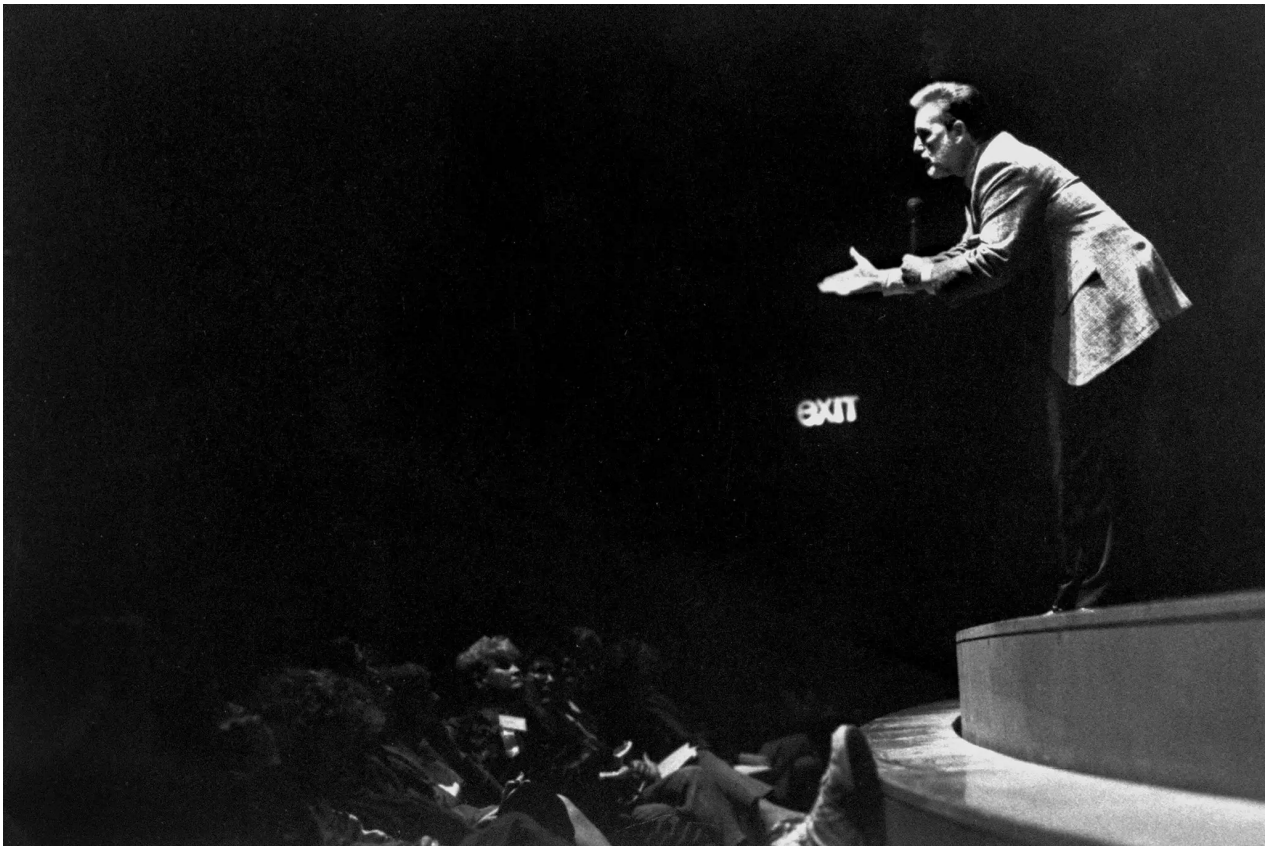
John Bradshaw, Self-Help Evangelist Who Called to the 'Inner Child,' Dies at 82



John Bradshaw speaking in Detroit in an undated photo.Taro Yamasaki/The LIFE Images Collection, via Getty Images

By William Grimes

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John Bradshaw, whose ideas about family dysfunction and the damaged "inner child" concealed within most adults made him one of the most popular and influential self-help evangelists of the 1990s, died on Sunday in Houston. He was 82.

The cause was heart failure, his son, John Jr., said.

Mr. Bradshaw drew on his unhappy childhood as the son of an alcoholic father, his own drinking problems and his work as a counselor to develop a set of explanations for myriad psychological ills.

