

Guest Contributor: Daniel J. Siegel

## The Mindsight Movement: Reflection and Brain Wisdom at the Grassroots

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Just eighteen days prior to the publication of this Quarterly, Daniel Siegel's new book *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation* was released to the general public. As most of us know, Dan's work has focused around how relationships—with ourselves and with others—shape the brain and mind, and how science combined with subjectivity can lead us toward a kinder, more awake world. With *Mindsight*, he is carrying this message to a broader audience, using science and story to share the hopeful message that each individual can become a point of change through the development of insight and empathy.

I had the privilege of interviewing Dan last fall while the book was in its final stages, so the experience was fresh in his mind. He talked about the urgency for all of us to carry this message of transformation toward kindness to every receptive person, and also shared his personal journey in writing *Mindsight*.

Bonnie: What was it like for you to be engaged in working on this book for so many years?

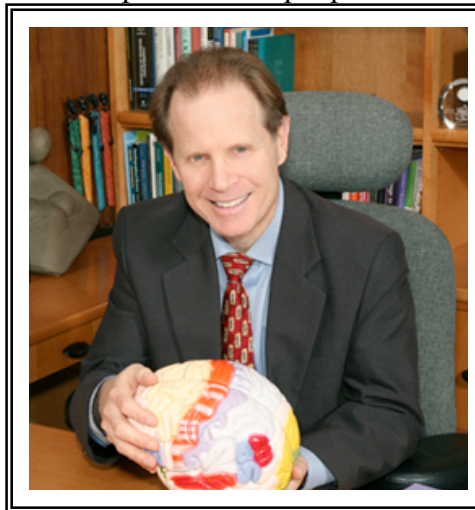
Dan: We are all in a moment of huge transition as a species. As human beings, we have this opportunity to shift the direction of cultural evolution if we work together as a team. I think the writing of *Mindsight* in many ways was a parallel process to what a lot of us are trying to do, which is to bring an awakening process to

people. That awakening can take many forms. On an individual basis, it can be people looking for deeper meaning in their lives. In our relationships one on one, it can be finding more intimate connections in a busy, harried life style. In families, it's taking responsibility for how we treat our children so that we understand that the way we communicate and create the patterns of relationship shape how the next generation will emerge. In terms of education, we find that people have been consumed with trying to teach

kids the basic skills, but have missed the most fundamental skill, self-knowing awareness, which is the gateway for compassion and kindness.

So in all these ways, educationally and in families and relationships, we're at this crucial moment where we all have a part to play. So in my own personal journey, I think the book *Mindsight* was an immersion that forced me to

wrestle with some of the deepest dilemmas of what we're all trying to do as a field of awakeners—educators, mental health people—how do we combine deep knowledge about science with a deep respect and knowledge about the internal world? How do we combine the subjectivity of mental experience with the objectivity of rigorous research? In *The Developing Mind*, I wrestled with these same issues, but there the goal was to fight against some of the scientific reductionism that left the mind out of the equation of understanding



development. My goal was to try to bring a solid argument that our experiences shape us and in fact shape something that's very real but not measurable—the mind. As you know, that book was a scientific presentation, very dense. All the books since have been translations of those core ideas. *Parenting from the Inside Out* was an attempt, not so much to look at science, but to inform parents *about* science so they could look at their own lives as a doorway to becoming more nurturing parents.

