalized groups.

Below I outline three domains into which I hope to expand the reach of activism, either by bringing awareness to insufficiently recognized areas of activism, or by calling for new strategies and venues of activism.

I. Inner Activism:
Activism Within the Individual Alone

Traditional definitions of activism do not include the moments when we, as individuals, sit privately with our own thoughts and beliefs. However, such moments can be ripe and powerful. Consider the following:

- A woman stands before her full-length mirror. Society’s objectification informs her vision, bringing body shame and body hatred to her experience of herself. Research indicates that she may literally see an image larger than her actual body. She decides, yet again, to go on a diet.
- A man faces a powerful depression each morning when his alarm wakes him. He puts on his clothes, a relatively happy face, and a functional-looking outfit for work, stuffing down his depression. He avoids examining his feelings, even though he feels a silent resentment and despair about his job and the way he is treated at his workplace.
- A woman goes to a party, has a glass of wine, and experiences a rare freedom to speak her mind. The next morning she berates herself, “Why did I talk so much? I’m so embarrassed.”
- A Jewish college student suffers from family pressure to make a success of himself. He feels anxious every day. His mantra becomes, “I have to get over my anxiety.”
- A black woman is corrected by her white manager at work. She gets irritated with her boss, but shortly after is even more upset with herself for feeling irritated. “I’m so paranoid,” she thinks. “My boss was just doing her job.”
We need a revisioned activism: an activism that recognizes moments when our thinking transforms, that broadens current activist efforts, and that opens our eyes to the individual suffering caused by social injustice.

The essays in this book support this thesis but do not further explain it. They are intended for general readers who are interested in personal growth, as well as therapists, psychologists, activists, and teachers and students of sociology and psychology. Topics are wide-ranging, but all of the essays challenge traditional activist assumptions, promoting a revisioned activist approach. The essays are grouped into the following four sections:

- Racism, Anti-Semitism, and Homophobia: Witnessing Social Justice
- Hunger, Self-Hatred, Failure, and Sexism: The Real Weight-Loss Story
- What’s Going On? Reflections on Current Events
- Beyond a Popular Psychology: Remembering the Shadow

Section I: Racism, Anti-Semitism, and Homophobia: Witnessing Social Justice

Traditional activism rightly raises a battle cry against xenophobia in all its manifestations: homophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, ableism, Islamophobia, and more. However, few psychology writers examine how mainstream ways of thinking sustain and defend these dynamics, how perpetrators are unconsciously motivated by a sense of their own powerlessness, or how marginalized people are among America’s greatest teachers of love and democracy.

Traditional activism focuses on what injustice looks like—what
Section II:
Hunger, Self-Hatred, Failure, and Sexism:
The Real Weight-Loss Story

Our country’s $60 billion diet industry preys on women who carry tremendous shame about their bodies, literally banking on their suffering and failure. Making matters worse, the solutions it offers work only 5 to 10 percent of the time, amplifying the self-hatred of dieters and turning their hope into one more reason to feel shame.

To talk about weight loss without talking about sexism and the suffering specific to women in our culture is just wrong. To talk about weight loss without talking about how much internalized body hatred women have is just wrong. To promote weight-loss programs and theories without talking about how many thin young girls are dieting is just wrong. To talk about the problems caused by obesity without talking about the problems caused by eating disorders is just wrong. To ignore the high failure rates of diets is to set women up to feel even worse about themselves.

Besides their inherent sexism, discussions and programs about weight loss rarely address the deeper reasons why people eat the way they do. People eat in ways that are physically unhealthy in order to meet valid needs—needs that are most often unconscious, waiting to be discovered. Addressing America’s obesity problem by criticizing people’s eating and exercising habits—without a deeper understanding of real human needs and the obstacles we face in meeting those needs—is hurtful, not helpful.

In my view, any weight-loss program that doesn’t leave a person feeling better about themselves, regardless of whether they do or don’t lose weight, is likely to do more long-term harm than good.

