

A Critical Appraisal of

Mindsight: The New Science of Transformation, Daniel J. Siegel

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Significant changes are taking shape in the world of secular, clinical psychiatry. An expanding group of theorists and practitioners are distinguishing the mind from the brain in order to harness the adaptiveness of the brain to counseling therapies for mental health. This is a helpful move away from hardcore materialism.² An expanding universe of studies flood the literature on mental health. While some “blame it on the brain,” others claim to “fix our broken brains,”³ but Daniel J. Siegel primarily seeks to explain and *integrate* our disrupted brains. The better integration of our neural functions through “mindsight,” is the psychiatric approach pioneered by Siegel. *Mindsight: The New Science of Transformation* (Random House, 2010) expands, illustrates and explicates the field of “interpersonal neurobiology.”⁴

The *Foreword* by Daniel Goleman (of Emotional Intelligence fame) captures the essence of “mindsight” in saying: “*Mindsight* plays an integrative role in the triangle connecting relationships, mind, and brain. As energy and information flow among these elements of human

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² An insightful article makes the point, “In unexpected ways, science and mysticism are joining hands and reinforcing each other.” “The Neural Buddhists” (Op-Ed by David Brooks, May 13, 2008) in the New York Times (available here [at Google Docs](#).)

³ Mark Hyman and Martha Herbert in *The Ultramind Solution* (Simon & Schuster, 2010).

⁴ Siegel is the author of many similar books, such as *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (Guilford Press, 1999). He is also the founding editor of the Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology which features over a dozen books relating neurophysiology to many aspects of psychology/psychiatry <http://books.wwnorton.com/books/book-template.aspx?ser=Norton+Series+on+Interpersonal+Neurobiology¤tpage=1&lastpage=4>.

experience, patterns emerge that shape all three (and the brain here includes its extensions via the nervous system throughout the body). This vision is holistic in the true sense of the word, inclusive of our whole being.”⁵ Hence Siegel defines mind as an embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy and information.⁶

Christian psychologists and counselors should be motivated to give a hearing to the better integration of neural function, or more broadly, mind and body. Christian faith, cognizant of the resurrection, implies a correspondence of mind and body, as well as a significant role for the body. Dr. Siegel’s work *could* in principle contribute therefore to a growing body of knowledge on the body and on the mind which assists the biblical counselor in her task.

Dr. Siegel is evidently a warm and compassionate person whose autobiographical struggle through a materialistic medical school (Harvard, no less) gives the reader evidence and hope of his genuine spiritual enlightenment. Beyond the autobiographical *ethos* of the book, four themes flow within the streams of thought in *Mindsight*. 1) Siegel’s impressive mastery of current neurological architecture and functionality. In this he helpfully explains the various technologies of scanning which reveal the “man behind the curtain,” showing specifically how we access “where” neural activity occurs. 2) Siegel’s sensitive and caring use of “elaborate personal as well as patient stories.”⁷ These serve to incarnate the genuine human counseling and medical concerns facing persons and families of persons. 3) Siegel artfully and frequently uses neuroscience to rationally and medically explain the neurophysical basis of each patient’s

⁵ *Mindsight* “Foreword,” 4.

⁶ This definition of itself is a marvel since he notes that working with over forty interdisciplinary scientists, “What I discovered was that the fields of mental health, psychiatry, psychology, social work, nursing, occupational therapy, and educational therapy, didn’t have a definition of the mind,” *Mindsight*, 14.

⁷ *Mindsight*, *Introduction* (“advanced praise” unnumbered).

problems. 4) The book features heavily the intervention of the practical, therapeutic use of the techniques of “mindful awareness” and guided meditation to reintegrated neural activity with a reported outcome of healing toward restoration. Fond of acronyms, he utilizes “FACES” as an outline of a healthy, integrated brain: Flexible, Adaptive, Coherent, Energized, and Stable. The health of the brain is indicated in avoiding both “rigidity” or the “chaotic” in mental behavior.

