

Shrink Rap Radio #117, November 3, 2007, Self-Disclosure and Friendship

David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Charles Merrill, Ed.D.

(Transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Axel Reisdorf)

Charles Merrill, Ed.D. is professor of psychology at Sonoma State University, where we have been longtime friends and colleagues. After earning his doctorate at the University of Florida, he came to Sonoma State University where he was Director of the Counseling Center for many years. Later, he became a member of the psychology department, eventually serving as department chair and Chair of the Faculty Senate. He was one of the co-founders of the psychology department’s M.A. in Organization Development program. He regularly teaches courses on counseling theory and practices, family psychology from a systems perspective, group process, and a seminar on myth, dream and symbol based on the psychology of Carl Jung. His teaching has been strongly influenced by the writing of such theorists as Martin Buber, Ted Landsman, Sidney Jourard, R.D. Laing, James Hillman, and Carl Rogers. In recent years, Dr. Merrill has been active in the Association for the Development of the Person-Centered Approach, which focuses on research and practice of person-centered, and Rogerian principles and practices in psychotherapy, education and groups for world peace.

Dr. Dave

Dr. Charles Merrill, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Dr. Merrill

Thank you, thank you David.

Dr. Dave

Well let me sort of describe the backdrop here or the forthdrop for our audience. We are sitting outside at Sonoma State University. It’s a beautiful day, it’s in the seventies. Flowers are blooming. We are sitting by a food cord area, so people may hear other voices in the background and I introduced you very formally as Dr. Charles Merrill but of course we are long time friends and colleagues and I think of you as Charlie. But I notice a lot of times you say Charles, people call you Charles. Which do you prefer?

Dr. Merrill

Well, for years I had a double name, Charles Hall and when I came to California I wanted to be less formal so I went to Charlie and now I have been slowly letting Charles come back into the picture.

Dr. Dave

Is Charles Hall coming back?

Dr. Merrill

No, I think that was from the early early days of growing up in East Texas.

Dr. Dave

Ja, and I want to get into that too. Now I've already mentioned that we have been friends for a long time, something like 35 years.

Dr. Merrill

A long time.

Dr. Dave

I know that friendship was something you care a lot about. You have given a lot of thoughts to it I think you may have done some presentations on it. So it is something that I want to work around to but I'll start somewhere else. You mentioned growing up in east Texas and I know you grew up in a little town called Kikon Gap, so what was that about?

Dr. Merrill

Sometimes I think coming to Sonoma States is like coming to a village because growing up in a small hamlet like that – you know everybody and you know everything that is happening.

Dr. Dave

How many people were in Kikon Gap? What do you guess?

Dr. Merrill

The sign on the road said 258. I think there were 9 in my High School graduading class. And so there was a sense of really being known in that small community. And I felt that in my work here at Sonoma State in northern California for many years there was that same sense of pretty much knowing most of the faculty and people here and getting close with the students. But in a small town the downside is that everybody knows your business, the upside is – I had a strong sense of place. And that was a reassuring, comforting experience for me.

Dr. Dave

Yes, and that stayed with you because I remember some years back you took a visit back home to Kikon Gap and you took a camera with you and you created a slide show and you put country music to it and folk song music to the slide show to give it some kind of soundtrack. I remember just being really moved and somehow you captured a peace of Americana that I guess through western movies and so on and I thought oh that really connected with the Texan in me and I am not from Texas.

Dr. Merrill

You know that slide show which is kind of being archived these days but whenever I did that, something in me was moving around, wanting to capture something around my childhood roots before disappeared. I was interesed in taking old houses that were decaying, not the new brick homes that were being build. In other words: they had no meaning for me. But those oder homes and the people most of who in that slide show are now gone, passed on – that was very important.

I have a very interesting side story on that. I did a presentation in Mexico – it was a humanistic conference – and I presented that slide show. And it was amazig that people that were there – particulary that Mexican citicens – really related to me and to that experience of the images of World Texas and much like their feeling the tone of it was like what they experienced.

