The 120th anniversary of the birth of Theodor Reik occurred on May 12. So, why take note or celebrate this occasion? More specifically, who was Theodor Reik? What were his psychoanalytic contributions? Why call him Dr. Guilt?

To address these questions, some background is necessary. Theodor was born in Vienna on May 12, 1888 into a troubled lower middle class Jewish family. Just 6 days earlier, on May 6, a young physician, Sigmund Freud, celebrated his 32nd birthday. And 22 years later, in 1910, Theodor met Dr. Freud and from that moment on, a very close father-son relationship began, ceasing only with Freud's death in 1939.

At the age of 22, having graduated from the University of Vienna, majoring in psychology, Theodor emerged into young adulthood as conflicted and guilt ridden. Several critical events occurred in the troubled life of this young man. His mother died and he considered himself an orphan (his father died four years earlier). He became very interested in the work of Freud and sent him a draft of a paper. Freud was impressed with the paper and agreed to meet with Mr. Reik. Freud perceived, almost immediately, a troubled, guilt ridden, brilliant young man who had an uncanny capacity to explore unconscious issues.

Reik came to realize that the answers to his personal issues were to be found by immersion into the theory and method of this new view of man, and with none other than the father of psychoanalysis. It was the kindness, patience and guidance of Freud that were major factors in Reik's development and success as an analyst. Personally, professionally and financially, Freud was always there for him.

It is the writer's view that the key to understanding the multifaceted works of Reik (26 volumes in English alone) were: his very deep-seated lifetime personal issues of unconscious guilt and aggression; the unconscious need for self punishment (masochism); and the compulsion to confess. These three human experiences, in fact, became the foundation of Reik's theoretical approach to understanding and treating the neurosis. Furthermore, the issues of guilt, punishment and confession coincided with the major elements and themes addressed by the new science of Freudian analysis. Finally, these phenomena were universal experiences of humankind, according to Reik.

First and foremost, Reik was a classical Freudian, but Reikian style. For him, the analyst's mission is to directly address, confront and uncover the unconscious guilt and punishment issues of the patient. It is done with tact and what I call empathic confrontation. And it is the mutual interplay between the unconscious of the patient and that of the analyst that brings to consciousness buried, guilt-ridden feelings. The whole process for Reik is fundamentally an act of confession.

From 1910 to 1938, Reik lived an intellectually productive life, in private practice, writing, lecturing, teaching in Vienna, Berlin, and the Hague. He became well known and respected for his work. His personal life was marked by two marriages, the birth of a son with his first wife, and two daughters with his second wife.
In June, 1938, Reik and his family escaped from the Hague before the Nazi occupation and moved to New York City. He was not totally accepted by the analytic community, in spite of his achievements, for two basic reasons: at the time the world of psychoanalysis was composed of physicians; and Reik's approach to the understanding and treatment of the neurosis was an alternative to and in conflict with the mainstream ego psychoanalytic theory of the day.

Regardless of his disappointment and anger, Reik developed a private practice and continued to publish. In 1948, Reik's publication of "Listening with the Third Ear" became a best seller and catapulted him into public prominence. It provided a very readable and substantive entry into the world of clinical treatment, its theory and method (Reikian style), and its potential for personal exploration and relief of neurotic suffering. This volume, plus subsequent books published in the 1950's and 1960's, played a very significant role in educating the American public, which at the time, was entranced with this new and exciting vision of humans and their vicissitudes. Thus, Reik's role in educating mid-century America about psychoanalysis was a major contribution to the profession. And in no small measure did Reik enjoy his popularity.

Another effort initiated by Reik led to the development of non-medical psychoanalytic education. In the early 1940's, Reik began meeting informally with psychologists and others interested in becoming engaged in psychoanalytic work. By 1948, these meetings eventuated in the creation of one of the first institutes who mission was the education and training of non-medical psychoanalysts. The institute was named the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis (NPAP). Several hundred psychologists, social workers, and other qualified candidates have been and are currently being trained for psychoanalytic work. Over the years, other non-medical institutes have emerged, resulting in a plethora of training programs of various theoretical persuasions. In effect, Reik became the father of non-medical psychoanalytic education in the United States.

In sum, Reik strove to bring to greater prominence unconscious guilt and self punishment as the dominant issues in treating the neurosis. By thwarting the destructive power of unconscious guilt forces in the patient, neurotic suffering is minimized. Underlying the process is the emergent capacity to confess.

His approach to treating the neurosis I consider a significant and lasting contribution. Secondly, Reik's success in educating mid 20th century America about psychoanalysis, was a major contribution. Finally, Reik's role in the establishment of non-medical psychoanalysis stands alone as legacy to those in the profession and to their patients, "in treatment".