
THE GENERALIST'S CORNER

Affirming Psychological Science—For Students, Teachers, and the Larger World: An Interview With David G. Myers

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David G. Myers received a BA in chemistry, magna cum laude from Whitworth College and an MA and PhD in psychology from the University of Iowa. Since 1982 he has been the John Dirk Werkman Professor of Psychology at Hope College. He is best known for his authorship of Psychology (2004), now in its 7th edition, and Social Psychology (2005a), now in its 8th edition. He is also the author of The Pursuit of Happiness: Who Is Happy—and Why (1992), Intuition (2002), and What God Has Joined Together: A Christian Case for Gay Marriage (2005b). With his wife Carol, he endowed the American Psychological Society Fund for Teaching and Public Understanding of Psychological Science.

Harold L. Miller, Jr. received a BS degree in psychology from Arizona State University and a PhD in experimental psychology from Harvard University. He joined the psychology faculty at Brigham Young University (BYU) in 1975, where he is professor of psychology and associate chair. He has served as dean of General and Honors education at BYU and is an associate editor of the Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior.

A few days into 2005, *The New York Times* (2005) excerpted postings at John Brockman's Web site "Edge" (www.edge.org)—postings in response to the question, "What do you believe is true even though you cannot prove it?" Several psychologists were among the notables quoted, including David Myers, who wrote:

As a Christian monotheist, I start with two unproven axioms:

1. There is a God.
2. It's not me (and it's also not you).



Harold L. Miller, Jr.

Together, these axioms imply my surest conviction: that some of my beliefs (and yours) contain error. We are, from dust to dust, finite and fallible. We have dignity but not deity. And that is why I further believe we should

- (a) hold all our unproven beliefs with a certain tentativeness,
- (b) assess others' ideas with open-minded skepticism, and
- (c) freely pursue truth aided by observation and experiment.

This mix of faith-based humility and skepticism helped fuel the beginnings of modern science, and it has informed my own research and science writing. The whole truth cannot be found merely by searching our own minds, for there is not enough there. So we also put our ideas to the test. If they survive, so much the better for them; if not, so much the worse.

If one's access to Dave Myers was limited solely to this excerpt, it would nevertheless provide a suitable introduction to his multidimensionality. From it one learns that he is humble, faithful, and skeptical and that he advocates, practices, and communicates scientific inquiry—all the while maintaining a lively humor and respectful decorum. What one would not learn from the excerpt alone is that he holds an endowed chair at Hope College, where he has spent his entire academic career since receiving a PhD from the University of Iowa, that he and his wife Carol are philanthropists (through a foundation endowed by the royalties from his best-selling introductory psychology texts as well as his general audience trade books), that he has accommodated admirably a progressive loss of hearing, and that he is an avid noontime bas-



David G. Myers

ketball player. These details, and others, would be learned at his Web site (www.davidmyers.org).

It is primarily through his multiedition texts that Dave Myers has influenced two generations of psychology students. Such long success as a text author implies a successful teacher. Indeed, he was honored as Hope College's Outstanding Professor/Educator just 5 years after joining its faculty. Adopters of his texts soon learn through print and electronic ancillaries of his genuine fondness for students and their teachers. To meet him in person is to recognize in quick fashion what might be characterized as his personable passion—for learning and teaching. Beyond his psychology texts are more deliberately focused, scholarly titles. In their case, one is tempted to speculate that they reflect inquiry with personal import—pursuing psychological science as a faithful Christian, contrasting the upside with the downside of intuition, reflecting on the American paradox of unrealized happiness amid material bounty, coping with hearing loss and advocating new assistive technologies for public places, and, most recently, questioning legislative initiatives to ban gay marriage.

Aside from his legendary career as text author, Dave Myers's current reputation may lie primarily in his role as one of the founders of the emerging movement known as Positive Psychology and in his and Carol's recent pledge of \$1 million to the American Psychological Society (APS) for the advancement of teaching and public understanding of psychological science. Although such awe-inspiring achievements form the backdrop for the interview that follows, the voice in the interview may belie them. It is a voice at once engaging and wise but also refreshingly never too sure of itself.

Miller: Has there been a highlight in your teaching career? If so, how would you describe it?

Myers: Just last week I had a highlight moment. At a university lecture I was introduced by a former introductory psychology student who accurately recalled a long-ago class demonstration of mine and how it stimulated a train of thought that helped lead to his becoming a psychology professor. For those of us who have been professing psychology for several decades, such moments help validate our life's work.