Dr. Dave

Yes, yes, and you are a great story teller, too. Somehow it was a narrative about your life. And so I want to encourage you in the course of our conversation, if stories come to mind and that you feel are particularly illustrative to you that you feel free to go ahead and share them. Anybody in that little town. Did either you or anybody else ever suspect that... your father was a truck driver – did anybody suspect that you are going to be a university professor?

Dr. Merrill

It was an amazing little area in the late 50s. There were a number of graduates of that tiny country school that went on to university. And I think I was a part of that group. It was like several years in there that that happened. But I don't know that in my early years that I would have thought that I would ever going to be a professor.

Dr. Dave

What did you picture for yourself?

Dr. Merrill

I saw myself going into business of some kind so I studied business administration, got into psychology kind of late. And I saw myself probably working for a company or maybe having a business on my own or either maybe going in with my father's trucking business. So I really – once I got into this I realized that it held some interest but not nearly as much as psychology and other counselling people oriented kind of direction.

Dr Dave

Well as you think back on those days of growing up in Kikon Gap, I wonder if there is a story that comes to mind or time that somehow encapsulates or you know symbolises some of the – something important about that time or that in some way throw shadows on your later life.

Dr. Merrill

I remember an English teacher that – she was a – her name was Mrs Crawford and she was just great. She saw me as a person. She really saw me.

Dr. Dave

That is so important.

Dr. Merrill

And it was – you know at that time my class was probably little larger than nine but basically you could hardly be missed but I felt that she was introducing the class to literature that I had not a clue about growing up: Beowulf, Shakespeare, various novelists – and she made it come alive.

Dr. Dave

So she exposed you to a larger world because I was envisioning you being that very small world – your place – and having a rather narrow vision of the world. But now you are like this gentleman scholar, you are very sophisticated, in terms of where you live, your lifestyle, wines, travel ect.

Dr. Merrill

So I also credit partly my wife Hella to that. She is very aesthetically minded, she is an artist and she has really – I think encouraged me to travel and to widen my own vistas.

Dr. Dave

So you leave this little town and school and you went to college – if your experience was anything like mine, because I went to a small school too – not as small as yours but I suddenly found myself being a very small fish in a big pond. What was it like to you? That transition out of a small town, small school to university?

Dr. Merrill

Well I think for me the university was called a college – it was East Texas State College, which is now part of Texas. And my experience was that it was not a huge leap, it was a leap but it was not like going to University of Texas let's say or an East Coast School. I would have been totally lost.

Dr. Dave

So you didn't really experience a shock?

Dr. Merrill

No, not in the same way. There was a shock of being in classes for a lot more that was expected from me than in High School – that's for sure but it was close to home so I maintained the connection there too for several years.

Dr. Dave

And then later you went on to graduate school in psychology and it was at the University of Florida?

Dr. Merrill

Well I did my Masters at East Texas State and then I did my Dr. at the University of Florida in the cauch of education in counselor education.

Dr. Dave

I remember that you got some counselling or therapy when you were a student there. And I had the impression that that was very formative for you.

Dr. Merrill

I had an experience earlier on with – I had a class with **Isaac Homes** who had studied with Carl Rogers earlier in Rogers' career. And I was very impressed with his way of teaching and also is proceptual outlook on learning and realy behave in ways that we believe our soul. And that stayed with me all the way through the graduate experience at Florida.

I remember having some brief counselling with Sidney Jourard who had done some similar research on self disclosure in – I suspect in 1965 or 1966 – and he was very instrumental in getting me to broaden my thinking horizont. He had me reading **Cosins, Nicos Cosins**, he had me reading Martin Buber. It was not like any therapy I have ever been in. It was more like a teaching experience as a part of that therapy. He was like a mentor for quite a while even after I no longer saw him as a client. And I realised that when I was working on my degree – I was really young – I was like 23 / 24 and I was really in a formative place. I was in a very open place in my life to really absorb. So some of those exposures through Isaac Homes and through Sidney Jourard and some other faculty at University of Florida have been really important to me – even today.

