

Shrink Rap Radio #115, October 14, 2007. Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy and Education

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Dr. Myrtle Heery
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Jo Kelly)

Excerpt: *“I believe, and I have had the experience - I have had a near death experience in a car accident – that life goes on in another form, and it’s a beautiful form. The only thing that’s really missing is the physical body and the physical touch of people you love and care for. But you go on. I truly believe you go on. You have work to do and you do it at a different level; and I feel I’m being guided and taught by all those that had gone before me. I think there’s a very very thin veil from being in the body and out of the body and we have to take very good care of this gift of being here.”*

Introduction: Myrtle Heery, Ph.D., M.F.T. is Associate Professor of Psychology, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, California, and Adjunct Faculty at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California. She has taught at both universities for eight years, mentoring masters and doctoral students of psychology, as well as organizing, sustaining, and leading groups. In addition, she is Director of the [International Institute of Humanistic Studies](http://www.human-studies.com/) <http://www.human-studies.com/> through which she offers two-year training programs nationally and internationally for helping professionals. This training leads to certification of in-depth communication in both individual and group settings. She gives day-long introductory trainings across the U.S. including Arizona, California, and Texas. She is in private practice in Petaluma, California leading consultation groups for therapists and seeing individuals, couples, and families, and leading annual retreats for mothers. Myrtle also volunteers for Petaluma hospice bereavement, helping individuals and leading groups. She has published papers and chapters in psychology journals and books on bereavement, existential-humanistic, and transpersonal psychotherapy and psychology. In addition, she was a contributing editor and published in the Yoga Journal and studied and taught extensively with James F. T. Bugental, Ph.D., first president of the Association of Humanistic Psychology.

Dr. Dave: Myrtle Heery, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Heery: Well thank you David for inviting me to be part of this wonderful cutting edge phenomenon for psychology.

Dr. Dave: You and I have known each other for a while now, and I'm trying to remember when we first met. My recollection is that it was while I was Chair of the Psychology department at Sonoma State. Is that right?

Heery: That is true. I came to your office and asked basically for a job and you gave me a job.

Dr. Dave: Oh OK! (laughter) Well that's good – I don't think it was right away though, was it?

Heery: No, it was not. It was a process of your skills of networking me with the right department and the right place at the right time.

Dr. Dave: Well I remember that one of the points of connection for us was that both you and I have been greatly influenced by the work of Dr. James F. T. Bugental, who you and I know as Jim Bugental and who unfortunately has retired due to age and ill health. He pioneered an approach that he referred to as existential-humanistic psychotherapy, and I was very influenced by his books and I served for a time on his board of directors. Now how did you come to know his work?

Heery: I came to know his work in a very idiosyncratic way. I was a doctoral student at the California Institute of Integral Studies back in the 1980s and I basically was tired of driving so much for getting good supervision; and I asked a very dear friend of mine who used to be a professor at Sonoma State, Ann Dreyfuss, if she knew anyone locally who was really good. She said yes, she gave Jim's name, Jim picked up the phone and I went to visit him, and I basically started supervision with him in the early 80s, and had a wonderful, wonderful mentor-mentee relationship with him concerning existential-humanistic psychology

Dr. Dave: And I think in some ways you've sort of taken on his mantle, now that he's retired. Would that be fair to say?

Heery: That would be fair to say, and many others have also. There are many students that Jim has touched during his career; and I being one of them. I did teach with him for many years as his assistant, so I feel like I got a pretty close look at how he views psychology and psychotherapy and took off with my interests. The one thing I learnt the most from him was to honour and respect individual voices, which he did with me also. So my voice is mine, certainly with an influence of his teaching but it is my voice. So that's influenced my teaching and who I am as a psychotherapist also.

Dr. Dave: Well I'm really hoping that his work doesn't get lost in the march of time; and you know so many new books come out every year, and as I say, I think his books were extremely important. I wonder if you can tell our audience just a bit about the approach that he called existential-humanistic approach.

Heery: Absolutely. The thesis is basic, it's very basic. It's what's coming around now in psychology: which is present tense. Attention to the present tense in psychotherapy and into the theory of psychology that everything the client brings to the room is happening in the present tense. It's very similar to Buddhism which many psychologists now are interested in. The present tense and how that is influencing choices that a human being makes.