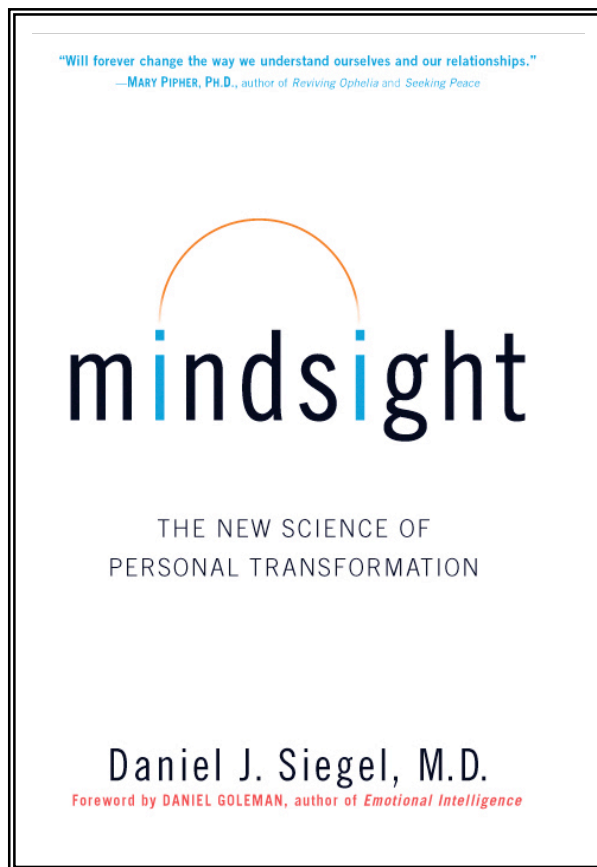
Amazingly, as part of this endeavor, we have a 15-book series with Norton on interpersonal neurobiology. Some of the books, like the first in the series, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy* written by Lou Cozolino, and like mine or yours, directly address the idea of neural integration. Others in the series, like Allan Schore's, Dan Stern's, Pat'Ogden's, Ed Tronick's and others may not use the vocabulary of neural integration, but in essence we can perceive that all the books in the IPNB series support the notion that certain kinds of neural integration are at the root of regulation. In the current book, I address the same body of ideas, talking about seeing the mind, using the term *mindsight* for seeing the mind and shaping the mind—which *mindsight* allows us to do. When *mindsight* is used as a way to awaken the mind to the flow of energy and information in ourselves, in our bodies, in our mental life, and in our relationships with one person or many people, then *mindsight* allows us to see and shape energy and information flow. I believe all the books in our Norton IPNB series support that notion.

Bonnie: *The Mindful Brain* is also in the Norton series. How does it fit into the larger picture of

your work as a whole?

Dan: For me, *The Mindful Brain* was my own new immersion in an ancient practice of mindfulness. People often ask, "Well, you wrote *The Mindful Brain*. Why do you need to write a book called *Mindsight*? Isn't it the same thing?" And actually *mindsight* and mindfulness are *not* the same thing. Mindfulness is an incredibly important universal practice that has been around for 2500 years. It's in the east and the west, ancient times, modern times. Extremely important. I think it's a basic science of the mind that every therapist and educator should be trained in. It certainly helps awaken the mind, so it's very parallel with the nine domains of integration, and particularly interwoven with the idea of the integration of consciousness. At the time I came up with the nine domains, I didn't know there was a field of mindfulness, but now I can see how they share common ground. Consilience at work again.

So the answer to the question of what's the difference between *mindsight* and mindfulness is that *mindsight* is really, I don't want to use the word larger, it's a different, more encompassing human feature where we can monitor energy and information flow and modify it as we really go deeply into subjective experience. At the same time, we can also know about the structure and function of the nervous system, understand the social nature of the brain, and put front and center the notion that this ability to monitor energy and information flow allows us to then modify it toward integrative states, toward linking differentiated parts.



I've spent a long time in the last few years teaching with extraordinary mindfulness teachers, and we have these discussions that lead us to the conclusion that mindsight is different from mindfulness. Mindfulness doesn't talk about the brain. Mindfulness doesn't talk about integration. It may be integrative as a form of the domain of integration of consciousness, which is beautiful, and I think ultimately mindfulness practice, like secure attachment, promotes integration. But it would be like saying that secure attachment is the same as mindsight. Well, secure attachment may depend on mindsight, but in secure attachment you don't specifically think about, for example, memory circuits or right and left hemisphere. We might see mindsight as the basic science of interpersonal neurobiology that highlights the way that tracking energy and information flow allows us to transform our brains in the direction of integration.

The question is how do we present the work we're doing in interpersonal neurobiology to someone who may not be familiar with the mind, may not be familiar with science, and yet hopefully may be able to benefit from what interpersonal neurobiology is accumulating as a way of awakening the mind.