Dr. Dave

Ja, you know Sidney Jourard – certainly that was a name, I became aware of. He wrote an important book called "The Transparent Self". Isn't that right?

That book made a lot sense to me. And I am afraid that people maybe don't get exposed to that these days. Maybe the idea of he was advocating had sort of generally entered into the counselling / therapy culture. What is your thought about that? How would you characterise his thesis in that book?

Dr. Merrill

His thesis is similar to Rogers – Carl Rogers in some ways. And the idea is that basically if you are willing to take the risk to disclose your feelings, your thoughts, your dreams to someone that you think you can trust, that that will tend to encourage that person - if you are in a friendship or relationship - to do the same – to open up back. So the similar part is that self disclosure begets self disclosure.

Dr. Dave

I always found that to be true.

Dr. Merrill

And I have too.

One of the things that I found interesting in his research was that women – now this is a generalisation but it is close to his research – that women are more likely to be open to disclosing to either a man or a woman. Men on the other hand are more likely to disclose to another woman than to another man. And he goes into some reasons around that which have to do with – I think trust in the sense of how we are conditioned as males in our culture to not be that open about feelings – and he could extrapolate other thoughts about that in terms of we are all exposed more to women earlier in our lives through our mothers.

So that was an interesting kind of opening for me to think about what or who do we open up to. That has probably become more a part of the culture now. Not as a clear marker as it was at that time.

Dr. Dave

Yes, because I think in a part he was responding to the psychoanalytic models which have been pretty dominant often to that point. And he was advocating transparency even to a therapeutic relationship. In a disturbance he rather than being a blank screen should be open about who he was and that sounds like he was with you.

Dr Merrill

Very much. He wouldn't give me feedback about how I held myself, was my body stiff he was very much a person in that relationship.

Dr. Dave

You know another name that you have mentioned that I kind of recognise it but I don't really know who he is or what his contribution was – is Ted Landsman. Can you say a little bit about him?

Dr. Merrill

Ted Landsman had also been a student of Rogers and of **Comes** He basically developed research in the 1960s and into the 70s about what is now called positive psychology. He called it positive human experience. And he was interested in finding out about what are the positive forces in our life that help us make changes in our lives or that help us move forward in our lives. So he felt like that negative experiences or what later I called disconfirming experiences tend to knock a person down. Tend to lower self esteem, tend to make us doubt ourselves more than we probably need to. So he was having his graduate student's research

positive human experience. A good friend of mine studied what he called the “turning point experiences” Or there is a book called “The Tipping Point” which relates to that as well. What is it that tips? Something old but you can’t go back, you have to go in a new direction. And he was very much – how do I say this – At that time, he was also, he was jewish and I didn’t know a lot about his background but he really opened that world for me of taking a look at what is happening, also kind of post World War II. A fall out from the Holocaust. He was very much involved in that whole movement or developing more awareness about that. When I think about that, the positive human experience research – he and Jourard were also good friends – I think came out of that thinking about the horrendous experience that so many people lived through and didn’t live through in that whole World War II area.

Dr. Dave

You know you mentioned that tipping point experience or that critical turning point so I have to throw that back at you and ask you: Is there a place that stands out for you in your own live as a critical turning point or tipping point?

Dr. Merrill

I think there are a number of tipping points that happen in our lives that it is hard to single out a particular one. – Here comes a skateboard. Listeners are getting a full dose of life around us. – I think a tipping point for me was. Actually I was in therapy as a part of my masters and I was thinking about dropping out of school and waiting and taking a break. My father needed help in his work. He was getting older. He was having problems with his. His business seemed to need help. So I said I am stopping, taking a year off and he encouraged me not to do that. And he said: You know if you drop out of graduate school at this point you may never go back. He said: I’ll figure it out. I’ll find a way. And I was so. At the time I was surprised. As I look back on that I realised how profound that was. Chances are that I would not have gone back.

Dr. Dave

And he had never been to college. This was really. I don’t know. It sounds that it was really insightful of him and very giving.