In this section, I bring these issues to the surface by citing research and sharing stories from my therapeutic practice working with women clients on their body image issues and weight-loss.
As activists, we must unearth our unconscious assumptions so we can approach these problems armed with more than new regulations, policies, and strategies for policing.

In this section, I expose the cultural meaning that the media neglected in its presentation of the fictions told by news anchor Brian Williams, the death of Phillip Seymour Hoffman by heroin overdose, the trial of George Zimmerman for killing Trayvon Martin, the mass shooting of 20 children in Newtown, and more.

As James Baldwin wrote more than a half-century ago, “[I]t is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.”

**Section IV: Beyond a Popular Psychology: Remembering the Shadow**

When did psychology become bumper stickers promoting the market values of mainstream success, which urge us to be more functional, energetic, smiling, cooperative, and secure—and less anxious, vulnerable, down, and depressed?

A psychology with no shadow, that fears the darkness and fights to keep us in the light, is an impotent psychology that cannot address society’s biggest problems, including war, domestic violence, addiction, self-hatred, racism, and terrorism. It is a psychology that cannot address the harm done when an individual lacks the inner and outer resources to follow the path of their own heart. It is a psychology that follows the path of “a whole century of normative psychology, an approach to mental health that has more to do with socialization than with well-being.”

Popular psychology has fallen victim to a craving for quick fixes—affirmations on refrigerator magnets, Internet memes, and shows like *Dr. Phil.* It fails to address our true life project—to be authentic efforts. These essays are meant to provoke critical thinking about sexism, to challenge the diet industry (which has mostly escaped scrutiny by activists), and to highlight a “love ethic” (in the words of MLK) that contrasts with the belief that criticism is a tool of sustainable change.

These essays are further designed to enlighten men, but especially women, to the social forces at work when they look in the mirror, step on a bathroom scale, and get dressed to meet the world—highlighting these as moments of activism.

In our workaholic American culture, we pride ourselves on remaining focused on our tasks and goals. But if significant world events don’t give us pause and inspire self-reflection, then this single-mindedness becomes a form of denial that our media is too often complicit in.

The media has the power to bring collective awareness to many serious problems, from school shootings to racially charged court trials to the tragedies of suicide and addiction. But as revisioned activists, we must train a critical eye on the culture at large and its complicity in these problems. The media tends to blame the individual and stereotype those with mental health diagnoses, fostering the naïve hope that the world’s problems are “out there,” divorced from our personal lives. Its rallying cry is more about getting us back to the mall than promoting deeper reflection.

As activists, we must unearth our unconscious assumptions so we can approach these problems armed with more than new regulations, policies, and strategies for policing.

In this section, I expose the cultural meaning that the media neglected in its presentation of the fictions told by news anchor Brian Williams, the death of Phillip Seymour Hoffman by heroin overdose, the trial of George Zimmerman for killing Trayvon Martin, the mass shooting of 20 children in Newtown, and more.

As James Baldwin wrote more than a half-century ago, “[I]t is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.”

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Popular psychology has fallen victim to a craving for quick fixes—affirmations on refrigerator magnets, Internet memes, and shows like *Dr. Phil.* It fails to address our true life project—to be authentic
human beings following our own authentic paths. Instead, it tries to help us be more “successful,” forgive faster, compromise more readily, anti-depress and anti-grieve, and try conventional weight-loss strategies to feel better about ourselves.

Indeed, psychology has abandoned our souls in its flight to the light, and this serves to keep our culture profoundly deprived of soul food—psychological intelligence, insight, and development.

In this section, I explore how forgiving too readily may invite future injury and suppress our true feelings; how striving for harmony may censor the words and feelings that would lead to more sustainable resolutions; how insisting on color blindness may invalidate the pain of those who don’t have the privilege of being treated as colorless; and how the values of productivity and success may reject the qualities of tenderness, sensitivity, and creativity.