In *Mindsight*, I took on another challenge because it was written for the general public and not a scientific or clinical audience. The question became how do we actually present the work we're doing in interpersonal neurobiology to someone who may not be familiar with the mind, may not be familiar with science, and yet hopefully may be able to benefit from what interpersonal neurobiology is accumulating as a way of awakening the mind. The 15 books in the interpersonal neurobiology series are beautifully attuned to the needs of therapists and the feedback I get, and I hope you're getting for your book, is so positive from therapists that it's really rewarding to try to bring all of us together in the field of mental health. *Mindsight* is the first attempt to go to the broad general audience with the field of interpersonal neurobiology, not scaring them off with too much science, but

hopefully putting enough science front and center, combined with deep immersions into subjective experience that people will find the value of an interpersonal neurobiology perspective in their personal and interpersonal lives.

I don't know what's going to happen. I hear every day that people don't read books anymore.

I hear every day that people don't want to read anything that's demanding. They want to read sound bytes. I wrote it despite those warnings because it's not a sound-byte, self-help, put-everything-in-charts book. It actually requires a person to read it, so I have no expectations for how the book will be received by the general population who may not like to read or may not like to be challenged. I wrote it as well as I could and we'll see what happens.

Bonnie: I know *Mindsight* was a long time in the making. Can you tell us something about your process with it?

Dan: I wrote the first version, then signed the contract in spring of 2005, and finished the book in September 2005. I had a bunch of people read it, got feedback, edited it, and turned it in two months later. That book was something that I tried to edit, and the more I edited, the more abstract it got. The book is organized by stories. I've never given so many extensive stories of patients before, so I had to make sure the stories were absolutely accurate but totally confidential, so that was quite challenging—to keep the stories true, but change the details enough so that not even the person would recognize himself or herself. Then the second challenge was how to measure out the science for readers totally unfamiliar and maybe even uncomfortable with science, yet keep enough so they could have an unfolding understanding of the scientific picture, and yet not too much so they would feel

overwhelmed. That was a challenge that took many years, I must say. I threw out the first version entirely, and rewrote the whole thing. The book sat for awhile.

In all my writings, I'd never had an editor before. I've had a publisher tell me to turn it in already or make it shorter, but never had an editor. So this is the first time I've had a human being who was devoted to the project, who told me not to talk about the anterior insula so much, or that the audience didn't need to know about spindle cells and their interactions between the anterior cingulate and anterior insula. We would go back and forth.

The woman who purchased the book, Toni Burbank, had been in the business for 40 years. I deeply respected her and was so thrilled that she acquired the book, and even more thrilled that she wanted to be the editor. So she and I for the course of a long, long time, especially the last five months, went through every paragraph of that book to use *Mindsight* to put ourselves in the reader's shoes, to make sure that what was introduced wasn't too much, too fast, that it was necessary, and that the stories could stand on their own as well as being steppingstones to a larger picture. So that was quite challenging. Toni really encouraged me to dig deep into my internal subjective experience to bring up words that are not left-brain words, but reach into myself and be more integrative in the writing. She was inspiring in that way, and I trusted her, and I do trust her, and I had a lot of fun doing it. I really believe she got the project's goal, and she got the essence of *Mindsight* and interpersonal neurobiology. I learned a tremendous amount about writing from Toni Burbank, so I feel very grateful that I had that opportunity to spend all that time with her before she left Random House. I feel like, in a way, I got a course on writing.

I'm doing another book for Norton that will come out in March. In that book I'm using everything I learned about writing with Toni to take all the science that didn't fit into the *Mindsight* book and make it available for the clinician in *The Mindful Therapist*. That will be a

clinician's guide to *Mindsight* and neural integration. I'm very excited about that, and I'm basically about three-quarters finished. If we include *The Mindful Brain*, all three books will go together.

