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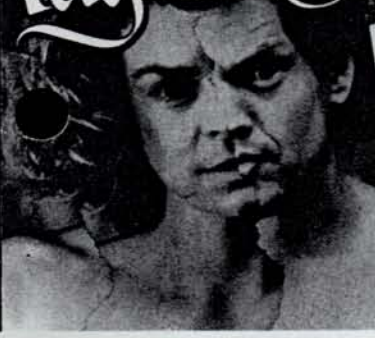
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# *A BRIEF LOOK AT JOHN BRADSHAW*

*by Tal Brooke*

John Bradshaw is by now the preeminent psychological counselor to the masses on American television. He is sixty, though looks a decade younger, and at only 5' 9," is significantly more diminutive than he appears on television. Over the past decade Bradshaw has become something of a national oracle in offering solutions to the host of psychological ills peculiar to our time—ills that seem to be sprouting like weeds in the national psyche, especially among baby boomers.

Bradshaw's lectures involve stunning self-disclosures amidst rapid-fire psychobabble—quick psychological fix-its that hang in a dense smog of seductive insights punctuated by esoteric psychological concepts that he has appropriated from various schools of psychology ranging from Jung to Eric Berne. He borrows at will, mixing schools of psychology with an intuitive use of the pallet as he creates his master work.

Television audiences watch Bradshaw lecture large auditoriums filled with awestruck listeners who sit in reverent silence, mesmerized by his pronouncements. It has become a movement, a psychological creed, almost a faith. It is the creed of the wounded victim. Parents and the old order, with its Christian worldview, are made the perpetrators of the psychological horrors of our time. Deliverance for the wounded victim comes through discovering and freeing the inner-child who is trapped deep within by the traumatic wounds that have come from family and society. John Bradshaw has the key to deliverance.

What John Bradshaw offers appears new on the American landscape, but is more accurately a hybrid. Since the 1960's, marathon encounter sessions at Big Sur's Esalen Institute have anticipated the present psychological amalgam. Pilgrims seeking inner transformation would journey to Esalen to join closed groups that for days on end would *really-get-real* by unmasking all their inner secrets, peeling back layers like an onion, and vaulting over taboo inner

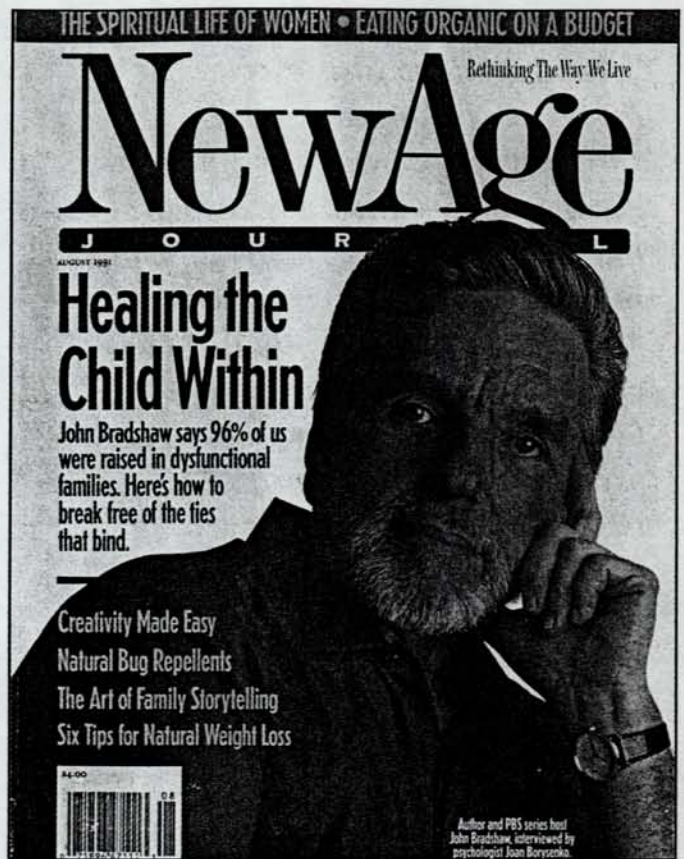
boundaries in the process. (Unlike Bradshaw's mainstream appeal, Esalen catered to the fractional upper percentile of cognoscenti—and was energized by such architects of America's new age thought as George Leonard and Michael Murphy as well as pioneers in psychology such as Fritz Perls, Abraham Maslow, and Eric Berne).