One of the genuinely amazing apologetical features of this book and the work it reports is to give a person, ill-at-ease with the Eastern arts of meditation and mindfulness, a rational, biological, physical and quite Western explanatory lens through which to become more willing to take the Eastern leap of faith. By the end, one wonders on what basis a rational Westerner could argue with Zen-like disciples. I feel that this is a tremendous testimony to Dr. Siegel’s capacity to use the medical apparatus of knowledge and expertise from “research” to then provide a gateway for practices, heretofore considered quite irrational and plainly outside of scientific-medical analysis.

The power of a transformed life is the strongest weapon in Dr. Siegel’s arsenal. He compassionately, yet (in another sense) dispassionately incarnates his clients. While averting any sense of judgment (dispassionately) he reveals the cases of a brain-damaged mother who is not the same person to her family after a car accident, an enraged young man who is unable to cope, of an out of touch elderly man, of a mother who has lost any sense of meaning in life, of a couple who are on the verge of divorce, having given up on change and harmony. Each of these cases is presented in a compassionate, warm, even loving way, with a winsome level of real-life detail. It is somewhat predictable, if not obligatory, that Siegel’s intervention is transformative, but this is presented fairly humbly and with an emphasis on slow, patient change. If the power of the

persuasion rests in the embodied cases (case studies), the handmaiden to this is certainly neuroscience. This “science” becomes the rational means of affecting the suspension of the reader’s disbelief. The bald claim that Zen Mindfulness can heal people, young, old, abused, and conflicted without resort to medication nor a miracle would be less than persuasive. However resting upon the arch of updated neurobiological research and a not-infrequent reference to the brain’s architecture, then Eastern Mindfulness becomes simply a scientific application of Western research, the purely objective conclusion of a Harvard Psychiatrist’s unbiased inquiry into brain function.

As it turns out brains get “wired” through our experience and our conscious intention (mind, per Siegel’s definition). In some cases the clients were simply the receivers of badly wired brains, i.e., with insufficiently integrated neural pathways. In others, physical trauma to the brain disrupted the personality circuitry. And to still others, a conscious intention (in childhood) or the family environment left certain functions devoid of integration. The electrical metaphor of circuitry is frequently alluded to in the book.⁸ But I wonder if in fact the plumbing metaphor might not be more accurate. After all these “neural” pathways are the means of a chemical transfer. Why not say neural plumbing rather than circuits? But then again, would it not be just as apt to refer to them as highways, as “neural pathways” suggest? Each molecule which is traveling is like a tiny yellow school bus driven from one house to school. Yet another metaphor might be more accurate. Could these not be neural wormholes since quantum activity underlies each interaction? These wormholes transmit starships from one dimension of space-time to another.

⁸ This is so much the case that his web site has the Trademark, “inspire to rewire” on it: <http://www.drdansiegel.com>.

The above riff suggests the direction for my first and persistent criticism of the book. Dr. Siegel's mastery of the current lingo and findings of neurobiological research, which I do not mean to slight in itself feels like the curtain shrouding a vast region of "I know not what" (as John Locke said of matter). Perhaps this is why Siegel even suggests to readers that they may skip his introduction to neurobiology without losing the main message of the book. His impressive use of medical nomenclature relating to the geography of the brain finally gives way to therapies such as a patient "imagining a safe place" for troubling memories. While discussing the connectivity of various regions of the brain, one gets the sense that completely nonsensical terms or creatures could be plugged into the description with the same explanatory result. He uses concepts like the neuroplasticity of the middle prefrontal cortex whose neural pathways should be horizontally connected and whose vertical integration act to sooth the inflamed amygdala through the function of reflective circuitry of neural empathy. Would the meaning be different if one said, "Tiny jackrabbits lope to and fro carrying either daggers or pain pills between the top and bottom of the inside of your head. So you'll want more pain pills than daggers." All this (current) scientific explanation gives way to rather simple, yet indirect actions. Through meditation we stimulate the prefrontal middle cortex with the effect of easing the overactive amygdala. To a stressed limbic brain system unconsciously selecting flight, fright, or freeze we simply say to it: "Thank you for your love and concern [O Limbic brain]. I know you want to keep me safe, and I want to be safe, too. But your enthusiasm is too much, and it's not necessary to keep me safe."⁹

⁹ Siegel, 247.