So the basics is that we are all human, we are in existence together which is what globalisation is about, and that we all carry the shadow of something called dying with us all through our living, and how do we approach that as we make choices in living.

Those are some theoretical concepts, but the actual practice of the therapy has to do with the client and the therapist focussing on the present moment.

Dr. Dave: Yes, the focus on the awareness of death, certainly that would seem to echo the part that's existentialist when he talks about it being humanistic existential.

Heery: Right. The existential part is the existence, the givens of being a human being. We have basically five tenets in existential therapy, which are: we all have a body, we are in a body, we are embodied. We will all die: senitude. And we have those small senitudes all throughout life.

Dr. Dave: Wait, what's senitude? That's a new word.

Heery: Senitude means – actually that's a word Jim used a lot in his theories – senitude means the ending of something. For instance, the ending perhaps for you when you retired from Sonoma State. That's an ending, that's a type of ending that happens throughout our life, which bears witness to how we will finally end, when we finally die. How we serve during those small senitudes, the larger senitude of leaving.

Dr. Dave: OK, that was a new word for me, so back to the five. Do you want to run through them again?

Heery: Sure, there's having a body; sentience; being a part of, and apart from. We all experience being a part of a group of people: humanity, and we also experience being apart from. For instance your listeners right now might be drifting off, not hearing everything I'm saying, or you're saying. So they are apart from. And then their minds, their consciousness will bring them back, and then they'll hear something that touches them and then takes them off. So it's this continuum of being a part of and apart from that operates in every single human being. That's how we are all alike.

Another way that we are all alike, and we share this likeness is that we have choices. And it's so interesting to me in my 30 some odd years of doing psychology and psychotherapy, when I speak to a client often times they come with a concern. For instance "I'm having trouble with my partner", "I'm having trouble with my job". Those are very typical, cross cultural concerns in every country and in the United States. So when you ask a person, well what choices do you have? Many times people will say "I have none". But it is the art of the psychotherapy to bring out in the human being that they actually do have many choices, and that is what is successful; and the potential, the humanistic aspect of this model and you are looking at the different choices that people have.

And then finally, the responsibility we each take in our own life. We are entities unto ourselves, responsible for every single choice that we make.

Dr. Dave: Well you know I didn't even give you a heads up that we would be talking about this today and I'm impressed at how easily it rolls off your tongue. So is this your approach today, the humanistic existential approach? Would you say that describes how you are working?

Heery: Well, yes, and no. The "no" part is that I am also highly influenced by transpersonal psychology, and my dissertation, which Jim was the chair of, was in interviewing people who had the experience of hearing voices.

I myself had heard one many years ago when a very dear friend of mine had died, and I had a full inner voice experience of his presence five years after his death. And I became very curious about that phenomenon: I wasn't psychotic, I wasn't schizophrenic, I wasn't on medication. So I interviewed thirty people who we tagged as – and I hate to use this word – normal; but "normal" being that they were not on medication at that point in life, and they had not been diagnosed with any psychological disorder.

And what we found is that people who hear voices, not all people but 90% of the thirty people I interviewed, did selfless service from hearing voices from inside. But the voice was guiding them to contribute to the culture at large. So my emphasis on existential humanism includes the transpersonal because I think where humanistic psychology falls short - and has in the past, there has been a criticism of it – is it doesn't place the person back in the culture, back in the world in which they live. So the transpersonal dimension places the person in a larger context of what are they doing here, how are they contributing to the larger good of humanity.

Dr. Dave: We may pick up on that theme again a little bit later.

You know I went to Amazon just to see any publications that you might have out there, and so it's interesting to hear about this dissertation because I saw all of these people who were citing your work in other books, and I wondered "is this the same Myrtle Heery that I know?" (laughter) and I guess it is! And I think it is referring to that research that you just described; your doctoral research, which is really fascinating

Heery: Yes, that put me out in the world pretty rapidly. I got a lot of emails from schizophrenics all over the world (laughter) and "normals" like myself. It was a big event for my work at that time.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Now in one of his later books, Jim talked about his work as "life changing psychotherapy" in contrast to other approaches. But don't all therapists think that they do life changing therapy? So what's the distinction here?