Beyond his televised lectures for mass audiences, John Bradshaw conducts workshops—with his own spin on earlier encounter groups—for hundreds, even thousands of participants. These are more in-depth and require audience participation as they are led by Bradshaw in person.

Declaring ninety-six percent of Americans as coming from dysfunctional families, Bradshaw's workshops take participants on emotion-laden journeys within to encounter who they really are, their "inner child." First they have to deal with their "wounded inner child." Then they will encounter their "wonder child" deeper still and hiding behind the hurts and scars within. Like Eric Berne, founder of the once popular Transactional Analysis, Bradshaw has decided that all people are tripartite within: the pearl in the oyster is the wonder child. But finding him requires a journey, and journeys incur expenses.

To "embrace the darkness" of their past, Bradshaw's workshop audience are led through exercises that he has termed "collective grief rituals." According to one participant, Mary Walton of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Feb. 17, 1991), tears were not uncommon. Hurts and betrayals are summoned and relived. Other rituals are enacted included meditating, clutching stuffed animals, and writing letters from the inner child to the parent about the abuse that took place or the needs that were never met. Then participants gather in small groups, and each person in turn receives "infant affirmations" of unconditional love and acceptance from other members of the group, along with pats and hugs.

The workshop ends with a "homecoming" meditation in which Bradshaw guides the



participants through a visualization of themselves as children leaving the abusive parenting of their fathers and mothers behind forever. "Leaving home means becoming your own parent," Bradshaw observes, "and becoming responsible for your own inner child. It means that you're not going to be a victim anymore. You're going to be a survivor moving toward empowerment. It's not that if you *leave* your family of origin you'll die, it's that if you *stay* you'll die."

Bradshaw is angry about this societal chain of victimization, especially the modern "dysfunctional family." He sometimes hisses into the microphone with righteous rage. If I were to typify his voice at such moments, I would characterize it as carrying an angry bristling effeminacy, an almost overripe "male sensitivity," propelled by this haranging anger. It is an anger from "deep inner wounds" that only true victims have earned the right to display on the hard slope of selfhood. Underneath all of it, however, Bradshaw has a mission.

*John Bradshaw is charismatic. His lectures to large audiences involve stunning self-disclosures amidst rapid-fire psychobabble—quick psychological fix-its that hang in a dense smog of seductive insights punctuated by esoteric psychological concepts that he has appropriated from Jung to Maslow. He borrows at-will mixing schools of psychology with an intuitive use of the pallet as he becomes creator of the master painting, (or perhaps the master school of psychology).*

role-model.

Living with Bradshaw up close is perhaps less awe-inspiring than being bedazzled by him from a distance. This is especially apt, from the son's viewpoint, if John Bradshaw has started to live with the kind of eccentric, extravagant self-indulgence seen in Hollywood or in the lives of such celebrity gurus as Rajneesh. For instance, after he bought back from his ex-wife the Georgian-style mansion in an elegant neighborhood of Houston, according to *Time*, Bradshaw embarked on wild spending sprees to redo it lavishly, from buying wizard figurines (his "inner child is fascinated by wizards"), Indian artifacts, and expensive antiques to wallpapering the master bedroom with purple wallpaper

and installing a king-sized sleigh-bed with a purple sari draped over the top. Bradshaw would explain this as the ecstatic expression of his inner "wonder child." But to his son, one would think this rationale resembles the emperor's new clothes—or what Mark Twain called flapdoodle. What will the inner wonder child do next, we might ask? Perhaps it means never having to say you're sorry to relatives and family. As film producer Zero Mostel said, in spelling out the Hollywood code of lavish living, "If ya got it, flaunt it."

