

# GODHEAD

## THE BRAIN'S BIG BANG

*The explosive origin of creativity  
mysticism and mental illness*



JOE GRIFFIN & IVAN TYRRELL

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*The strange origin of creativity,  
mysticism and mental illness*

JOE GRIFFIN & IVAN TYRRELL



PUBLISHING



First published in Great Britain 2011

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Published by HG Publishing an imprint of  
Human Givens Publishing Ltd, Chalvington,  
East Sussex, BN27 3TD, United Kingdom.  
[www.humangivens.com](http://www.humangivens.com)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-899398-27-0

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Typeset in Sabon and Franklin Gothic.  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press Ltd.

“Behind it all is surely an idea so simple, so beautiful, that when we grasp it – in a decade, a century, or a millennium – we will all say to each other, how could it have been otherwise? How could we have been so stupid?”

*John Archibald Wheeler*

“Most people live, whether physically, intellectually or morally, in a very restricted circle of their potential being. They make very small use of their possible consciousness, and of their soul's resources in general, much like a man who, out of his whole bodily organism, should get into a habit of using and moving only his little finger.”

*William James*

“There is something in us, eternally young, that can understand beyond this visible world, beyond phenomenal reality. But this one thing in us, eternally young, is lost by us in the world of objects and the external things of the senses, and, using the logic of the senses, wastes itself in useless speculations which are without meaning for it, because it is capable of understanding a higher logic and a new world, utterly different from this dark world of sense and temporal logic into which it passes and in which it becomes lost.

This magical side of ourselves which in childhood we feel, is destroyed by life, and remains only as a memory, dimly felt at moments, recalling for a fleeting instant something that we once knew and possessed and which has gone out of our lives.

It is this, this *one* in us, that must find itself again ...”

*Maurice Nicoll*

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## Curtain Raiser

A DEFINING moment came in the prehistory of our humanity when we ceased to be purely animal. Often called the 'brain's big bang', it occurred in the Stone Age about 40,000 years ago. This powerful psychic explosion enabled our ancestors to experience and exploit a newfound questing spirit to understand and manipulate the world: complex languages developed and refined tools appeared, as did exquisite drawings, carvings, paintings, decoration and musical instruments. From that moment on, all these accomplishments were apparent in Europe – and more besides.

We had changed, become quickened by an original evolutionary advance: self-reflective consciousness. Suddenly our forebears found that they could see the world in an entirely new way and respond creatively to it. They could daydream, imagine the future, consciously review memories, deliberately think about the world as it appeared to them and more effectively manipulate what they saw for their own advantage. 'Intellect' and 'soul' became apparent for the first time: they became aware of being aware. A few of them, perhaps the first shamans, discovered that it was possible to directly experience a profound feeling of connection to everything else and they set about uncovering ever deeper and more subtle connections to reality. This adaptation, however, came at a high price – a much-increased vulnerability to a range of mental illnesses. How and why this happened, and what it means for us today, is partly what this book is about.

Undoubtedly the brain's big bang was a spectacular natural event. We are still riding the crest of the creative wave it unleashed – not unlike the way innumerable billions of galaxies still appear to resound from the celestial Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago that set in motion, as most scientists believe, the expansion of the Universe. The surviving

art and artefacts of prehistoric humans are the well-known indications of this dramatic mental transformation. They place it in time, but they don't give us direct evidence of the precise nature of the psychological changes that occurred – and those who might have told us are, of course, long since dead.

So big questions remain: what was it like to wake up to a new way of seeing? What survival value did it have? Did it carry new burdens with it, ones that animals and their predecessors did not carry? What exactly happened in their brains in order to make them so creative? How must their thinking and behaviour have changed as a result? And, perhaps above all, do implications arising from this event have relevance today?

Just as physicists examine the properties of physical matter, and from that vantage point peer back through time to unravel the processes involved in the development of the Universe, it is also possible, by using recent discoveries and insights about the evolution of life and the brain in particular, for psychologists to unravel some of these mysteries using the very same mental tools – reason and imagination – that first made their appearance in the Upper Palaeolithic period. In *Godhead: The brain's big bang* we look back through historical and prehistorical time to unpick the origins of creativity, mysticism and mental illness, and connect what we find with an analysis of the current state of mind of modern humans to see what it reveals.