Miller: How would you characterize what you have become in the course of your career as a psychologist? As you look back, were there any persons or events that now loom large as contributing to what you have become? If so, what was their contribution?

Myers: Two people who loom large are James Davis (University of Illinois, emeritus) and Ivan Steiner (University of Massachusetts, now deceased). In 1978, Jim invited me to join 7 other Americans and 16 Europeans at an international retreat of small group researchers. As we entered the seminar room the first day, I found myself seated near Ivan. During the breaks and on some outings, I enjoyed getting to know him. Several months later when he received a phone call from McGraw-Hill's psychology editor, wondering if he could recommend someone to coauthor a new social psychology text, he gave the editor my name. That tripped the first domino in a line that later included just about every-

thing else that has developed in my career in the last two decades.

Miller: That career is notable for several reasons, not least your remarkable success as a text author. You've also published several other books—general audience trade books—on several topics. What has prompted those books?

Myers: When reading and reporting on psychological science for the texts, I've occasionally come across information that's so interesting and humanly significant that I think people should know about it! And that's when I feel compelled to write. Maybe it's the teacher in me that gets an urge to inform the public about things widely misunderstood (such as about the materialism that many people think makes for happiness or about the reliability of unchecked intuition).

The psychologist-writer Mary Pipher tells me her next book is on "writing to change the world." Robert McAfee Brown had the same idea. "Why do we write?" he asked. "I submit that beyond all rewards ... *we write because we want to change things*. We write because we have this [conviction that we] can make a difference" (quoted by Marty, 1988, p. 2). I feel the same.

Miller: Which of the books for general audiences brought you the greatest satisfaction in writing?

Myers: Which of my children do I love most? *The Pursuit of Happiness* (1992) was a great pleasure, and part of the satisfaction was anticipating (and then getting drawn into) the positive psychology movement.

Writing *Intuition: Its Powers and Perils* (2002) was like biking with the wind at my back. I've never enjoyed writing so much. One resulting satisfaction was the evening I got an appreciative e-mail about the book from Daniel Kahneman. I shared the note with my editor, explaining that Kahneman's work with Amos Tversky had helped inspire the book and that, as I said in the Preface, he "long ago became deserving of a future Nobel Prize" (Myers, 2002, p. 32) for his contributions to behavioral economics. Eight hours later—the next morning—he and the world learned that he had won the prize!

Miller: What are some of the notable public responses to the books?

Myers: None of them have been best sellers, but each remains in print and has triggered opportunities to communicate psychological science. *The Pursuit of Happiness* (1992) has led to 185 public presentations and nearly 400 media interviews, the most rewarding of which was working intensively with ABC TV on a 1-hour special on happiness research that they broadcast three times. *A Quiet World* (2000) has been rewarding for the comments from people with hearing loss and their family members.

Miller: What do you consider your most enduring contribution to psychology?

Myers: I'm unsure what will endure, but I feel deeply honored to have assisted the teaching of so many of my colleagues across the world. All of us who are text authors feel keenly our responsibility to ask, "what fruits of psychological science should be understood by educated

people?” As we answer that question we participate in defining our field and its legacy.

Miller: You refer to defining the discipline of psychology and also its legacy. What is currently most valuable in that legacy?

Myers: Psychology’s legacy is substantive: It expands our knowledge of who we are. It also helps us think smarter and more compassionately by restraining our intuition with critical thinking and our judgmentalism with understanding.

Miller: What critical advice do you offer to psychologists who are striving to improve as teachers?

Myers: Big question! In a forthcoming chapter on teaching, I develop some of these pointers, mostly drawn from other teachers of psychology:

- *Be positive.* Catch students doing something well and reinforce them.
- *Be enthusiastic.* If you are not naturally expressive, feign enthusiasm.
- *Give lots of practical examples.*
- *Make discussion questions concrete and specific,* and have patience awaiting answers.
- *Create the space.* As any theatre director knows, a good house is a full house. Stack extra chairs so that students compactly fill the seats.
- *Lecture less.* Allow the text to cover the discipline. Focus each class on a big idea, enlivened by memorable demonstrations, video clips, activities, and discussions.

Miller: What future do you envision for the teaching of psychology?

Myers: The long talked-about move to increased use of interactive media and online learning now seems to be gaining momentum. My hunch is that future pedagogy will attend more to what is best accomplished by (a) the printed word, (b) live teachers, and (c) electronic learning.

Miller: How have you related your faith to your work?

Myers: I have danced on the science-faith boundary through books and articles that explain to people of faith the value of psychological science, document interesting correlations between faith and personal and social well-being, and compare big ideas about human nature found in both psychological research and in religion.