In his televised lectures, John Bradshaw talks a lot about his own "dysfunctional upbringing" and broken home. And that gets audiences sympathetic and involved, passionately so. Many people these days can identify with the pain of a broken home. And indeed it is sad that John Bradshaw, by his report, had an inordinate amount of pain in childhood. Misfortune seems to fall on some unfairly. We cannot minimize the reality of his own sufferings. But others have suffered unfairly as well down the centuries, some even more than Bradshaw, including some of the great Christian saints.

After all, pain and suffering are part of being in a world estranged from God. There are heroic stories where pain has driven some lives to true salvation, while others went off

Sometimes Bradshaw uncloaks rare admissions of belief that make him more resemble a New Age shaman than a psychologist when he says, "there is a massive evolution of consciousness moving toward '**deep democracy.**' This is occurring at all levels of social interaction." (*Current Biography*) Such global-mystical statements parallel Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy*. And as always, we are left to wonder what Bradshaw really means by his words.

John Bradshaw has become the voice crying in the wilderness that millions of Americans in our time have chosen to heed. We will peer into his background for perspective.

## A Biographical Portrait

Now happily divorced, John Bradshaw was unhappily married from 1969 to 1989 to the former Nancy S. Isaacs, who had two children from a previous marriage. Together Bradshaw and Isaacs had a son, John Elliot Bradshaw Jr., who today, according to several sources, is a conservative evangelical Christian. Recently a college student at USC, John Elliot Bradshaw Jr. appears to be less than awed by his father's beliefs, lifestyle, or qualities as a

improvising their own paths of ultimate truth or stumbling down ravines, inwardly driven, angry, or ambitious. Pain has been used by any number down the centuries to justify their adversarial stance against God. As C.S. Lewis said, they put God in the Dock, on the witness stand, ridiculing and caricaturing him in public, or they adopt the impartial tone of the thoroughly objective scientists, unmoved by any outward "design argument" or show of evidence. Pain for Bradshaw has been a key motivator in his self-styled path.

John Bradshaw was not close to his dad. For a sensitive and intelligent lad, he got a bad deal, as do all children of alcoholics. Bradshaw's father, a railroad clerk for Southern Pacific, was an abusive alcoholic who sometimes disappeared for weeks on end. "What I remember is being terrified all the time," Bradshaw recalled in an interview with Victoria Balfour for *People* (May 28, 1990). When Bradshaw was ten years old, his father deserted the family. At the age of thirteen Bradshaw was drinking heavily. "I had all this rage," he explained to Balfour.

Bradshaw said of his father, "Because he was never there to model behaviors for me, I never bonded with him, never experienced what it was like to be loved and valued by a man." Bradshaw also mentions his mother, who was "perfectionistic and duty-bound..." qualities he claims "create shame-based children." Bradshaw was both her golden boy and surrogate husband.

Despite these problems, he was a top student and was elected president of his senior class, winning a scholarship to the University of St. Thomas in Houston. But he dropped out in his second year because of continued problems with drinking. Bradshaw then attempted to escape his alcoholism through the Catholic priesthood. Later he would use the stifling and dead institutionalism he encountered in the Roman Catholic monastery of the Basilian Order to invalidate all of Christianity in a single brush stroke.

*Television audiences watch Bradshaw lecture before auditoriums filled with awestruck listeners who sit in reverent silence mesmerized by his pronouncements. Bradshawism has become a movement, a psychological creed, almost a faith. It is the creed of the wounded victim—parents and the Old Order, especially the Christian world view, are the perpetrators of these horrors. Deliverance for the wounded victim comes through discovering and freeing the inner-child who is trapped deep within by the traumatic wounds that have come from family and society.*

That model would become a paper tiger for Bradshaw to attack representing a dying outmoded old order which he would oppose vehemently on his national telecasts.

Bradshaw applied to a Basilian seminary in Toronto, Canada, where he was accepted as a novitiate in 1955. "After all those years of messing up with the drinking, I thought I could go into the seminary and be perfect," he explained to Victoria Balfour. Finding the Basilians' understanding of love to be "very narrow and rigid," and plagued by the return of his drinking problem, he left the seminary in 1964, **the very day** before he was to be ordained, after nine full years of being in the order. And true to form, his departure from Catholic seminary was dramatic and theatrical. He ran down the hall screaming curses. As Bradshaw explains in *Homecoming* (p. 275),

I rebelled against the anti-life forces of the old order. Mine was an intellectual revolt at first. But my alcoholism helped me to act it out. ...in a night of Dionysian frenzy I ran drunkenly down the monastery halls at three in the morning screaming curses at the authorities and guardians of the old

order. My wonder child was kicking up a storm.