In writing it we found ourselves making interesting new inferences about current human behaviour. During its gestation, for instance, a new way of looking at mental illness arose which may carry radical implications for diagnosis and treatment – namely, a previously unrecognised link between mood disorders, psychosis and autism.

A fresh approach to mental health is certainly needed. Many psychiatrists have admitted to us over the years that psychiatry has lost its way. By allying itself too closely to the medical model that focuses on the physical and biological aspects of mental distress and favours chemical treatment over psychotherapy (despite a lack of evidence for biological drivers of the common mental illnesses), it is failing dismally to reduce the sum of human misery. The World Health Organization shows that depression, for instance, is currently among the top four contributors to the global disease burden.<sup>1</sup> Psychiatry has

always suffered in comparison with other areas of medicine because mental states are, on the whole, less well understood than bodily ones.

A debate over psychiatry has simmered, largely under the public radar, for some 200 years.<sup>2</sup> It concerns whether the medical profession should have any special role in managing people who were considered to be 'mad'. As one participant, University College London consultant psychiatrist Joanna Moncrieff, recently put it, "Psychiatric problems are not fundamentally medical problems and I think that a lot of the difficulties and contradictions that psychiatry throws up are to do with its claim that they are."<sup>3</sup> Conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, Asperger's syndrome and personality disorders have proven difficult to diagnose with precision. In a 2009 *New Scientist* article, science writer Peter Aldous notes: "Doctors can only question people about their state of mind, observe their behaviour and then classify their distress according to the most obvious symptoms."<sup>4</sup>

The title of that article, 'Psychiatry's civil war', is one way of summing up this situation.<sup>5</sup> The current battleground is the psychiatrist's bible, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or *DSM* for short, and the influence of drug companies on research and diagnosis. The *DSM* is what psychiatrists turn to when diagnosing distressed people. It is currently in the midst of a major rewrite, a process that has highlighted just how vulnerable psychiatry is to exploitation by vested interests. Aldous reports one eminent psychiatrist as going so far as to warn that the rewrite "will extend definitions of mental illnesses so broadly that tens of millions of people will be given unnecessary and risky drugs".<sup>6</sup> A particular concern is that the next *DSM* will include new categories to capture milder forms of illnesses such as schizophrenia, depression and dementia. The result of this, according to the same psychiatrist, "would be a wholesale ... medicalisation of normality that will lead to a deluge of unneeded medication".<sup>7</sup> Not just 'a pill for every ill', but a pill for every one of life's ups and downs.

Psychotherapy generally is in no less a confused state, as Moncrieff also points out:

In some respects, I think, psychotherapy has filled the same role as drug treatment in being regarded and presented as a panacea for all sorts of problems. Even though psychotherapy obviously involves trying to identify the root of the problem,

it is problematic because it focuses on the individual rather than the society. Having said that, psychotherapy at least looks at a person as an individual and seeks to understand their life story, rather than putting them in a box, under a diagnosis, and giving them a treatment according to which box they are placed in. I think, to that extent, it takes the right approach to trying to understand suffering and the problems that are experienced by people who become psychiatric patients.<sup>8</sup>

In attempting to improve psychological interventions ourselves, we sought to widen the vision of psychotherapists and teachers to include the idea that what causes mental distress is *always* whatever is stopping someone from getting their innate emotional needs met. We called these innate needs 'human givens', and created the human givens approach to psychotherapy to incorporate techniques and skills from the various models that have proved helpful and set them within a larger overarching set of ideas about human functioning.<sup>9</sup> By doing this we hoped to address the type of problem raised by Moncrieff with regard to what the psychotherapy available to the public usually offers: a focus on the individual.

The new direction does not offer that focus through analysing past relationships and attempting to dig up forgotten traumas (psychoanalysis), or trying to change the way an individual thinks and behaves (cognitive behavioural therapy). Neither is the human givens approach solely 'person centred', in the sense of ignoring the wider context of an individual's life. Rather, it looks to see what factors are preventing someone from getting their innate needs met and then actively showing them how to use their reasoning power and imagination to get their life working in balance again.