Dr. Merrill

It was and I have come to ... I was able to express that to him later in his life – how much that ment to me. And he got it. He understood.

Dr. Dave

At Sonoma State here, you served as psychology graduate coordinator for films. `96 to 2005 and you worked for programm coordinators to develop and improve programms in Art Therapy, Death Psychology, Humanistic Psychology and organisation development. These were all and continue to be a masters programms. And thus you have tought a number of undergraduate courses. This would be a tough question if somebody threw it at me but what is your philosophy of teaching?

Dr. Merrill

Well, I was very ... when I was in graduate school I read “On Becoming A Person” by Carl Rogers and there was a chapter in that book about person centered learning or student centered learning – he called it at that time - and I was just reading that and I had just realised: Whow if you allow people freedom, give them some boundaries but if you allow them the freedom to move within those boundaries and try to find a way to support a direction that they want to move in, people will learn, people will pick up and run with it. And basically I think

that was my philosophy as the coordinator of the graduate programmes as to try to support the resource, the human resource that the person who wants to do something, wants to develop an aspect of a programme.

Dr. Dave

Yes, you were good at working hard at creating a kind of a safe container for those programs. Because that kind of freedom is often ... there are other parts of the university in the university that are feeling threatened by pockets of freedom like that. They want to impose rules and so part of your job was to provide an intellectual rushing out and a defence to keep this space open to keep that freedom.

Dr. Merrill

For a good time there at the beginning of my ten year as graduate coordinator I was able to interface well with the administration of the university around the issues of are we keeping our standards up, are we developing along lines where people really need what we are offering. I have to also give you some credit because you were department chair at the time and actually tapped me for that job. You said for one year. I liked it, otherwise I wouldn't have continued and enjoyed what I was doing.

Dr. Dave

It was good choice on my part. I discovered your strengths – I mean you really became a campus diplomat – that's how I see you – a kind of a – I won't say elder – a staysman on campus.

Dr. Merrill

Oh, I'm getting older.

Dr. Dave

And my gift seems to be delegation. Getting people to do whatever you let them.

Dr. Merrill

I observed you, David. You helped me in that coordinator role because I delegated more and more as I went forward. And trusted the coordinators of the various programs as well.

Dr Dave

Excellent. Now, you mentioned Carl Rogers several times and I know that you are going to give a paper – somewhere – I don't remember where – on Martin Buber and Carl Rogers.

Dr. Merrill

Actually I gave that paper last year and it is coming out in a journal, called "The Person Centered Journal" the spring of this coming 2008. And it basically was build on the dialogue that Rogers and Martin Buber had at the University of Michigan years ago like in the late 50s. It was quite a seminar event and it has been researched and studied but in that dialogue there was – there were some things that touched me around – particularly around Buber's idea that in relationship it is what happens in the inbetween that makes the difference. It doesn't necessarily reside in the person that have a relationship it is what transpires between the two people. And Rogers didn't frame it that way. He talked more about unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence but even though both men were different generations from different parts of the world and different kinds of background there was something that resonated in that whole notion of dialogue – which is really more the Buber concept and also Jourard talked a lot about dialogue. Carl Rogers didn't much. He talked more about how to

provide a condition where within those conditions the person will make better choices. The choices that are right for them.

Dr. Dave

So what have you taken from each of these men?

Dr. Merrill

I think with Martin Buber who is a Jewish Israeli theologian – or he talks about himself sometimes as an anthropologist as well – that sense of really trusting the relationship and trusting that if I am willing to make a commitment to see you as a colleague a friend to make that commitment to be with you to not leave – what I mean to leave the field – whatever comes.

Dr. Dave

Even if there's a conflict.

Dr. Merrill

The conflict is really important part of it. That is one of the things that I liked about Buber is that sometimes you have to come up against another person but that doesn't mean that you don't love that person or feel connected. And I think that I never quite got that from Rogers. I got it more from Jourard because he kind of disclosed something you might not want to hear. And that's the way I liked about Buber is that he is willing to say out of caring what you may not want to hear but maybe need to hear.