I debated in *Mindsight* about making it a conversation with the reader, but since it goes into so many stories about my relationship with the patients, it's really filled with a lot of narratives where the narrative looks into the window of what it's like to be in the process of change. *The Mindful Therapist*, in contrast, is really about the therapist herself and himself, so I am speaking directly to the therapist in that book. It was really fun to do that kind of relational writing, you know. Since *The Mindful Brain* already covered the science, and *Mindsight* covers the clinical examples, in *The Mindful Therapist*, it's me speaking directly to clinicians about their own development and about the cases in the *Mindsight* book, offering a series of exercises to develop neural integration in the therapist.

As much as I know books are an aspect, people have said that this whole interpersonal neurobiology business isn't just a bunch of books. It's like a *Mindsight* Movement. Everyone has to work hard to awaken people to make it a kinder world, however we can do that. It's like candlelight—keep the candles lit, and when we light someone else's candle, it doesn't detract from our own but just makes more light in the world.

Bonnie: I've found that, too, as I'm out and about talking with therapists. For people, it's not just going to conferences, but also seeking a change of consciousness and in the way they are living life. I love being part of that.

Dan: That's beautiful. It's great being on a team together. This is literally a grassroots effort that isn't owned by anybody. It can't be limited to any one field or it will die. It's got to be owned by everyone and across disciplines, and even the whole interpersonal neurobiology series could be expanded to other fields than mental health.

Bonnie: As this Mindsight Movement gets some momentum behind it, what do you think the next steps are?

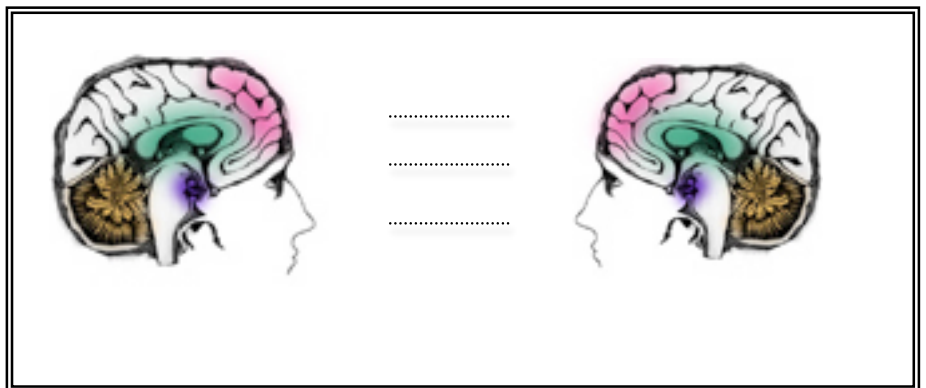
Dan: Well, I was speaking to the Seattle public schools the other day and this kind of question came up. The simple thing for education is that if we just look at the basic R's that exist now—reading, writing, arithmetic—we can develop a whole culture that lacks reflection, that doesn't promote the importance of relationships, or really cultivate resilience in people. So we've got these basic three R's but we're forgetting the other R, the fourth R—reflection, maybe a fifth and sixth for relationships and resilience.

So, from a very basic point of view, my hope is that as we all move forward as a human culture, we realize we've been working in a model of the basic three R's and that this is just not enough to sustain the planet. We must move toward reflective skills so that we can make our relationships kinder, develop resilience in these difficult times, and encourage this fundamental way we are able to see the internal world as real and worthy of respect and dignity. In short, we need to embrace mindsight as a core value, understanding that mindsight allows us to shape the internal and interpersonal world toward kindness. That's the whole idea—moving things toward integrative states that dissolve this top-down delusion of our separateness, liberating kindness to be the natural way we communicate with one another.

So my hope is that in starting out being solidly grounded in science, we can create a kind of secular ethic that promotes health as revealed through integration leading to harmony, and that health becomes something people want, so that we see reflective skills as a form of brain hygiene that people just do like they brush their teeth. If we were all 10 years down the road from now and I were asked, "Do you think the field has moved in the proper direction?" I would ask, "Are people approaching reflection from the

point of view they approach teeth brushing?"—brushing their brains, using mental floss, cleaning out the synaptic garbage so they can clear their internal worlds and realize we are all part of one interconnected whole.