I do not mean to disparage medical nomenclature, *per se*. Only that “location, location, location” does not prove “causation, causation, causation.” Even more, what of the yet undiscovered mechanisms? Neurotransmitters are all the rage now, but what about in 2050? Might they not be cast the way of “humors”? Unless one understands the whole mechanism(s) then could we not attribute the efficient cause a brain function to the transmission rather than the pistons? This is a crude analogy, but given the undiscovered country of neural quantum activity, the flat ignorance of the mechanism memory storage in the brain, and a thousand other unexplained matters in neurology, I believe biblical counselors, like their biblical archeological counterparts in the 19th century are more than a little justified in a healthy skepticism toward the Academy’s denial of the existence of Abraham’s home town. We need not “blame it on the brain” nor “explain it by the brain.” Just wait and see.¹⁰

It is possible that we (society) will grow ever more capable in understanding the human body’s capacities and mechanisms. Certainly the last century has leapt up from leeches and phrenology to the germ theory of disease and neural pathways. Even this is not an undisputed advance? In the last book I read on physical performance and reshaping selves, the author suggested “blood letting” has a medically useful function which may prolong life.¹¹ Phrenology is not all that different than current “location, location, location” studies in the brain which point to a shape/location of neural activity (per Siegel’s discussion).

¹⁰ We are biblical justified in hoping that along with whatever valid insights sciences bring, we shall be further confirmed in believing that the Bible is true indeed and “we are fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139).

¹¹ *The Four Hour Body: An Uncommon Guide to Rapid Fat-Loss, Incredible Sex, and Becoming Superhuman*, Timothy Ferriss (New York: Crown/Random House, 2010).

I refer above to the “scientific” reasons for water-boarding Siegel’s “explanations” for brain phenomena. In what follows I will seek to provide the biblical alternative to the therapies of Siegel, while at the same time accepting much of the broad strokes of Siegel’s interventions. The above discussion goes toward “answering a fool according to his folly” in the sense that an internal critique of Siegel’s “new science” would at least temper our embrace of his proposed therapy. As a practical rejoinder to the “groundbreaking” work, let me suggest another criticism. Siegel provides a handful of vivid examples of “success.” He certainly saw many more patients over the years of his writing the book. Were there any patients not deemed a “success” through this intervention? If so why not? These matters are not addressed in the book. Science is just an extension of ordinary experience. So if this is a genuine science then this therapy should universally apply or other explanatory factors are at work.

Biblical counseling recognizes different classes of therapy. “We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone” (1 Thess. 5:14). Those that are fainthearted and weak often need the sensibilities and sensitivities of a person like Daniel Siegel who actively empathizes and activates his “mirror circuitry” to the end of seeking to genuinely encourage and help those in need. The sympathy of another person made in the *imago Dei* may very well cause spiritual and physical transformation of itself. Biblically, however, this transformation will not reach its proper goal apart from conformation to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). This requires a wisdom beyond the geography, circuitry and plumbing of the brain.

If Siegel’s personable empathetic approach can be explanatory of therapeutic outcomes with some patients, what of his meditative therapies? The actions of the mental activity of

meditation (*per se*) is not outside the scope of biblical intervention (Psalm 1:2, 27:4, 63:6: Josh. 1:8, etc.). Psalm 4:4, along with other texts enjoin the believer toward a meditative therapy: “When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder [meditate] it on your beds, and be silent” (NRSV).¹² Biblical meditation is, however, “according to” *something* rather than *nothing*. It involves imaginative thinking but involves specific content. The righteous man meditates on the Torah day and night.¹³ He contemplates the covenant Word. This biblical skill may very well overlap with Siegel’s skill which he evidently seeks to impart to patients. In a number of his examples he helps the patient realize a kind of spacial dimension to consciousness which he indicated will help “rewire” the brain’s circuitry. Imagine you are in your seat, now imagine going outside and look into the window seeing yourself sitting in this seat. This might be accompanied by rhythmic and deep breathing.