Dr. Dave

And I've seen you do that in your own life. I've seen you do that in department meetings where you had the courage to speak up and say something that was unpopular or to say something about the process that was going on, that would kind of lead people a little bit the wrong way but that needed to be said. And I've seen you in your marriage kind of hang in there in difficult times, trying to simultaneously hold your own ground but at the same time also trying to be really working at listening to and valuing your mate.

Dr. Merrill

I say yes to all of that. And I've sometimes –

Dr. Dave

And it's hard work.

Dr. Merrill

It's hard work and I wonder sometimes: Why did I say that? Why didn't I just keep quiet? But on the longer – when I look at the longer path – the longer vision I am glad – I – when I hear them said whatever was – I think the commitment part is really important to me. More than I realised. You know? I used to think I to be committive as kind of confinding and suffocating and reduced my degrees of freedom. But now I see a different way in that. That making a commitment to an idea or sometimes a person is quite an important step for me to respect that in myself and even if the other person leaves the field, that doesn't mean my commitment may not change. Buber was very important in that I think.

Dr. Dave

When you said that even if the other person leaves the field that reminded me of that moment when the interviews with Carl Jung – where the interviewer tries to get him to talk about what

happened with Freud and Jung refuses to do so and the interviewer says: “But Freud has been dead these many years.” And Jung says something along the lines of these commitments don’t change.

And I know you thought about friendship a lot. I seem to recall that you wrote a paper about that or gave a presentation about friendship years ago.

Dr. Merrill

I did years ago. I did do a presentation.

Dr. Dave

So what are your ideas about friendship? And have those changed over time?

Dr. Merrill

Well, I think even speaking about the commitment part speaks a bit - ties in a bit with friendship for me. I have a friend in Florida, named Stan and he and I have known each other – like us – for over 30 years. I just wrote him a letter the other day. And we hadn’t been talking on email or on telephone – he doesn’t like email – and I just kind of disclosed what was happening for me in my life and at some point he will respond – it’ll either be a brief letter or it might be a phone call and I think friendship for me – how do I say this? – helps me realize what the marks have been in my life. In other words: I am not really good about a friendship that comes and goes after a little while. I like a friendship to last for years because there is something about the history about it that – it’s a grounding experience for me and maybe that’s going back in growing up in a small community where things didn’t change that fast or that quickly and there – like for example – I don’t want to leave friendship but I gonna make a point here. My first – or is it my second grade school teacher is like 98, she is still alive, she still keeps the membership list of the church, she signs people in when there is a school reunion, she lives alone, if you can imagine that and she is there. How many generations would that be? I don’t even know how to count. I think friendship for me is something that has a lot of depth to it. I’m interested in also like you and I have a long term friendship and it’s gone through a lot of different places in my life we have gone through a relationship break up or two, issues having to do with health, issues having to do with work, issues having to do with how does one bring more meaning in one’s life. And let’s say, personally – friendship with you and I would also include my friend Stan in this and a couple of other people but not that many is it where you pretty much talk about anything. And there is that sense of acceptance – mutual acceptance. Like there’s not much you can do that would change my feelings about you.

Dr. Dave

And I have done some stuff.

Dr. Merrill

So have I, so have I. It’s a part of growing up.

Dr. Dave

Yes, I have done some stuff that put that to the test in some ways. I certainly – I would say as I reflect on our friendship – in many ways you have been a wonderful model for me - you are only one or two years older than I am but in some ways you are like a big brother. You introduced me to people that I wouldn’t have met otherwise and ideas and events and kind of moved me into spaces I realised. I cannot remember the specifics now but in the past I reflected on the thought you know “Whow I got to do this and go to this place and that’s because of Charlie, he brought me in to this.” Like you I had a boat – and took me many times

– sailed around San Francisco Bay – met other people. I watched you grow so much in the time that we've been together these many years and I've seen you evolve into a better and better husband, into the gentleman style, that I mentioned, the campus diplomat and peace-maker. You talked about the importance of relationships to me. When that comes across in the way you work with people on campus where you draw them out, you tell your stories, you like to hear their stories and in the process is you are – you build bridges between people. That is how I see you.