All the studies of positive psychology and wisdom traditions of happiness suggest that when people do that, they are happier. They live lives of more meaning and equanimity. So all the science is there now. We can even point fingers at what integrative processes in the brain need to happen to make that occur. It is merely a matter of making this not just the opinion of interpersonal neurobiologists, like you and me or anyone reading the newsletter, but bringing brain



hygiene and the kindness it promotes into the world as a kind of movement. It needs to come from the grassroots, with a feeling that everyone's empowered, everyone's involved in both the responsibility and the celebration of our interconnectedness and our awakening. And that's what I hope can happen, and why we need everyone lighting everyone's candles. This is not keeping the candles in the candle factory. This is about lighting candles everywhere to make this dark world a brighter place.

Bonnie: I believe people resonate with this message in a deep way because I see heads nodding in agreement when I go out to speak about this particular vision. There is a felt need for this because the world is a mess right now, so it is surely the right moment for all this. So much is in bits and pieces and fragments, not only in terms of our culture, but even the science is often known just in bits and pieces, not very coherent.

IPNB really is taking the lead gathering science and subjectivity together into a meaningful framework.

Dan: Communal effort has to be front and center. I think Norton has been a wonderful home base because of its beautiful professional work, and its being solidly in the publishing world and allowing us to have a professional library that backs up what is fundamentally a common sense, person-to-person, shake-hands effort. The library is great and I'm so happy that we can all be part of it. The better it gets, the better things will be.

But in the end, it isn't a book that gets a person to open his or her eyes. It's a person or a connection.

And now, I never thought I'd be doing this, but the social media world of interpersonal connection is where communicating ideas has turned in our culture, and so, a few minutes ago, I sent out my first tweet. When I first told my kids, they said, "Don't be a sell-out. Don't do Twitter." Then I saw that the Dalai Lama is twittering and Matthieu Ricard is twittering, and Obama—all these people interested in making the world a better place are using this form of communication to inspire people. So after a few months reflecting on what my kids warned me

about and doing research on social media, I think we need to have a voice of IPNB out there.

Interpersonal neurobiology has a lot to share in what I'm calling Knowledge Nuggets, these small little tweet-sized things that we can send out every now and then to remind people that kindness is good for their brains. I'm always skeptical, kind of my personality, but I am driven to make this grassroots connection better, so that when years go by, when we near the end of this journey called life, we can say that we contributed even a little bit toward making this a more compassionate world. That would be just a great, great sense of meaning to have in the last days of life. For me, in terms of the meaning and hope for all this, if we can move it one sentence, one page, one tweet, one whatever, opening the door for people, letting people pass on the road smiling, just a win/win situation.

Bonnie: As I grow older, I think the same way. I feel I have been able to be a positive contributor in a small way and that is a privilege. Gives the feeling of having a settled heart.

Dan: Absolutely. What else can we do?

Bonnie: I can't imagine anything better.

Dan: Yes. Me, either.

First day of a new season-  
welcome to autumn! Look  
for upcoming "knowledge  
nuggets" about how  
wisdom & science meet to  
promote a kinder world  
  
-Dan's first tweet,  
September 22, 2009

**Daniel J. Siegel** received his medical degree from Harvard University and completed his postgraduate medical education at UCLA with training in pediatrics and child, adolescent, and adult psychiatry. He served as a National Institute of Mental Health Research Fellow at UCLA, and is currently a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine where he is on the faculty of the Center for Culture, Brain, and Development and the Co-Director of the Mindful Awareness Research Center. An award-winning educator, he is a Distinguished Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association and recipient of several other honorary fellowships. He is also the Executive Director of the Mindsight Institute, an educational organization that focuses on how the development of mindsight in individuals, families, and communities can be enhanced by examining the interface of human relationships and basic biological processes. He is a member of the GAINS advisory board. His groundbreaking books include *The Developing Mind* (1999), *Parenting from the Inside Out* (2003, with Mary Hartzell), *The Mindful Brain* (2007), and *Mindsight* (2010). Much more information is available at [www.drdansiegel.com](http://www.drdansiegel.com).