In his television shows on PBS and in books like "Bradshaw On: The Family" (1986) and "Homecoming: Reclaiming and Championing Your Inner Child" (1990), he argued that

millions of adults fail to achieve healthy relationships because they have never come to terms with the shame, self-blame and “toxic guilt” caused by parental abuse, physical or emotional.

Until they learned to seek out and heal the hurt child within, he said, most adults stumbled through life, expressing their pain through self-destructive behavior and entering into unhappy love relationships with similarly damaged partners, each hoping to find in the other a loving, approving parent.

In lectures attended by up to 7,000 people, and in smaller workshops, he led audiences through “grief work” — exercises intended to make them travel back in time and face themselves as they once were: small, frightened and alone.

Mr. Bradshaw, a charismatic, theatrical speaker, held his audiences in thrall. His public appearances had the fevered atmosphere of a religious revival, and, lest he be trampled by adoring fans, he had to be ushered away from his performances by side doors.

Attendees often turned up holding stuffed animals for comfort and, when Mr. Bradshaw pushed them to recall their childhood traumas, burst into tears, a first step toward reconciliation. “The goal of this work,” he often said, “is to get you to come to peace with the past and finish it.”

John Elliot Bradshaw was born on June 29, 1933, in Houston. His father, John McCollough Bradshaw, was a clerk for the Southern Pacific railroad and an abusive alcoholic who left his wife, the former Norma Elliot, when his son was 10.

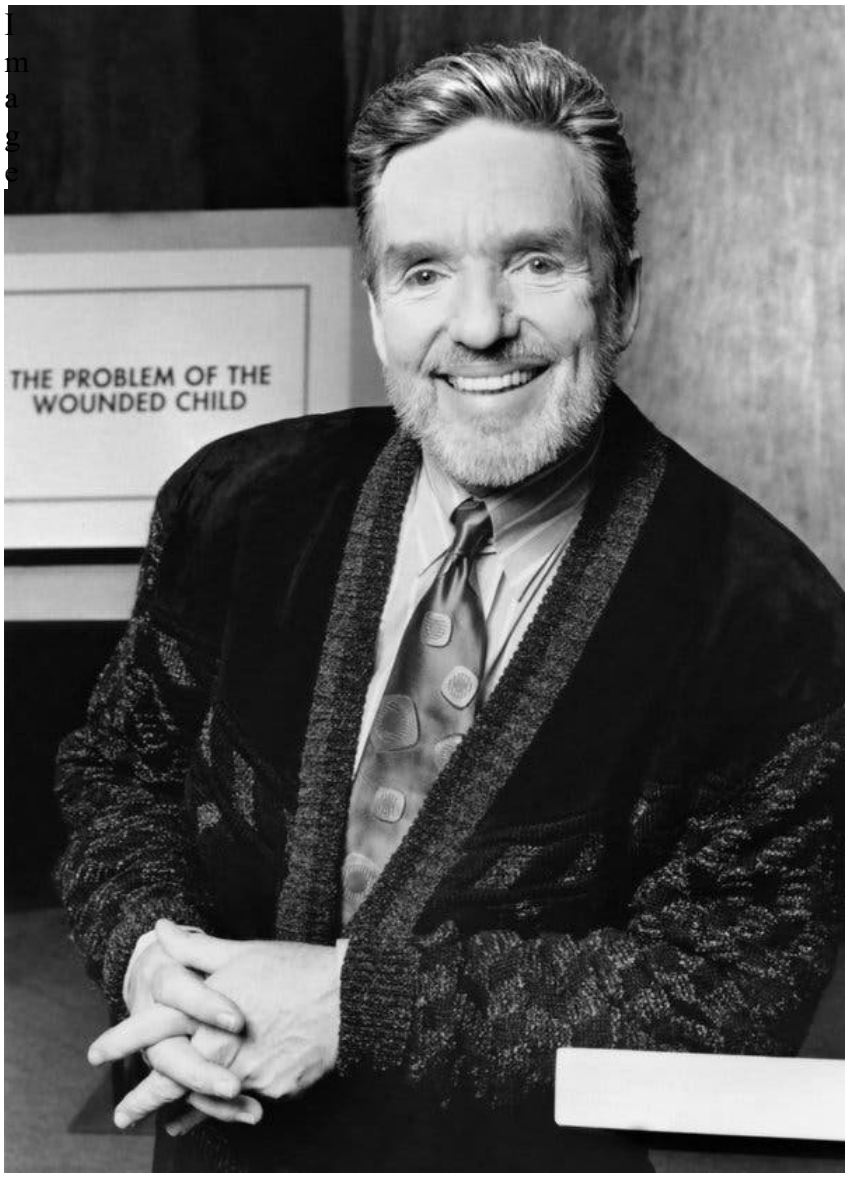
By the time he entered St. Thomas High School, Mr. Bradshaw was already drinking. After two years at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, he left to enter a seminary in Toronto run by the Basilian Fathers, a Roman Catholic order, hoping that religious discipline would straighten him out. It did not.