With this book, I hope to take you, the reader, on a journey with me beneath the surface, to the place where our shadows live —our own shadows, and those of society. If we can stand still in that place long enough for our fear and aversion to subside, we can begin to listen to those shadows, listen to what they are asking from us. We might hear voices that disturb us, voices of our own diversity, impelling us to change our life course in ways that terrify and excite us to the core. We might realize we could become revisioned activists—and that in so becoming, we could change ourselves and the world.
Gurus, yogis, meditation masters, lamas—these are spiritual authorities for many New Age Americans who look to the East for wisdom. But while teachers from Gandhi to the Dalai Lama have shone fine Eastern light to illuminate our paths, this cultural turn to the East can inadvertently dismiss the spiritual wisdom of our own African-American elders—teachings rooted in our own soil, pain, and shadow.

These spiritual teachers are Fanny Lou Hamer and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who faced beating and death with voices compelled by love. They are John Coltrane, whose vision of individual freedom and collective expression manifested in some of America’s finest music, as well as Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, who brought soul to pain and misery. (Is there a finer thing for a spiritual tradition to do?)

They are Howard Thurman, who brilliantly guided the practice of a uniquely American Christianity, and Cornel West, whose intellect and spirit soar in pronouncement of a love-based ethic. And how could we leave out Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou, African-American women who have revealed the glory and redemption we need as individuals and as a nation. These teachers don’t turn water into wine; they turn tears into the blues. They don’t walk on water;
they create music that we float on. They don’t carry a staff and part the Red Sea, but they do honor to the Hebrew cry, “Let my people go.”

These elders, and countless others, have elucidated a spiritual wisdom that was born in the fires of America’s own alchemy, through a process of cooking the demons and injuries of injustice along with the spirit of love and perseverance into a unique brilliance. Their wisdom honors and redeems those who have bled for America’s soul.

To many, these individuals may not look like spiritual teachers—but not because they lack spiritual riches to offer. I remember wondering why I was listening to Buddhist chanting instead of John Coltrane’s “Love Supreme” during my morning meditation period. I remember several black elders teaching me how to make heated dialogue into a meditation on relationship instead of an inner practice of loving-kindness. I remember Dr. King waking me up to the fact that spirituality is also a public practice when I heard him say that “justice is what love looks like in public.” I recall Maya Angelou teaching me how to turn great suffering into powerful humanity, a practice I had previously sought in Eastern teachings. I recall poet Etheridge Knight singing to me of desperation, imprisonment, and freedom, lessons that Eastern spiritual teachers had taught me years before.

Of course, these black teachers don’t don robes, hold weekend workshops, or show up in the kind of classrooms or retreat centers that many associate with spiritual teaching. Most Americans would liken these elders to artists and activists more than spiritual teachers. And sitting at the feet of these elders challenges our fundamental paradigm of education, especially spiritual education. Nonetheless, their spiritual powers cannot be denied. They offer a way of living, loving, and dying in a world of darkness as well as light.

To be clear, I have no inherent objection to Eastern philosophies and spiritual disciplines. I have been a student of many fine minds and hearts, from Sharon Salzberg and Pema Chödrön to Bhante Gunaratana, Stephen Levine, and Jack Kornfield, teachers who helped bring Eastern traditions to the United States. But when these teachings are highlighted at the expense of teachings forged on the backs of those who have suffered under the weight of America’s shadow, an injustice is perpetrated. For the purpose of righting this injustice, I offer the following critique of some Eastern and New Age teachings in contrast to the relative value and power of African-American wisdom teachings for all Americans today.

First, some New Age and Eastern teachings foster practices that avoid the shadow. Practitioners often attempt to relieve pain and suffering rather than investigating its meaning; they seek bliss even when their path is taking them into their deeper feelings; they can be found blessing each other while remaining unconscious of how they patronize. I have witnessed groups of such practitioners being open-hearted toward streaming tears but not toward screaming ire. I have seen competition and jealousy treated as negatives to be rooted out instead of as fire and heat to deepen the knowledge of self and the bonds of community. At its worst, this kind of spirituality can become a form of denial, a flight toward spirit that denies the soul’s descent, risking the same fire that brought Icarus back to earth.