Bradshaw's inner wonder child has continued to kick up a storm ever since. His years of theological scholarship and training have been used as a weapon against the "faith of the old order." His easy familiarity with Christian concepts and theology have enabled him to disarm less discerning Christians with private spins of interpretation on biblical passages. Unbelievers equally see him as an ally as he glibly caricatures the faith he has since departed. His hostility to God—"Call God he, she, or it...I don't care"—simmer just beneath the surface. This pattern puts Bradshaw in the company of men like Pelagius who departed from the faith then used their extensive familiarity with biblical teachings to alter or destroy it.

The Basilian monastery during those nine years was a convenient base for John Bradshaw when he was in Toronto. For he also attended the University of Toronto from which he graduated in 1958 *magna cum laude* with a B.A. degree.

With his new credentials from the University of Toronto, he was assigned to teach at St. Thomas High School in his native city of Houston. But he was fired in 1960 after only two years on the faculty because of his drinking and other problems. "The brothers

*To help his workshop participants "embrace the darkness" of their past, Bradshaw leads them through exercises that he has termed "collective grief rituals."...The workshop ends with a "homecoming" meditation in which Bradshaw guides the participants through a visualization of themselves as children leaving the abusive parenting of their fathers and mothers behind forever.*

frowned on this," he admitted to Balfour, "but they thought I was a genius and they kept me." After the firing he returned to the Basilian fathers for four more years until he left them in 1964. By then he had returned to the University of Toronto for several more degrees, a bachelor of sacred theology and an M.A. degree in philosophy. This put John Bradshaw in line for further studies at Rice University where he did graduate work in psychology and religion from 1969 to 1972. But he had more obstacles in his path before he was in the clear to be the guru he is today.

When Bradshaw left the Basilian Fathers in 1964, dropping out one day before ordination, he had "no place to live, no [driver's] license, [and] no clothes," as he recalled to Balfour of *People*. "I was just a lost soul." He returned to Texas and joined Alcoholics Anonymous while taking a short-lived job as a pharmaceutical salesman—short-lived because he soon began to abuse drug samples from the company.

Perhaps he decided it was better to use his academic credentials and gift of gab to become self-employed as a management training consultant. Despite the fact that his own life was out of control, John Bradshaw was already leading workshops in 1964 for a range of Fortune 500 companies as well as diverse organizations such as the Los Angeles Police Department, the Young Presidents' Organization, and the Congressional Wives' Prayer Group. Yet the great healer was worse off than many of his hearers. Within a year he committed himself.

On December 11, 1965 Bradshaw checked himself into the Austin State Hospital in Texas. "I was there for six days in this locked ward with the criminally insane," he told Balfour. "It was at that point that I surrendered." He strengthened his commitment to Alcoholics Anonymous—"If I hadn't, I'd be dead by now."—and began a three-year regimen of daily attendance at the group's twelve-step recovery meetings. Casual speaking engagements at AA meetings led to contacts with various groups in need of a speaker acquainted with addictive problems. By 1969, he was ready for Rice University, and one can gather that what he learned



academically was incorporated into his own evolving school of the psychology of addiction, codependency, and recovery.

As Bradshaw became a rising star on the lecture circuit, according to *Current Biography*, lack of progress in his own personal life did not seem to affect his growing reputation as an effective counselor and popular lecturer. By 1981 he was so in demand that a PBS producer in Houston asked him to put together an eight-part television series called *The Eight Stages of Man* (named for the life-stages designated by the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson.) Broadcast nationally from 1982 to 1984, the show was carried by more than 100 PBS stations. Bradshaw had just entered the public domain and in a matter of years would be earning millions from workshops and book royalties.