Dr. Merrill

I think that started early David in my life I was thinking about it even in a – even as a kid, I used to like to get people together. I was interested in bringing people together and I am not sure why I went that way – you know – but I was more interested in playing with and hanging out with and figuring out than being alone or fighting or being overly competitive. I am not very competitive, sometimes that's gotten in my way but I am willing to sacrifice that for some of the gains that I have been able to work more collaboratively.

Dr. Dave

Yes, I think that's a quality that we share to some degree – you know that I also like to picture myself as a peace-maker or somebody who can mediate in times of conflict.

Dr. Merrill

And I have seen you do that many times.

Dr. Dave

Yes, we both been rafted into that role. Sometimes we get a bit paid to be in that role. You were a counseling therapist for many years. We didn't say anything about that. I should at least make mention of that. I don't know if you want to comment on that or not. I know for both of us our teaching was sort of more primary and so the counseling therapy work that we did was part time and eventually we moved away from it.

Dr. Merrill

I think for me – I had a private practise part time for about 15 or 16 years. And I found the work itself I liked very much I've particularly seen maybe 8 clients a week. Couples, individuals and with a co-therapist sometimes families. I am not sure what happened there. I think when I came in as department chair at some state I was – I felt like I couldn't handle so I let the practise kind of go on hold and I didn't get back to it. I got involved in campus politics and moved into some leadership positions there and also worked in helping develop the organisation development MA that was part of the founding faculty of that group. I think my interest just kind of went off in different directions but I sometimes – well, it's not regret exactly but I sometimes wish I had another venue to do that one to one work. I do group work and I deal - think of my classes – I actually courses – I actually - work probably more as a facilitator in some ways than I do as a lecturer. But I found that the practise actually was very good for me to develop my ability to listen, to hear, to kind of trust my own intuitive sense about how to respond to somebody else's pain. So I am very glad to have had that experience. It actually helped me a lot in my teaching and administration work.

Dr. Dave

What feeds your soul today – these days?

Dr. Merrill

I think I have been moving more away from the academic life as I have gotten older and as I moved towards every time and place and so I am living as an artist. My life as an artist. And I think it's finding ways to creatively express myself in writing and photography, in travel, in doing things that kind of have a character for me. Having a boat for example has a character for me, growing up in a landlocked area except for lakes. So I think I am in a transition that is actually – and I think that is an emerging – something is still emerging from me.

Dr. Dave

Yea, the interest in to see what happens. I am a step ahead of you and that on ...

Dr. Merrill

You are.

Dr. Dave

As I retired and you decided to take a different movement, to hang in there a bit longer than I did. And you will be retireing pretty soon. I know you wanted to mention a book by Carl Rogers and I want to give you the chance to do that.

Dr. Merrill

It's a brand new biography that has just been released the last month I think called "The Life and Work of Carl Rogers" by Howard Kirschenbaum. And he did an earlier biography, earlier edition and this is 700 pages. I just started reading it in anticipation of our interview and it is very good. It probably is the defenitive work right now on Rogers' life.

Dr. Dave

Whow. An important life and contribution it was. People really need to stay aware of it, well I am kind of lighting things down here and I wonder if there is anything that I have missed in this conversation that maybe you wanted to have the chance to say.

Dr. Merrill

No, I just find it interesting being interviewed because you don't know how it's gonna go and I found that your questions were really great. I really enjoyed your questions and sitting here even though we are outside there is a few distractions. I hope that mainly comes through – that what we want to say comes through on the tape. I just feel privileged to be able to be in this work and to live in California that's I think been a part of also my growth is actually being able to come to a part of the country that actually has felt – where I felt like I very much could be who I am.

Dr. Dave

OK, my good friend Charly Merrill.

Dr. Merrill

Thank you very much, David.

Dr. Dave

Charles Hall Merrill, thanks for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Dr. Merrill

You are very welcome.