In contrast, much African-American teaching is rooted in shadow. Its elders have sat in the fires of brutality as well as in projections of inferiority, aggression, and deviance. I am reminded of an African-American man who attended a workshop on conflict resolution with some 300 participants from over 25 different countries. Many of us grew to admire his wisdom, personal power, and leadership capacity when he helped to resolve our most protracted tensions. He had a hard-earned ease with anger and aggression that most of us didn’t. One night he walked into our workshop hall pushing a mop and garbage pail and singing a song from slavery times. He said that in his garbage pail was all that we throw away—aspects of our sexuality, our greed, our anger, our desperation,
and more. “I eat this garbage,” he said. “I live on all that you throw away, and that’s what makes me strong, true, and a person you look to for keys on how to be alive.” His spirit had grown strong in the shadow of mainstream America’s compulsion to climb the ladder of success and higher states of consciousness, leaving behind the rags and bones of a true spirituality.

Second, practitioners of New Age and Eastern traditions often urge individuals to handle disturbing feelings like hurt, anger, insecurity, and impatience by looking inside themselves. Many use these same practices as a way of avoiding relationship difficulties and conflict. When the practitioner is angry with their partner, they may turn to their meditation cushion instead of learning to address the issues directly. When they have judgments about their families and communities, many practice letting go of these feelings rather than using the power and impulse of their judgments to speak out for change and healing.

In contrast, through music, protest, and the church’s call and response, African-American elders teach dialogue and the fine art of democracy. Like the conversation between voices and instruments in jazz music, this dialogue makes beauty and moral/spiritual development out of engaged interaction, even when it is heated.

Third, some practitioners of New Age spirituality promote the concept that we choose our reality, our emotions, and what comes into our lives. But this perspective can inadvertently deny the genuine victimization and collective responsibility for injustice perpetrated against groups—from blacks and women to Jews and gays—by suggesting that all responsibility lies with the individual’s consciousness and not with the collective unconscious. It is worth noting that this kind of denial is less likely to be promoted by people who are marginalized by mainstream culture, people who are more likely to be treated as members of a group rather than as individuals. A friend recently quoted an Eastern spiritual teacher as saying that working on our own individual consciousness is the most important thing we do. I responded that I had a slight allergy to spiritual ideas that highlight the consciousness of the individual over that of the collective.

In contrast, I am reminded of Emmett Till’s mother, who said in front of the open casket of her murdered son, “I’ve not a minute to waste; I will pursue justice for the rest of my life.” She practiced a spirituality aimed at awakening a whole culture and freeing their hearts and souls regardless of their personal choices or practices.

Finally, while many who turn to the East consider themselves to be progressive, their progressive attitudes often manifest in condescension, caretaking, and charity towards blacks and other marginalized groups. While they may be involved in working toward social justice, they don’t treat our African-American wise women and men with the same authority, respect, and reverence they do their Eastern spiritual teachers, whose feet they are more likely to sit at.

In contrast, some of our African-American teachers once sat at the feet of those who spoke for America’s Judeo-Christian heritage. I am reminded of the slave woman who, on her knees, prayed to God to forgive her Christian slave owner, who stood above her, believing he was spiritually superior. She prayed, “Oh Lord, bless my master. When he calls upon thee to damn his soul, do not hear him, do not hear him, but hear me—save him—make him know he is wicked, and he will pray for thee.” She who was on her knees was the teacher; he who stood above was in need of redemption. Is this not the kind of reversal as well as and spiritual/moral education Americans still need today?

As an ethnic Jew, I am aware of how African-Americans have enriched the story of Moses. Zora Neale Hurston’s novel Moses, Man of the Mountain presaged the Civil Rights Movement, and civil rights activists embodied the great prophet’s story of freedom. This poetic irony highlights the depth of a people who were often more spiritually developed while assuming a station of inferiority.
The poet Rainer Maria Rilke suggested, almost one hundred years ago, that people in the West suffer a kind of soullessness and have lost their spiritual way. As a result, their children may need to go far out into the East, “towards that same church which [they] forgot.” Rilke's words were prophetic—a whole generation did indeed go far to the East to find their “church” unconsciously turning a blind eye to their African-American elders.