Heery: Well. I think the distinction is short term versus long term psychotherapy. And I think we are talking about here long term psychotherapy, of actually changing inner constructs. The subjective part of a human; how they actually go about constructing their life from inside. And I don't think that's possible in short term therapy, I really don't. I think it's possible to change some ways, some habits, for instance smoking, or arguing with your partner. I think those are very applicable to short term therapy.

But we're talking about looking at how you actually construct your entire view of life from the inside out. It's like a verbal meditation this type of therapy, where you're actually speaking to your therapist about what's going on in your inner world and then making some choices; and seeing if it's possible, through the relationship with the therapist, that you can construct new ways of being in the world.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I like what you said about it being like a verbal meditation, speaking out loud your awareness. Because when I first read some of Jim's books - and at that point I don't think he was into Buddhism or meditation, or anything like that - and it struck me in exactly that way. It seemed very Buddhist, very much like an out loud kind of meditation. I think maybe later he came around to seeing it in that light.

Heery: Well, that's an interesting subject in itself. We had many dialogues together about the soul, the spirit, the transpersonal; because he was on my committee of hearing voices. And Jim, in many ways was a very concrete person, and is a very concrete person. He does believe and follow the inner guidance but he is always concerned, well how is the person functioning in the world? So it was always, he was interested in those concepts: Buddhism, Sufism, all the different religions. But he was very much interested in how life is god in itself, which was very helpful to me. And now in my teaching graduate students and undergraduate students I'm also interested in my students' transpersonal experience but how is that applying to their life? And how do they see god in the tree? How do they experience their world as a positive world, and how are they going to act in that positive way?

Dr. Dave: Yeah, there is so much we could talk about around that. Now, you have taught and led workshops all over the world. As a matter of fact, thinking back to our first meeting when I was chair of the department and you came around, or maybe it was a little bit later. I remember you coming and telling me about a program you were running that involved exchanges with Russian mental health professionals and you've been to Russia a number of times. I remember you brought some Russian psychiatrists and psychologists over who I had an opportunity to meet. Talk a little bit about that experience.

Heery: Well, what I did in the late 90s - actually the connection with the Russians started in the early 90s - and I wrote an article for the Humanist Psychology Journal about that, titled Inside The Soul of Therapy. And it was a soul experience going to Russia.

How I connected with them is that many of the students there had read Jim's work. One of his first works was *The Search For Authenticity, The Art of the Psychotherapist*. His last book was *Psychotherapy Isn't What You Think*. They had wanted him to come but he was unable to go, so I went for him. We led several different workshops and trained many students there and many of them came here and visited. They visited your

University, and went to the Evolution Conference of Psychotherapy so it was a very rich time.

During that time I became aware of how much psychology was important in the globalisation process, so we formed an institute called the International Institute for Humanistic Studies. Which is focussing on training “helping” professions, and I want to say that word broadly because we are training hospice workers, nurses, different people who reach out and help other people. It’s like taking psychology in a further realm of its possibilities, and we are doing 2 year trainings in different countries, primarily in America right now: California, Arizona, Texas, Colorado. They’re titled Unearthing The Moment.

During these 2 year trainings people learn how to communicate in an in depth, clear communication format with emphasis on compassion, hope, courage, resilience and tolerance. Those are the five qualities we’re teaching in communication.

Dr. Dave: I love it!

Heery: Yes, it’s pretty powerful. I see it reaching all of these students, reaching many different venues. Recently our focus has also included the concept of ageing. We just yesterday did another annual seminar on Awakening to Ageing; and it’s growing and growing and more people are not just coming to us for Professionals for Continuing Education units, which we do offer, but they’re coming as lay people wanting to know how to age with grace, how to communicate with each other with compassion, and how to make a difference in their community.

And last year I was invited to go to China where I spoke in two universities, one in Beijing and one in Shanghai and I would say it was the peak of my experience of speaking with students from another nation. I really got why China is cutting edge right now. It felt to me like the days of when we were with J. F. K. and we all had the dreams that we could just do anything. That to me was the experience of the Chinese students - they can do anything. They had read everything about me on the internet, they were on their toes with questions and they were text messaging their buddies in another town as I was speaking. I was speaking in English, I didn’t even need a translator and their questions were so rich.

And I just want to share with the audience the one central thing I see around the world when I speak with different audiences, is: what would you do about your government in your country? And the consistent message I

hear back is “well we could just function fine without our government. We could do it ourselves.”