Miller: There is a certain courage in such efforts, since they are likely to arouse naysayers, including those who insist that bridging psychological science and religious faith will be detrimental to both. How do you answer that claim?

Myers: Yes, the naysayers come from both sides—religious conservatives who are skeptical about psychology and those in psychology who may associate religion with the religious right. Historians of science, however, tell us that many of the founders of science were people whose religious convictions made them humble before nature and skeptical of mere human authority. To the extent that religion feeds such science-supportive attitudes, and to the extent that science can inform religious understandings, then both can benefit (even while recognizing that they also address some differing questions).

Miller: Your generosity, fiscal and otherwise, is becoming known. What does it mean to you personally and professionally to be in the position of benefactor?

Myers: Having unexpected monies come our way prompted my wife and me to ask, “How much is enough?” Having reached beyond that point, and believing that we are stewards of resources entrusted to us, we began to live off the royalties from my social psychology text and assigned other book royalties to a family foundation. Because what we do is usually done pretty quietly, and because we do not encourage unsolicited proposals, the distributions have been a hassle-free pleasure. Endowing the new APS Fund for Teaching and Public Understanding of Psychological Science has been particularly satisfying. This endowment has allowed me to return something to the teaching of psychology and also to simplify some of our giving by entrusting teaching-related distribution decisions to esteemed colleagues under the leadership of Doug Bernstein.

Miller: What charge did you give to those who will oversee the awards from the new fund?

Myers: The Fund’s declared purpose is “to enhance the teaching and public understanding of psychological science for students and the lay public, in the United States, Canada, and worldwide.” Specifically, “The income from the Teaching Fund investment will support activities such as (but not limited to) conferences, institutes, and electronic networking; the development of teaching resources; the creation of teaching resources suited for those in developing countries or in underserved populations; and other activities that support the teaching and public understanding of psychological science.”

The only excluded categories are “prizes and awards for past accomplishments; and support for projects, such as textbooks and trade books, which could reasonably be expected, if worthy and intended to yield a commercial product, to generate their own funding.”

Miller: Beyond supporting the teaching of psychology, do you have any personal pet projects?

Myers: In a proportionally small way, the foundation has also supported my wife, Carol, and me in our avocational pursuits. Hers has been the development of a nonprofit Web site (stnicholascenter.org) dedicated to the person behind Santa Claus (St. Nicholas). The site offers its visitors (600,000 last year!) stories, activities, crafts, an arts gallery, a gazetteer, a shop, and more.

My own passion, as a hard of hearing person, is my advocacy of “hearing aid compatible assistive listening” through a technology that’s becoming commonplace in the United Kingdom. It enables hearing aids to serve as in-the-ear loudspeakers for sound transmitted by television, PA systems, and telephones. Our initiative has led to installations in most of the major public facilities of my own community as well as in a number of homes. Now the momentum is spreading elsewhere (including a very recent installation in the main chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives). As I have explained in published articles and a Web site (hearingloop.org), my dream is to see doubled functionality for hearing aids,

which perhaps could double the use and decrease the stigma of hearing aids.

Miller: Can you describe a recent experience that illustrates how your dream will be fulfilled?

Myers: I recently sat surrounded by several hundred others in London's Gatwick Airport departure lounge, straining to hear announcements about my delayed flight. Alas, the loudspeaker sound was too distant and foggy for my hard-of-hearing ears.

But hold it. This was the United Kingdom, a country whose cathedrals, churches, and auditoriums now broadcast sound wirelessly to hearing aids. Knowing this, I turned my hearing aids to the setting that can receive a magnetic signal. Voila! Just as my wireless equipped laptop was receiving information wirelessly, so were my hearing aids (via magnetic signals sent through a wire loop invisibly surrounding me).

I do have increasing hopes that the dream may be fulfilled. This week, as I answer your questions, the executive director of the national hard-of-hearing persons' organization and the executive director of the hearing industry's public education foundation are both visiting my campus to strategize a national initiative. It's all very exciting.

Miller: How would you describe your best moments as a teacher? Your worst moments?

Myers: My best moments have been the pleasure of seeing the stunned and then sheepishly grinning looks on students' faces after one of those vivid and memorable demonstrations (for example, after virtually 100% of the class have labeled "unsurprising" a seemingly common sense finding that is actually opposite to the finding that people on either side of them also claim, in hindsight, to have known all along).