Evidence for the effectiveness of the human givens approach to therapy was recently published in a leading peer-reviewed journal. The results of a 12-month study of 120 patients treated by human givens therapists in a GP's surgery in Luton in the UK were reported. The results showed that more than three out of four patients were either symptom-free or reliably changed as a result of the therapy. This was accomplished in an average of only 3.6 sessions.<sup>10</sup> The data were shown to be significantly better than the recovery rate published for the UK

government's flagship IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) programme. Not only that, unlike the IAPT programme (which uses therapists trained in cognitive behavioural therapy, or CBT), the same consistent results have been obtained from outcome measures from multiple sites across the UK for more than 3,000 patients. This later data is being prepared for publication by leading independent researchers.

After observing for many years that our approach was highly effective we were able to delineate the three main reasons that prevent children and adults from getting their innate emotional needs met. Any one of these is sufficient to generate unhealthy levels of stress in an individual, which, if maintained, poses the very real danger that anxiety or anger disorders will develop, depression set in, psychotic symptoms appear or addictive behaviours take hold.<sup>11</sup>

The three factors are:

**One:** The environment the person lives or works in is 'sick' and prevents them from getting one or more of their emotional needs met (as in having to endure an abusive and dysfunctional family, living in a threatening neighbourhood, not having meaningful work to do, working for a bully or having autonomy restricted).

**Two:** The person doesn't know how to operate their internal guidance system to get their needs met (as in learned helplessness when a person is conditioned to have low expectations of themselves, or when they don't know how to challenge unrealistic expectations with universal reasoning, or when they are misusing their imagination by worrying – which precipitates depression – instead of using it to solve problems).

**Three:** The person's innate guidance system is damaged in some way, perhaps through faulty transmission of genetic knowledge (as in caetextia, the inability to read context that's seen throughout the autistic spectrum), poor diet (not getting proper nutriment to the brain), poisoning (drugs, alcohol, etc), physical accidents to the brain, or psychological trauma (including post-traumatic stress syndrome or PTSD) which is usually easy to treat quickly using psychological methods.

These perceptions, and practice based on them that uses innate human resources, such as imagination, well, are influencing psychiatric practice. As the UK-based consultant psychiatrist Dr Farouk Okhai wrote recently, "Having worked with the human givens approach for

several years, I have found it far more useful when face to face with a patient, to set aside any possible diagnosis, ignore categories and clusters and subtypes and appendices, and ask, instead, 'What does this person need to live a full life?'"<sup>12</sup>

Our effort to improve psychotherapy practice also gave us glimpses of what nature could require of our species if there is to be any further evolutionary development for it – an understanding of which we suspect is of increasing urgency in this age of tumultuous change. As Jalaluddin Rumi, the 13th century Persian poet, said, "Things which have to be tackled have to be done at the right time. That time is generally soon."

It is now widely accepted that we are confronting global problems of such a magnitude that civilised life could soon become untenable.<sup>13</sup> Almost all writers and pundits agree that without significant changes in the values that we hold and the way that we organise our societies, disaster will loom. Selfishness, lack of empathy for strangers, consumerism and the piling up of massive financial debts in exchange for short-term advantages are the powerful forces fuelling the various crises we face. They have become the leitmotif running through almost all modern commentaries analysing the situation.

Without doubt, a more powerful and inspiring motivation than greed has to take hold for the human species to find the will it needs to make the effort to save itself. In this book we hope to offer an approach that could hearten and enthuse enough people to develop a greater capacity for cooperation and service at a level beyond the one that political and religious ideologies have achieved to date.

We strongly believe that for the human race to cooperate more intelligently, a shared vision is needed between individuals, families and organisations – one that draws out of the collective psyche a greater capacity for caring about what reality requires. In the first instance this means a 'waking-up' process has to happen so that more people come to think that this might at least be possible. (The tough social, financial and environmental times ahead may well prove to be part of that process.) Certainly, given the bleak alternative, no one has anything to lose by at least considering that this might be so. But where is such a vision to come from?

In looking for inspiration, most people's instinct is, naturally

enough, to turn to one of the three great traditions: religion, spirituality or science. But for this to be a meaningful exercise, we ought to ask ourselves what worthwhile vision emanates from each of these positions today.