Dr. Dave: Interesting. Yes, well what an exciting life you are leading, doing all of that. Now you are director of the International Institute for Humanistic Studies and I noticed a couple of times you’ve used the word globalisation, which when a lot of people talk about globalisation it’s a dirty word, yet I sense when you use it there’s a positive role for psychology to play in that process

Heery: Absolutely I really do, and I don’t think it’s a dirty word. I think it’s been used in the trade world and the business world, in the economic sphere of the world, but not in the world of communication and that is basically what falls apart every single time. Whether you are talking about economies, social life issues, you’re talking about how the two human beings, or three or four are speaking with each other. So I think that is what psychology has to offer for the universe, is how to speak to each other. That’s what we do one on one, starting in one on one therapy and then working with groups.

My course that I teach on group psychotherapy is one that I teach at Sonoma State and at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology and I more and more see that as the venue for psychology working more and more with groups. You see this in business where they’re hiring consultants. You yourself have experience in that area. And I think that area has just begun to open up, and especially using the internet, and especially using the computers and being able to speak to people instantly, all over the world. Speaking is so critical.

Dr. Dave: I think that Carl Rogers came to a similar place toward the end of his life, where he was doing a lot of group work and going to different countries.

Heery: Right. He was in the Eastern Bloc countries, some of my personal friends were with him when they did these communication sessions. And those sessions, really I took from a lot of what I knew through my colleagues that went with him a basis of our unearthing training is often times what we do with the training of the professionals. We don’t talk theory, we talk what matters to each human being in the room before we start talking about psychological theory. So, people have an experience together, of what matters to them.

And Carl did this in the Eastern Bloc countries, and big people in the higher ups of government would sit together for two or three days talking about what mattered to them. What mattered to them! And then after what mattered to them they would take on the big topics of economy, nuclear, the Berlin Wall at that time. Then they could come to some conclusions much more rapidly than they could without the foundation –the existential foundation of how we connect.

We connect with each other by: you have children, I have children, how are your kids doing, how is your wife with her ageing, how are you with your ageing, how is it to have grey hair. We connect that way first, with how we are alike. Then we can talk intellectual ideas together.

Dr. Dave: What an exciting process.

Heery: It is. It is a very exciting process. I think it's another way of looking at how to resolve not only individual problems but global problems.

Jimmy Carter during his Presidency did not understand how one of his major treaties that was signed reached its conclusion. So he gave the tapes from the session to Carl Rogers and his colleagues. What they found was that these three men who were speaking with each other started speaking about their children, their daughters; and how much they cared for their daughters. Then they went for a walk at Camp David outside. And I'm not clearly sure about all the intricacies of this so I don't want to misquote what happened, but the big thing that did happen is that people met on what mattered to them.

And I think if your listeners right now would think about really good communications they have with their spouses; their significant others; their children; their people at work. If you first start talking with what matters to you, you can resolve just about any conflict.

Dr. Dave: Now I know that you're teaching a class on careers in psychology because I was a guest speaker just this past week. How are you preparing your students to go into careers in psychology?

Heery: Well I am preparing them by inviting people like you and others to come to the class who are doing things that are different, that are out of the box of how we have seen traditional psychology and psychotherapy. Not to say that that box is not going to continue on, I just think that it's going to take on different shapes.

I've invited you, I've invited a hospice worker to talk about hospice and death and dying. I've had someone who is going to talk on pre and perinatal psychology, what they're doing with cutting edge work with birth work. So there is a whole venue of psychology and how it's being applied in the world today that I think is exciting.

Students don't just have to think about getting a licence. Certainly that's one thing they can do, and it's an important thing to do. But even after they get a licence, most licensed therapists have three or four hats that they wear, just like yourself and me. And I think those three or four hats are extremely interesting for the students to hear about.

Dr. Dave: What's your hope for the future? I mean as we look to the future it seems like there is a lot of threat of doom and gloom. And yet here you are preparing students to go into that future, and you must have some hope that allows you to do this. What is your positive vision for the future?