He did manage, while in the seminary, to earn a bachelor’s degree from St. Michael’s College at the University of Toronto in 1958, whereupon the seminary sent him to teach at his old high school. He was fired after two years for reasons related to his drinking.

He returned to Toronto and, after earning a bachelor’s degree in sacred theology and a master’s in philosophy from the University of Toronto, taught at the University of St.

Thomas for a year. In 1964, just days before he was to be ordained, he left the Basilian Order.

“When I walked out of the seminary, I was 31, but I was like a scared, frightened kid,” he told People magazine in 1990. “I had no place to live, no license, no clothes. I was just a lost soul.”



Mr. Bradshaw in 1990.PBS

After waking up under a car one morning, Mr. Bradshaw checked himself into an alcohol-treatment program at a state hospital in Austin. On being released, he returned to Houston and attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings daily for the next three years.

He soon began teaching adult Sunday school classes at Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church and working with addicts in the church’s drug-abuse program. He also appeared on local television as the host of a talk show, “Spotlight,” and found himself in demand as a lecturer

on family psychology.

In 1981 Liz Kaderli, a television producer who had attended one of his church talks, asked him to do a television series on the psychologist Erik Erikson's eight stages of man. It was broadcast on 100 PBS stations in the early 1980s.

Mr. Bradshaw then came up with his own idea for a program based on his study of family-systems theory. "I went to Liz and said, 'I want to do a series getting the family systems material out there — looking at alcoholics, rage-aholics, incest, violent families, and helping people to see they are all about the child's loss of emotions and about shame,'" he told People.

Only a few PBS stations picked up "Bradshaw On: The Family," a 10-part series. But when KQED in San Francisco broadcast it for 11 straight hours during a fund-raising drive, the station attracted more than $300,000 in pledges. The word spread, and stations all over the country ran the series. A book with the same title, published in 1986, became a best seller, and Mr. Bradshaw was on his way.

His book "Bradshaw On: Healing the Shame That Binds You" (1988) became a one-hour PBS special, and "Homecoming: Reclaiming and Championing Your Inner Child," based on his inner-child workshops, spent 52 weeks near the top of the Times best-seller list.

The terms "inner child" and "dysfunctional family" became part of the nation's lexicon and were widely assumed to be his creations.

"You can dispute whether Jung or the transactional analyst Eric Berne sired this troublesome infant," The Observer of London wrote of the "inner child" fad, "but Bradshaw threw its coming-out party."

The backlash was inevitable. Some mental health professionals called Mr. Bradshaw's ideas and his treatment methods glib and superficial, his courting of adulation unseemly.

Mr. Bradshaw disarmed critics by freely admitting his shortcomings. "I have a lot of narcissistic wounds," he told The Observer. "I have had a lot of need for the audience."

In addition to his son, Mr. Bradshaw is survived by his wife, the former Karen Mabray; a daughter, Ariel Bradshaw; a stepson, Brad Isaacs; a stepdaughter, Brenda Isaacs Booth; four grandchildren; and two great-granddaughters.

Mr. Bradshaw sold more than 12 million books. His many titles included “Creating Love” (1992), based on a 10-part PBS series, and “Family Secrets: What You Don’t Know Can Hurt You” (1995).

His most recent book, “Post-Romantic Stress Disorder: What to Do When the Honeymoon Is Over” (2014), had its origins, like much of his work, in his own life — in this case his failed first marriage, which ended in divorce in 1989.

“Everything I write about I struggle with myself,” Mr. Bradshaw told The Observer. “Therapists are like the Wizard of Oz. Pull back the curtain and you find we are frightened and scared, too.”

The New York Times