Religions undeniably bring comfort and solace to millions, but we nevertheless see arising from them a growth, on the one hand, of ever more strident fundamentalism, in some instances so extreme as to promote intolerant behaviour and violence, including torture and killings; and on the other, a growing outpouring from some religious intellectuals of arguments attempting to maintain religion's hold in the world by justifying it in the face of those scientists who argue there is no need for a belief in the supernatural at all.

The preaching and writing of religionists often has a pleading quality to it – “science hasn't totally eliminated God because there are still mysteries in our world that science hasn't explained”. This position is known as the ‘God of the Gaps’: whatever we currently cannot explain, the hand of God explains it. The risk proponents of this view take is that as soon as a rational explanation develops for what hitherto had seemed mysterious, their God is again in retreat. It is a less than convincing argument, and far from inspiring.

Then we have those who regard themselves as not being religious *per se*, but as being ‘spiritual’. This means, one supposes, a lack of commitment to any specific ideology, an open-mindedness to the transcendent dimension of life, and a faith more personalised, less structured, more receptive to new ideas and myriad influences, and more pluralistic than the doctrinal faiths of religions.

But when one looks at what's been written in the last few decades to rationally justify why the natural basis of spirituality is important, what we almost always find is a strong tendency to limit the effort to reconciling physics with consciousness. Spirituality is concerned with the universal but invisible interconnectedness of everything, but books on the topic invariably cover experiments in extrasensory perception and precognition, and enquiries into various other paranormal areas, which are, for the most part, highly contentious because the effects they cite are so small, or are often not experimentally repeatable. So the study of the topic gets sidelined. Even more soul-destroying is that, because this approach mainly focuses on expanding conscious

awareness and exploring the extent that consciousness might survive after death, it doesn't address what is most significant to us when we are alive: our own *individual* consciousness, our living relationship with people, ideas, art, our work and the beautiful objects and places we treasure and our experience of love.

The metaphor that people writing about spirituality come up with again and again is that, when we die, our individual consciousness is lost, like a single grain of salt dissolving in the ocean. In other words, our personal sense of self is reabsorbed ... gone forever. There is something hugely unsatisfactory about this position too because the net result is that, in the endlessly convoluted analysis of how physics and consciousness are somehow intertwined, all reference to the real nature of emotions and relationships is ignored. Our humanity disappears. Everything personal, warm-blooded and loving about human relationships is missing. This suggests to us that this approach to spiritual matters is the product of the left-brained type of temperament, those systems thinkers who have difficulty appreciating the deep context of the interrelatedness of personal relationships. It is, in its own way, as unsatisfactory as the God of the Gaps argument.

A further approach to spirituality appears in those of a very 'right-brained' temperament. This largely consists of making endless associations between random events and attaching personal 'spiritual' significance to them.

What's left is the third, and youngest, of the major traditions: science, and particularly reductionist science. Many scientists and science advocates hold strong beliefs about the superiority of the approach, as exemplified by British philosopher Bertrand Russell's famous statement: "Whatever knowledge is attainable, must be attained by scientific methods; and what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know."<sup>14</sup> His imperious and limited view of what is possible discounted all that humankind had discovered by other means over the tens of thousands of years before the scientific method was adopted. When science encompasses a set of rigid practices – hypothesis, experiment, data, evidence, modified hypothesis, theory, prediction, explanation and so on, *and excludes other methods of knowing* – it can have the tang of fundamentalism about it, leading some to claim that it is itself a religion of sorts, with adherents tending to believe that the Universe is impersonal and

has no deep significance, and that, ultimately, all living things are just a chance production of inanimate matter born out of chaos.<sup>15</sup>

This worldview has left many, such as the American 'longshoreman philosopher' and author of *The True Believer*, Eric Hoffer, aghast. They observe that many intellectuals throughout the 20th century had done all in their power to denude the human entity of its uniqueness.