Heery: Well I go back to my spiritual training with different spiritual teachers, Irena Tweedy being one. I remember asking her that question and basically the answer is: if each individual takes some time, quiet time, to look inside and see what is annoying them outside, where it is inside themselves. If they could just take in that part of themselves, own it, work with it inside themselves and then go back in the world with compassion to that irritation, that perhaps is not an irritation anymore. Perhaps it's something we can all be irritated about but then have compassion about also.

For instance, not being heard correctly, that's a very standard problem in communication all over the world. How many times during the day someone will say to another person, "you didn't hear me right!" OK, let's stop and hear it right. What was the meaning of what you were saying.

Viktor Frankl, a phenomenal existentialist who worked in the concentration camps in World War II, definitely gave us hope, gave all those people hope. It's that kind of hope, it's the hope that people will connect as individuals with the same humanity and broaden the potential of being human while we are here.

Dr. Dave: I went onto your website and found a few articles that you have linked to there, and I'll provide those links for my listeners as well. And you made reference in one of them to the spiritual teacher you just mentioned, Irena Tweedy was it?

Heery: Irena Tweedy, yes.

Dr. Dave: Now did you seek her out before or after you heard that voice?

Heery: Ah that's an interesting question. I was a meditator before I heard that voice. It was about the time, yes it was about the time the voice experience happened. Yes it was soon after that voice experience that I did not seek her, I think the path found me. It's a Sufi path and it's a path of being in the marketplace as an ordinary person. That's basically what a Sufi is in some languages, is someone in the marketplace doing their work, spreading the spiritual aspect of life in the marketplace.

So that force found me and it was quite a journey finding her physically, in fact I got quite lost finding her. She was at that time living in London, but finally when I found her she opened the door and said "I've been waiting for you."

Dr. Dave: Wow.

Heery: It was quite a wonderful meeting; and from then on I spent about five years visiting her off and on, and being taught by her the ordinary of life, and how the spiritual is in everything in the ordinary.

Dr. Dave: Fascinating. Would it be too intrusive of me to ask what you heard that voice say? It may be too private and you may not want to speak about it.

Heery: Ah, no, no not at all. I will tell you. My friend who had died was an artist and a writer and he was an Afro-American who had lived in Bern, Switzerland. His name was Vincent Carter, a wonderful man.

And he came to me while I was sleeping, and I was awakened in my sleep and so it was not a dream, I was definitely awake. And he said to me "I have gone nowhere. I have gone everywhere."

And I replied Vincent, is that you? And he said "Yes – listen." And at that point a very piercing sound started happening. And it was as if something biblical, the sound of the universe; I don't know how to put words on it but I wept, I started crying. And my husband woke up and he asked me if I was alright. I could not speak and he said "what is the sound in this room?"

Dr. Dave: Wow.

Heery: That was a very profound experience and I do not mind sharing it at all. I am sure, I am 100% sure many people have had very similar, profound experiences and it's not about the experience it's about what you do with it. And that experience has driven me to what I'm doing today. I'm extremely grateful for that experience; that we are everywhere.

Dr. Dave: So what's your notion at this point of what happens after this; in other words after this life?

Heery: I am everywhere, and we just had a very dear friend die last week, and I had that experience in the process of his dying that he was slowly dying and I believe, and I have had the experience - I have had a near death experience in a car accident – that life goes in another form, and it's a beautiful form. The only thing that's really missing is the physical body and the physical touch of people you love and care for. But you go on. I truly believe you go on. You have work to do and you do it at a different level; and I feel I'm being guided and taught by all those that had gone before me. I think there's a very very thin veil from being in the body and out of the body and we have to take very good care of this gift of being here. It can easily, quickly be taken away. Not that that's a bad thing, just that it's a reality that we should hold and take it with vigilance.

Dr. Dave: Well as we wrap things up here I wonder if there are any last words that you would like to leave our listeners with, or anything that we haven't covered that you had hoped to touch upon?

Heery: Well what I'd hope is that each one of the listeners listen to your wonderful station; and what you're doing is just cutting edge work and I in the moment am so appreciative of your following your voice of your work and your interest in the internet and this radio. This is such a wonderful venue for people to connect and do exactly what I'm speaking toward, which is having compassion, courage, hope, tolerance and resilience to everything that is happening in our lives individually and collectively. So thank you for this program.

Dr. Dave: Myrtle Heery, thanks so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Heery: You're very welcome, thank you.