ONE ON ONE

...with David Buss
Professor of Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin

One inspiration
Charles Darwin, one of the most important scientists of all time, intrepid in his search for scientific truth.

One intriguing finding from evolutionary psychology
Error management biases. Due to the cost asymmetries of different types of errors (e.g., it's more costly to miss one instance of detecting someone with homicidal intent than to be wrong in falsely attributing homicidal intent 100 times), the mind is biased and makes many errors of inference, but it's adaptively biased.

One book that you think all psychologists should read
The Extended Phenotype, by Richard Dawkins.

One nugget of advice for aspiring psychologists
Every mentor, no matter how brilliant, has limitations. Multiple mentors allow one to learn different theoretical perspectives and different methodological skills.

One thing that you would change about psychology
The lack of education in the most important theory in the life sciences hobbles many psychologists. The field would advance at an explosive pace with greater education in evolutionary biology.

One regret
That I failed to take any courses in evolutionary biology while I was a student.

One little known Darwin fact
That Darwin noticed that he had a tendency to forget facts that were inconsistent with his theory (something most of us are apt to do), so he forced himself to write them down and confront them. This scientific habit led to one of his most important theories – the theory of natural selection.

One cultural tip
I love the books of Vladimir Nabokov, especially from his Russian period: Laughter in the Dark; King, Queen, Knave; The Defense.

One proud moment
When Harvard University offered me my first academic post as Assistant Professor. Another occurred when the American Psychological Association honoured me.

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One thing that organised psychology could do better
Provide more venues for interdisciplinary symposia and conferences.

One hero from psychology
Donald Symons. His book The Evolution of Human Sexuality provided the first major treatise on evolutionary psychology, albeit one that focuses on human sexuality rather than the broader field.

One problem that psychology should deal with
Confronting what I call 'the dark side of human nature'. I believe that, in addition to adaptations to cooperate and perform acts of altruism, humans also have adaptations to exploit other humans – what I call 'exploitability adaptations'. These include adaptations to cheat, rob, inflict violence, commit murder, and to sexually exploit others (and I believe that both men and women can be sexual exploiters). A deep understanding of these dark components of human nature, and scientific knowledge of the social circumstances in which they become activated and implemented, will allow us to curtail the current harm they produce.

One more thought
I love the field of psychology. It's a blessing that our society can afford to employ people who dedicate their lives to the study of human nature.

More online at
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My book Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind, first published in 1999 and now in a 2008 third edition, was the first true textbook on evolutionary psychology. It opened the door for many professors throughout the world to formalise courses in the subject.

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