Reductionists, because of how and where they focus their attention, easily get seduced into the simplistic belief that complex systems can be completely understood in terms of their components; so they try to break everything down into its smallest parts to understand how things work. They are behaving like the little boy who wanted to understand how a fly could fly. He ripped off its six legs, its wings and antennae one by one, then separated the thorax from the abdomen. But he remained puzzled: where had the fly gone? He had yet to learn that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Not all scientists are reductionists: the great scientific minds nearly always aren't. But the methodological reductionist approach to scientific investigation is not just borderline pedestrian; it can be dangerous. The American-born David Bohm, considered one of the best quantum physicists of all time, recognised this. He said:

The notion that all these fragments [are] separately existent is evidently an illusion, and this illusion cannot do other than lead to endless conflict and confusion. Indeed, the attempt to live according to the notion that the fragments are really separate is, in essence, what has led to the growing series of extremely urgent crises that is confronting us today. Thus, as is now well known, this way of life has brought about pollution, destruction of the balance of nature, over-population, world-wide economic and political disorder and the creation of an overall environment that is neither physically nor mentally healthy for most of the people who live in it. Individually there has developed a widespread feeling of helplessness and despair, in the face of what seems to be an overwhelming mass of disparate social forces, going beyond the control and even the comprehension of the human beings who are caught up in it.<sup>16</sup>

Bohm is spot on. Yet hard-nosed secular scientists still noisily claim that there is nothing exceptional about human life. In his *Astonishing Hypothesis*, Francis Crick, co-discoverer of DNA's molecular structure, put it like this: "You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll's Alice might have phrased it: 'You're nothing but a pack of neurons.'"<sup>17</sup> In other words, our sense of self is just an epiphenomenon of a cold, mindless Universe.

The trickle-down effect of this miserable worldview is seen all around us, from the largely uninspiring university education young people receive, to tedious science articles spewing out more and more statistics of less and less consequence, to TV's dumbed-down 'science as entertainment' programmes. Self-styled progressive thinkers who cling to the position that humanity is unexceptional as an unquestioned truth contemptuously dismiss those who suggest they might be wrong.

With the ability to reason thus debilitated, they become intellectually impotent, as the journalist Bryan Appleyard described in his book, *Understanding the Present*: "Unable to create a solidity for himself, liberal man lapses into a form of spiritual fatigue, a state of apathy in which he decides such wider, grander questions are hardly worth addressing. The symptoms of this lethargy are all about us. The pessimism, anguish, skepticism and despair of so much of twentieth-century art and literature are expressions of the fact that there is nothing 'big' worth talking about anymore, there is no meaning to be elucidated."<sup>18</sup>

Scientism has admittedly generated many significant material benefits, in medicine, engineering and technology. And it has found new ways to entertain us and deluge us with avalanches of fact and opinion – infinitely more so than in any previous age, thanks to the Internet. But the more information we amass, the less relevant it all seems to our lives as we live them.

It is because it attaches no significance to our lives that scientism cannot lift the spirit: it fails completely to address human yearnings for answers to questions about meaning and destiny, and is incapable of leading us to a deeper relationship with reality.

As a result, it doesn't provide us with worthwhile reasons to ask more of ourselves. This is not, after all, just an issue about meaning.

Our physical survival as a species is at stake. It seems clear to us that the three means of enquiring into how humanity fits in the universal scheme have failed to bring about the appropriate changes in human behaviour that will be necessary for preserving life on this planet. This is one reason why we have attempted to provide a more fulfilling vision, one that acknowledges and recognises the warmth of human affections and the driving need for relationships, and that satisfies the feeling we share with many others that human life is somehow significant.

Such a vision must also offer answers to the fundamental questions that arose in humanity after the brain's big bang, once enough human beings had sufficiently evolved to access a level of reason and insight to ponder them. The need for answers to the big questions is not delusional, yet any that are offered must be compatible with our best scientific findings and somehow extend them. If human consciousness *is* significant, it must fit in with how the entire cosmos has evolved, because everything is connected.

Reductionists, by definition, do not attempt the big questions. To them it is pointless asking how consciousness and spirit, the fundamental animating properties of human life, are directly connected to the rest of the Universe because they view humanity as insignificant products of indifferent material processes. And, on the face of it, human life, in comparison with the almost unimaginable vastness of the cosmos, *does* appear insignificant, which in many people inevitably fosters a sense of unimportance. That thought, however, should be counterbalanced by awareness that, whatever we have learnt about the immensity of the Universe and its laws, all the discoveries made about its nature, all the knowledge of its vastness and complexity, are contained and occur *within the field of human consciousness*. As this book unfolds, we hope to show that consciousness has a vital role to play in the existence of everything and that the quality of our relationship with it lies at the heart of physics.