My worst moments were a byproduct of my hearing loss, when students couldn't help but snicker when I would answer a question inappropriately, or when, with body tensed, I simply couldn't make out, even after repetition, what was being said. In *A Quiet World: Living With Hearing Loss* (2000) I record this example:

I sometimes discern students' comments, sometimes not. If it is imperative for me to hear and respond, I seek clarification. If I take the unheard comment to be intended for the whole class, I smile and nod, on the assumption that the speaker and the class have already benefited from the remark, even if I haven't. Why embarrass myself and take up their time by having the statement repeated just for me, when perhaps I still wouldn't hear it?

Miller: What is your most heartfelt advice to teachers who have sensory or motor impairments or some combination of them?

Myers: I've been inspired by my correspondence with Meg Rohan, a formerly hearing and now deaf psychology faculty member at Sydney's University of New South Wales. In a forthcoming paper she explains how she has learned to capitalize on modes of communication that do not rely on hearing, such as e-mail, online activities, and bulletin boards; how she has learned sign language

and uses a sign language interpreter in classes; and how she has come to disclose her deafness on the first day of class and then use it as an opportunity for teachable moments. The end result has been gratifying student evaluations that remind the rest of us not to be too easily defeated by whatever challenges us (which in my case is a much lesser challenge).

Miller: Your authorship of best-selling texts has meant a particular legacy—a direct influence on at least two generations of psychology students in the United States and elsewhere in the world. Although the dimensions of that authorial legacy are still to be told, how have you experienced it most meaningfully?

Myers: I experience it through the unsolicited e-mail that comes from everywhere. I'm amazed at the almost universal kindness of our colleagues and students, even when sending in criticisms or corrections. Although I can't say that I've loved all the hundreds of publisher-commissioned critical reviews, even the most sharply critical colleagues will usually offer spoonfuls of sugar to help the medicine go down. I feel so much gratitude to so many people!

Miller: Presumably this large volume of e-mail and in-person contact has given you a feel for the soft spots that exist in students' (and teachers') understanding of psychology. In your experience, on what single topic is psychology most consistently misunderstood? What advice do you have for teachers seeking to correct the misunderstanding?

Myers: The single most misunderstood concept seems to be negative reinforcement. Thinking that the jargon is less important than the reinforcement principles behind it, I dropped the term as a key term from one of my text editions. Alas, I was punished (not negatively reinforced!) by the feedback from instructors who see the term as an essential part of psychology. So it's back, with more examples and reminders that all reinforcers strengthen behavior.

Miller: Earlier this year *The New York Times* reported your contribution to John Brockman's Edge Question Forum (see Introduction). What is there about your response to this year's question that you consider most relevant for psychology?

Myers: The *Times* quoted my faith-based empiricism but cut this concluding paragraph:

Within psychology, this "ever-reforming" process has many times changed my mind, leading me now to believe, for example, that newborns are not so dumb, that electroconvulsive therapy often alleviates intractable depression, that America's economic growth has not improved our morale, that the automatic unconscious mind dwarfs the conscious mind, that traumatic experiences rarely get repressed, that most folks don't suffer low self-esteem, and that sexual orientation is not a choice.

Miller: Which of these revisions of your own understanding proved most difficult for you?

Myers: For me, the most provocative new understanding concerns the enormity of our unconscious, below-the-

radar information processing. Research on “the automaticity of everyday life” has persuaded me that there’s a lot more to who I am than the conscious choices that command my awareness. Research on sexual orientation has also helped change my thinking and attitudes.

Miller: What’s on the horizon for you?

Myers: A new book for the faith community, *What God Has Joined Together: A Christian Case for Gay Marriage*, will be out in June 2005 from HarperSanFrancisco (Myers, 2005b). It’s another effort to give away information from psychological science (about marriage and sexual orientation). Despite the book’s marriage-supporting content, this may be the book that triggers some mail without spoonfuls of sugar!

Miller: Is there a particular incident or concern at the heart of this newest book? How might the book be most useful in teaching students about sexual orientation?

Myers: The book was triggered by my growing awareness of both the benefits of marriage and the growing evidence that sexual orientation is best viewed as unchosen and unchanging. My hope is that this information might inform the culture war debate over marriage and over the church’s ordination and marriage of gays. It’s a book for the faith community written with the aim of helping bridge the divide. Anyone interested in this book, or anything else I’ve mentioned here, is welcome to visit davidmyers.org.

Miller: My heartfelt thanks to you, Dave, for your cordiality as interviewee and, in much larger frame, for all that

you have given and continue to give to our discipline and for all that your writing has meant and continues to mean to psychology students and teachers across the world.

Myers: Thanks, Hal.

Resources

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Note

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