He has continued to be a member of a men's support group in Houston for over ten years. "I need a place where I can be real," he explained to *Time* correspondent Emily Mitchell (November 25, 1991). "Not that I'm not real. I try to be," he added. He told her that much of his early work may have been ineffectual because he was too nice. Disarming her with self disclosure, he added that he still had not come to terms with the source of his own inadequacies as a husband and father, even though he had been in recovery from substance abuse for years.

Bradshaw's second PBS series, *Bradshaw On: The Family*, made his name a household word. He videotaped ten unscripted lectures before a studio audience in 1984. First broadcast nationally in 1986, *Bradshaw On: The Family* raised more than \$300,000 during an eleven-hour pledge drive by the public-television station KQED in San Francisco. Then the series took off.

The idea for the ten-part series, *Bradshaw On: The Family*, came to him in 1983 when he attended a lecture for families of alcoholics in Shreveport, Louisiana. He picked up new ideas regarding family dynamics in general and his own life in particular. "I thought my addiction to excitement, my people-pleasing, were just personality quirks," he explained to

*Bradshaw's exhibitionism—of laying everything out before the public and prying out the innards of others for media effect—has hurt...estranged family members, including his mother, who have protested over what may be Bradshaw's breaking of a cardinal rule of intimacy—that with calous impunity he can run ripsod over the personal boundaries of others, while betraying their trust in the process.*

Victoria Balfour. "[Then in Shreveport] I got the whole thing, and I just got on fire with it." It also gave him material for his emotionally rousing lectures. In his lectures, Bradshaw more fully began to incorporate the role of his own early family life to explain his own compulsive adult behavior. Among other things, he could talk about "rage-aholism," a pattern of angrily overreacting to the inevitable stresses of family life. He later explained his temper tantrums, which were often directed at his wife and children, as examples of "spontaneous age regression" which stemmed from "unhealed psychic wounds" of childhood. One now wonders about their unhealed psychic wounds.

Speaking of that same era to Victoria Balfour of *People*, Bradshaw said, "The fact was that though I no longer used any mind-changing chemicals, I was still out of touch with my feelings, grandiose, compulsive." He added, "My helping was more about me than about [other] people." This insight came to John Bradshaw with the help of his own therapist in 1979. "I was a professional co-dependent. As a child I was not allowed to express my feelings, so I had to go back through therapy and express the child's pain."

One of Bradshaw's greatest defenses—and to the public it gives him almost sainted credibility—is his merciless self-examination, and what seems vulnerable self-disclosure. When you have nothing to hide, there is nothing to attack. You also earn countless fans on the sidelines who applaud you during your marathon contest of self-transcendence.

Bradshaw's third super-best-selling book, *Homecoming: Reclaiming and Championing Your Inner Child* (1990), is a distillation of his popular inner-child workshops, which he has called "the most powerful work" he has ever done. After the book, *Bradshaw On: Homecoming*, the TV series aired in 1990-91 and earned Bradshaw an Emmy nomination. His capacity-crowd workshops reflected this growing public craving for his insights.

In 1991 Bradshaw scheduled more than thirty weekend workshops, some of which drew as many as 7,000 participants. Dan Greenburg, who attended a \$175 weekend workshop of Bradshaw's in Houston called "Healing Your Inner Child," reported in *Men's Health* (June 1991) that "the heart of his theory is that if a parent hurts a child physically or emotionally, the child assumes the blame and makes himself bad in order to keep the parent's love."

Bradshaw pauses, "The child will thereafter confuse love with abuse and grow up to marry someone who is an abuser in the same way as the parent." At that point married couples in the audience turn toward each other in slow uncertainty.

"You don't realize how angry you are till you get into a relationship," Bradshaw was quoted by Greenburg, adding, "Show me a happy person, and I'll show you someone who's **not** in a relationship." Bradshaw said how his own problems drew him to others with similar problems. He told Greenburg that when he left the Basilian seminary in 1964 he became involved with four untreated incest victims within a year. But now Bradshaw was choosing healthier people. "I've had years of treatment and recovery," he continued with his usual candor, "and now the women I'm attracted to are *treated incest victims*."