Throughout much of recorded history, it was clearly often risky to investigate such questions openly, especially if the answers gained were deemed heretical by the prevailing religious and scientific orthodoxies. Not surprisingly, such endeavours and the discoveries they produced were communicated with great secrecy so that their brave proponents could avoid what were often painful, or lethal, consequences imposed

by the establishment. This inevitably gave rise to the formation of secret societies carefully transmitted their dangerous 'occult' knowledge to a select few who were deemed worthy and reliable.

There are now many excellent books that show the not inconsiderable influence of such clandestine groups throughout the pages of our cultural history right up to modern times.<sup>19,20</sup> The Royal Society, for example, which today plays an important role as scientific advisor to the British government and acts as the UK's science academy, began life as an extension of one such 'hidden college', through secret gatherings where the occult sciences were discussed by the intellectual and scientific luminaries of the age. (The word occult itself comes from the Latin word *occultus*, referring to 'knowledge of the hidden'.)

"Mysticism," wrote Evelyn Underhill in *Practical Mysticism*, "is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment."<sup>21</sup> Historical study shows us that the nature of our relationship with the Universe and its importance was always understood by an enlightened few, those men and women who managed to tune themselves to it. Some of them, overtly or in secret, looked for other sincere seekers and taught them how to connect up to the greater reality. Genuine mystical groups were not concerned with indoctrinating people or encouraging cult behaviour but in education. There is a golden thread of information about this precious hidden activity that is traceable among historical records and the literature of all cultures as far back as we can go. This esoteric, or 'inner', teaching has had many names: Tao, the Way, the Path, ancient wisdom, the Secret Doctrine, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, alchemy, the Hidden Tradition, Sufism.

Whatever it was called, it was the inner inspiration that formed the foundation of all major religions, though this was often unsuspected by the exoteric ('outer') functionaries who followed in their wake.

The ancient commonality of this perennial wisdom has been pointed out by many writers, including Max Gorman in his recent book, *Jesus Was a Sufi: The lost dimension of Christianity*, in which he quotes from one of St Augustine's letters: "That which is called the Christian religion existed among the ancients, and never did not exist from the beginnings of the human race." In parallel with this, Gorman also

# GODHEAD

## THE BRAIN'S BIG BANG

*Joe Griffin & Ivan Tyrrell*

*A book to enrich your life*

In *Godhead: The brain's big bang* the authors' show why science and mysticism are two essential aspects of human functioning, both linked with the human vulnerability to mental illness. You will encounter breakthroughs about the origin of information in the Universe, consciousness, time, autism, psychosis, imagination, hypnosis, cave art, stone circles, ancient Egypt, Gnosticism, Sufism, the esoteric origin of science and the nature of relationships, love and human destiny. Through the lens of evolution, cultural history, poetry, psychology and a wealth of new insights, they not only throw fresh light on ancient civilisations but also meet head on the central mysteries at the heart of science today. If you enjoy stepping up to the frontier of human understanding, brace yourself for a mentally exhilarating, iconoclastic and inspiring read.

### **Praise for Griffin and Tyrrell's other books**

"Harnesses between these pages are scientific insights and practical techniques of sufficient power to completely revolutionise our approach to parenting, teaching and the caring professions. I wholeheartedly recommend *Human Givens* to any individual with a burning interest in how life works and can be helped to work better."

Dr Nick Baylis, *Lecturer in Positive Psychology, Cambridge University*

"A wonderfully fresh and stimulating view of dreaming, evolution, and human functioning. It will deepen and widen every reader's perspective."

Arthur J. Deikman, *Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, University of California*

"In *Human Givens* Griffin and Tyrrell offer innovative perspectives on promoting effective living. They have synthesized brain and social research in such a way that they provide new templates for understanding how to unlock the best in human nature."

Dr Jeffrey K. Zeig, *Director of the Milton H. Erickson Foundation*

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