Why look to the East? Why not sit at the feet of America’s African-American wisdom teachers? Let me suggest that reaching out to this tradition, especially as white folks, means bearing a certain pain and, yes, responsibility for a legacy of suffering. In this way, many of us don’t walk into this “church” with clean hands—a pain we need not face in the ashram or zendo. However, bearing this pain may be just the deepening we need.

The “color line,” in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, still demarcates social boundaries. And while many of us have joined our voices with those who call for social justice, this attitude doesn’t embody the same valuation as looking up to folks for spiritual wisdom and development.

James Baldwin wrote, “The black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar, and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.” It’s time to shake our foundations, root out our negative projections and stereotypes, and end the unconscious devaluation and patronization of America’s black elders. While much wisdom can be found in Eastern New Age traditions, there is a rich tradition of wisdom grown right here, paid for in blood and tears, and ready-made to speak to the souls and psyches of Americans today.
she was mean-spirited; in many ways, she was quite intelligent. However, a certain psychological intelligence was absent—the ability to realize that her framework was her experience as a wealthy white person.

She had the unearned privilege of never being disadvantaged by racial stereotypes. She had the privilege of not needing to listen to and feel the pain of black New Yorkers, many of whom have stories and perspectives that clearly wouldn’t match her own. She had the privilege of needing neither data nor experience to feel free to issue her definitive opinion.

In short, she drew on her unconscious privilege to conclude that racial prejudice was a thing of the past.

Is “color blindness” the key to being judged by the content of our character?

Many argue, “If color blindness was good enough for Martin Luther King, then it ought to be good enough for a society that still aspires to the movement’s goals of equality and fair treatment.”

Much of the argument for color blindness relies on a superficial reading of Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, when he said, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Based on this statement, some argue that Dr. King believed racism would be ended when Americans no longer saw race.

What allows many folks, especially white folks, to maintain this belief? I know of no data to support the notion that this kind of color blindness helps alleviate racial disparities or racial injustice. In my experience, many who espouse this view simply have no idea what it is like to live in a dark-skinned body. They have the unearned privilege of not having to think of themselves racially.

Dr. Beverly Tatum, former psychology professor and current president of Spellman College, used to regularly conduct an experiment with her psychology students. She asked them to complete the sentence, “I am ______.” She found that while students of color typically mentioned their racial identity, white students rarely mentioned being white. The same was true for gender; women were more likely to mention being female. She concluded that racial identity for white folks is not reflected back to them and thus remains somewhat unconscious.

In short, black folks simply don’t have the privilege of not seeing themselves as a color, and they know others will see them as such, whereas many white folks easily enjoy not seeing their own color. Trying to not see race before we are truly awake to racism’s ugly present and past assigns racism to our individual and collective shadow, rendering its harm more insidious because it hides in seeming good-heartedness and innocence.

To quote Dr. King, “Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.”

Is affirmative action contrary to Dr. King’s dream of not being judged by the color of our skin?

I recently dialogued with a white man who insisted that Dr. King was opposed to affirmative action. He was immune to my presentation of Dr. King’s views from my extensive reading on the issue. Instead, he said, “I choose to take Dr. King at his word; the man was quite articulate and capable of saying what he meant.” Again, he referred to Dr. King’s “Dream” speech. He continued, “It seems pretty clear that for members of any race to expect preferential treatment because of their race is unacceptable. It doesn’t matter how noble one’s motives. It’s wrong.”

What was wrong was his reading of Dr. King. In his 1964 book
If we are to enrich the national dialogue about race, if we are to make further progress toward Dr. King’s dream, our collective awareness of unconscious privilege must grow. Then we may find what Langston Hughes exhorted us to wake up to:

That Justice is a blind goddess
Is a thing to which we black are wise:
Her bandage hides two festering sores
That once perhaps were eyes.

Why We Can’t Wait, King wrote, “Whenever the issue of compensatory treatment for the Negro is raised, some of our friends recoil in horror. The Negro should be granted equality, they agree; but he should ask nothing more.”