It is not possible given the (required) brevity of this appraisal to fully assess whether the “causal” agent is the specific content of Siegel’s mindful and meditative activities or simply the mental rest given the weary by practicing any form of changed thinking, pondering or meditation. If indeed it is the latter then a counselor would have hope that the therapeutic of meditation would be greatly enhanced by “thinking God’s thoughts after Him,” or envisioning kingdom truths (Mt. 6:33f) or joyfully and mindfully pondering the riches of God’s Torah wisdom. St. Paul enjoins a directed meditation on those in the midst of relational challenges in

¹² The root of “ponder” often translated meditate here is אָמַר “to say.” Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament edited by Ernst Jenni with assistance from Claus Westermann (1997, Hendrickson Publishers)OakTree Software, Inc. electronic version.

¹³ The term for “meditate” in Psalm 1:2 (יָדַבֵּר) ranges in meaning, “moan, growl, utter, speak, muse” but all of which have “content.” BDB (Abridged), n.p. A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (abridged), based on A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, by F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907, (OakTree Software, Inc).

Philippians 4.¹⁴ We are to think in a progression from what is “good” to that which is “glorious” (praiseworthy) (Phil. 4:8). The parallel structure of this passage calls for personal and relational peace, not unlike the outcomes reported in Siegel’s patients.

Structural Parallels in the Passage

- A. Think together [peace of mind] in the Lord.
 - B. Keep on taking hold of the peace disruptors (these women).
 - C. Keep on rejoicing in the Lord / perseverance.
 - > **The Peace of God will protect your hearts and minds.**
 - C’. Keep on envisioning that which is truthful (honest, right, ...) to glorious.
 - B’. Keep on putting into practice the things that you have gained from me.
- A’. The Lord of peace will be with you.

Finally, Siegel is quite personable and seeks the peace of his patients. But Siegel evidently lacks the integration of his new science with an understanding of *persons*. While the book does not entirely identify him as a Buddhist, one does find his material pointing in that way, “Neuroscience of Buddhist Contemplative Practices” by Daniel Siegel.¹⁵ Ultimately his philosophy and technique pushes toward the extinction of personhood, as the Buddha would have it. Hence there is a deep lack of integration here. Persons are relational and need attachments but Buddhism would finally strip these from us.

¹⁴ I offer my own translation of Phil. 4:1ff here: “So then, my brethren, loved ones, whom I long to see, my joy and crown, stand in the Lord in this way, loved ones: I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to think together in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my yoke-fellow, take hold of these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. [Tell them to] Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your [pl.] reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Stop worrying about everything, but in everything through prayers and entreaties with thankfulness and specific requests, make [your worries] known to God. And [then] the peace of God, which exceeds all thought, will protect your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Last of these [encouragements], beloved, [in such problems] focus your minds [*logizomai/reckon*] on whatever is true, whatever is honest, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, [see] if anything is excellent even glorious. Keep on putting into practice the things that you have been disciplined in and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

¹⁵ Presented at the Neurosciences and Spirituality Conference Claremont School of Theology Sunday, October 12, 2008.

APPENDIX: An example of how one might use Philippians 4:8 meditatively/prayerfully.

PHILIPPIANS 4:8 - PEACE RESTORATION WORKSHEET

I am having trouble with [person] _____ because this person [does/is/ acts, etc.]

I am praying (with thanksgiving about this). As I think through this problem. I am believing what is true, honest, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and glorious about this person/situation. I am believing, calling to mind, and envisioning what is the case and may become the case about this matter. I am specifically training my mind and imagination to see what is ---

1) True about this person and/or situation, such as _____

It is true that _____

It is true that _____

It is true that _____

2) Honest about this person and/or situation, such as _____

It is honestly the case that _____

It is honestly the case that _____

It is honestly the case that _____

3) Right about this person and/or situation, such as _____

It is right that _____

It is right that _____

It is right that _____

4) Pure about this person and/or situation, such as _____

There is purity in that _____

There is purity in that _____

There is purity in that _____

5) Lovely about this person and/or situation, such as _____

It is lovely and I love that _____

It is lovely and I love that _____

It is lovely and I love that _____

6) Admirable about this person and/or situation, such as _____

It is admirable that _____

It is admirable that _____

It is admirable that _____

7) Excellent about this person and/or situation, such as _____

It is excellent that _____

It is excellent that _____

It is excellent that _____

8) Glorious (praise-worthy) about this person and/or situation, such as _____

It is and may become more glorious that _____

It is and may become more glorious that _____

It is and may become more glorious that _____