Meanwhile, as Bradshaw's celebrity has grown, there has been some dissension from the ranks of fellow psychologists. Some of this has been about his dramatic and sensational style. Others have pointed out that Bradshaw has violated confidentiality so that he could use sensational and colorful material on the air and that this is a violation of professional ethics. And, of course, those from different schools of psychology have differed with Bradshaw's foundational views of reality, treatment, and prognosis. Family systems theory goes all over the map, like California's Route 1 from Bodega Bay to Big Sur.

Gerald Goodman, an associate professor of psychology at the University of California at Los Angeles, who was interviewed by Emily Mitchell of *Time*, made the point that blaming all of one's adult failures on childhood traumas constitutes an abdication of responsibility. "The way it sounds," Goodman said, "if only we had got more hugs in our infancy, we'd be fine." It is a point well taken at a time in which psychology seems to be in its infancy on the long road to common sense.

There have also been criticisms of Bradshaw from those within the recovery movement. Some members of Alcoholics Anonymous protest Bradshaw's defiance of the anonymity rule in which confidentiality in closed meetings are not supposed to be repeated outside the membership. Bradshaw has doubtless shared private anecdotes on the air that came from meetings that he attended during his own recovery—confidentialities that would hurt or embarrass those who gave them.

Bradshaw's exhibitionism—laying everything out before the public and prying out the innards of others for media effect—has hurt more than just his fellow travellers in the recovery movement. Estranged family members, including his mother, have protested over what may be Bradshaw's breaking of a cardinal rule of intimacy—that with callous self-interest he can run roughshod over the personal boundaries of others, while betraying their trust in the process. Some victims, it seems, are more equal than others.

His mother told Victoria Balfour, "It has really been hurtful—the fact that all our family secrets have to be aired in public to make a point." His ex-wife, in a separate interview, told Balfour, "And some of it is exaggerated." His ex-wife felt his indiscretions constituted "an invasion of boundaries." Bradshaw admitted to Balfour that even his own son has been annoyed by his father's tendency to "spruce [the stories] up a bit."

Do we have a case here of Bradshaw the victim creating other victims? And does this chain of victimization spread out? If Bradshaw the Great Recoverer creates other victims, what hope is there for the rest of the world? If he is the test model, the psycho-savior, what does that say about him and his system?

Bradshaw is having his moment in history. He is doubtless feeling that longed-for attention that he has apparently sought since his days in the crib as he is watched by a captive audience. Now all eyes can focus on his every gesture and *pronunciamento*. And the minions can be amazed at what they see — someone being healed before their very eyes in the ever-becomingness of their inner-child. It is a process that will continue to unfold as we watch the life of John Bradshaw.

But a warning, a *caveat emptor*, must be issued at this point. John Bradshaw has blotted out the notions of accountability, human evil, and sin as the lost plunge over the cliffs of self-help believing that they are just victims who are perfect and good within. The Bradshaw system does what all true counterfeits do: it intercepts genuine salvation from the deep wells of the human soul feeling life's pains and offers a "feel-good" mock-up, an anodyne.

Following John Bradshaw is like following a fool who makes things up as he goes along, dancing along ravines and down blind paths. Compared to the way of Christ, Bradshaw's way curves perilously and suddenly takes spontaneous unforeseen turns as the spirit of narcissism breaks into new territory. Bradshaw's self-proclaimed love is treacherous. Just ask his own family. The

*Bradshaw's way curves perilously and suddenly takes spontaneous unforeseen turns ...Bradshaw's self-proclaimed love is treacherous. Just ask his own family. The love of Christ is eternal and no one can stand against it. Even baby boomers are faced with a choice, the way of John Bradshaw or Christ. The two are really not compatible.*

love of Christ is eternal and no one can stand against it. Even baby boomers are faced with a choice, to take the way of John Bradshaw or the way of Christ. The two paths are really not compatible but diverge as widely as the East from the West.

### Sources:

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### About the Author

Tal Brooke, President & Chairman of SCP, Inc., is author of the bestseller, *WHEN THE WORLD WILL BE AS ONE*, and *LORD OF THE AIR*—which chronicles his years in India as the top Western disciple of the famed godman of "Signs & Wonders," Sai Baba— plus 4 other books. He has degrees from the University of Virginia [Col.] & Princeton [Theol.] and has spoken at Oxford and Cambridge numerous times among other prominent universities.