Later, in 1967, he wrote, “A society that has done something special against the Negro for hundreds of years must now do something special for him.”

However, we must not stop there. Again we must ask: Why was it so easy for this white man, despite my argument about King’s actual words, to maintain his position? While I confess to not knowing this man’s mind and heart, many white folks I have dialogued with are unaware of the preferential treatment they receive—that they are the beneficiaries of the affirming actions of a racially biased society—while black folks are still the beneficiaries of disconfirming actions.

For example, when blacks apply for a job, they are less likely to get selected than whites (even if the applications are identical in every other way). White folks get “extra points,” a kind of affirmative action.

Black folks are more likely to get stopped and frisked than white folks, even when what they are carrying is identical. That’s a kind of affirming action for whites.

Black folks are up to three times more likely to get the death sentence than whites in similar cases. I could go on about differential school funding, bank lending practices, and more. The truth is that white folks, in general, receive perhaps less overt but quite real and potent benefits that black folks do not.

When a person swims in an ocean of relative affirmation, it is almost natural to be unconscious of the fact that their achievements, confidence, and successes are not only a result of their own capacity and efforts. Unconsciousness of these privileges makes it easy to conclude that a more overt policy of affirmative action is a form of preferential treatment to black folks instead of a leveling of the playing field.
Many fine essays and books have been written about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., detailing his impact on American life, law, and culture. But few focus on the American psyche—how we see, or don’t see, Dr. King. Consider these six ways Americans bear witness to Dr. King and his legacy, each involving conflicting points of view.

1. Hero or idol?

Many Americans view Dr. King as a hero, and it’s natural to admire heroes. However, when a hero becomes a projection—an object instead of a subject—they become idolized. We see only the best in these people; we believe our own failings make us less worthy than they are; and we deprive our heroes of their humanity, their pain, their loneliness, their need.

Like Dr. King, Mother Teresa was a hero to many, which is why a posthumously published book of her correspondence was so startling. It revealed that for the last almost fifty years of her life she felt no presence of God. David Van Biema wrote in *Time Magazine*: “*Come Be My Light* is that rare thing, a posthumous autobiography that could cause a wholesale reconsideration of a major public
their altered state. If you can, enjoy it. You may discover a relationship that has always been there waiting for you—one you may not want to miss.

Notes

Introduction


9) Ibid.
12) In conversation with Jewish psychologists Dawn Menken, Ph.D., author of *Raising Parents, Raising Kids: Hands-on Wisdom for the Next Generation*, and Gary Reiss, Ph.D., author of *Beyond War and Peace in the Arab Israeli Conflict*.
14) Ibid.

Section I
Racism, Anti-Semitism, and Homophobia:
Witnessing Social Justice

1. The American Soul: Honoring Our Black Elders

2. MLK Today: Taking the Blinders off White Privilege


3. Dreaming King’s Dream Forward: Reflections on America’s Psyche


3) Ibid, 117.


4. What’s the Matter with “All Lives Matter”?  

5. America’s Deadly Denial of Racism  

7. The Holocaust and the Inner Ghetto: The Psychology of Jewish Suffering  


17) Ibid.

15. The Courage to Find Soul: A Call for More “Psyche” in Psychology


Herek, Gregory M. “Facts About Homosexuality and Mental Health.”


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**About the Author**

David Bedrick, J.D., Dipl. PW, is a speaker, teacher, and attorney and author of the acclaimed *Talking Back to Dr. Phil: Alternatives to Mainstream Psychology*. He spent eight years on the faculty of the University of Phoenix and has taught for the U.S. Navy, 3M, psychological associations, and small groups. He has received notable awards for teaching, employee development, and legal service to the community.

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David currently maintains an international private practice as a counselor for individuals, couples, and groups and works via Skype, phone, or in person in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He speaks and teaches on topics ranging from shame, night time dreams, weight loss and body image, diversity and social injustice, and alternatives to popular psychology and is a blogger for *Psychology Today* and *The Huffington Post*. 