

Conscious Living and Dying

Shrink Rap Radio

Episode #139

David Van Nuys interviews Annamaria Hemingway, MA, ABD

Annamaria Hemin: I think that death strips away everything that is unimportant and gives us the chance to be our most authentic selves. So if we fully engage, there's no place to run away and hide, and I think that brings out the potential in each person. To actually see what the cycle of life is really about. In some ways, I would describe it as the miracle of death. The miracle of life and the miracle of death are interwoven.

David Van Nuys: That was the voice of my guest Annamaria Hemingway. Annamaria Hemingway MA, ABD, is the author of the 2008 book *Practicing Conscious Living and Dying* and also writes articles for various magazines on this topic. She's a member of the International Association for Near Death Studies and a spiritual counselor. Annamaria has an MA in Consciousness Psychology and also in Mythology and Depth Psychology, and is currently completing her doctoral dissertation on the topic of The Near Death Experience: A Mythic Model for Conscious Living and Dying. She's also worked in hospice. Now here's the interview.

Annamaria Hemingway, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Annamaria Hemin: Hi David. Thank you for having me on the show.

David Van Nuys: Yes. Well, I'm glad to have you here, and let me say at the outset that I think you've written a very fine book. And I have to admit, I initially approached it as something of a skeptic, and as much as—I'm still pretty much on the fence when it comes to life after death. But skeptic or not, I found the personal accounts you've collected to be inspiring.

Annamaria Hemin: Well, I'm pleased to hear that, because that was really what I wanted to do with the book. There is no concrete evidence either way, and who knows whether there ever will be, but there are certainly the experiences that we all have every day that seem to point that this could be a fact, that life after death may well continue.

David Van Nuys: Well, I'd love to have my listeners to get a feeling for what you've done here and for your writing. So, let's start out by having you read a passage from your book. There's a beautiful section of commentary that you've written about a quarter of the way in. I think it begins on page sixty-five.

Annamaria Hemin: Sure. I'd be happy to do that.

Less than a hundred years ago, it was impossible to escape or deny the reality of death. For epidemics of childhood diseases and limited medical knowledge resulted in death and dying as being a part of every day life. In contemporary Western cultures advancements in health care and a longer life span have resulted in society adopting the concept of ignoring death, the dying, and the bereaved in order to somehow forget that death is an integral part of life. This approach leads to fear and alienation from the ultimate reality of existence and leaves us traumatized and feeling alone when the inescapability of death touches our lives. However, a deeper understanding of the enormity and inevitability of death, which may claim those of any age or circumstance, can result in a positively transformative, life-affirming experience.

David Van Nuys: Yes. Thank you. And of course, people are going to pick up that you have some sort of an accent there. You probably can't hear it, but I can. Tell us a little bit about where you're from and where you are now.

Annamaria Hemin: I actually come from England, the south coast of England. I'm sure that's the accent. In a town, a coastal town, called Brighton, on the south coast. About sixty miles from London, and I'm currently in California. Actually doing the final part of a PhD course and writing my dissertation on the subject of *The Near Death Experience: A Mythic Model for Conscious Living and Dying*. So, that's why I'm here at the moment.

David Van Nuys: Well, that's great. And I've never been to Brighton. I've been to London, and Brighton has certainly played a role in lots of the novels that I've read over the years. Next time I get over there, I'm going to have to check out Brighton.

Annamaria Hemin: You should.

David Van Nuys: Yes.

Annamaria Hemin: It's beautiful in the sunshine.

David Van Nuys: Okay.

Annamaria Hemin: If you're lucky enough.

David Van Nuys: Yeah. Right. When there is sunshine, right? So let me ask you to describe the structure of the book for our audience, because it has kind of a special structure.

Annamaria Hemin: Well, the structure of the book is looking at different interactions with death and dying.

The first section is a history, if you will, or description of the near death experience. Many people think that this is a fairly non— a phenomenon that only actually takes place nowadays, because we hear about it in the

newspapers, and people are more ready to talk about it. But actually, it has a long history. So, I discuss that a little bit, and then I follow up with five people who have had a near death experience, who describe their own experiences and the changes that have taken place in their lives.

The second part is actually dealing with people who have had some interaction with death and the dying process, either losing somebody or else actually accompanying somebody on this very sacred journey of transition that takes place. And, again, how this has resulted in a very inspirational transformative experience for them.

And the last section of the book really looks at the whole idea, as far as we can, of does consciousness exist after death of the physical body. And in this section, I have taken as much information from many diverse cultures. I wasn't wanting to write a scholarly book, but I was wanting to bring in as much evidence as possible. And this, again, is followed up by stories of people who have experienced some of the things I have talked about previously in the text.

So what I've tried to do, is to bring these facts, or bits of information, to people's attention, and then show and illustrate that actually real-life people, like you or me, have actually had this type of experience and may be pondering on that a little bit and seeing how widespread it can be. Everybody seems to have had something happen to them which is out of everyday reality that they cannot explain fully, seems to point to the fact that there is something else going on.

David Van Nuys: Well, I can acknowledge that part certainly. While I haven't had any intimations of life after death, I certainly have had intimations that there's more going on here than meets the eye.

And I wanted to pick up on a couple words that you use. You mentioned inspirational and transformative. And I was reading this book before going to sleep each night, and part of me was in resistance to doing that. Do I really want to read about death before I go to sleep at night? Is this going to be kind of a heavy topic? There's a natural resistance to wanting to even go anywhere near this topic.

I can even imagine that some listeners might even choose to skip this show because "Oh death. Do I want to listen to people talking about death?" But yet as I read, and really your book is a wonderful collection of vignettes woven together by the kinds of theoretical connections that you were just speaking of. And, really, I did find the vignettes that you shared, as well as your own writing, to be both inspirational and transformative and really good material to read before going to bed at night.

Now I notice that every chapter begins with a quote from Plato. And I guess I don't know Plato that well. Why Plato? Is he important in the history of conscious living and dying?

Annamaria Hemin: I think he is, because at the end of the Republic, Plato actually uses a near death experience, which he retells in the Myth of Er, that describes how a soldier on the battle field was killed. And then when taken for burial a few days later, he came back to life. And he then described what had happened to him, and how he had been on this journey. And it's very much written in the time of Plato, but it carries all the same components that people who have a near death experience in contemporary times have. So, I thought it was a very interesting place to start from.

And I liked—Plato would be one of the people I'd like to meet and have a conversation with when one's asked, "Who would you most like to speak to?" And I felt he was actually speaking to me in some way. And so, it was interesting for me that I found a quote from Plato that exactly matched each story. So it worked very well.

David Van Nuys: Interesting. Now, as I say, the book does consist of a series of vignettes, and I haven't prepped you for this, but I'm wondering if there's any one of these accounts that stands out for you, that you could describe here.

Annamaria Hemin: Well, it's a hard thing to do because I think all of the stories carry such a powerful message. In a sense, I'm interested in the stories where a person perhaps doesn't have any belief in an afterlife, but through engaging with a dying person—where something shifts in consciousness, I believe, through my interactions with people on this sacred journey. So I feel that Joanne's story in particular. Someone who was so totally transformed by the stillbirth of her daughter, went on to do such remarkable things, is a very good example of what I'm trying to get at here in the book. How—

David Van Nuys: I'm glad you chose that one, because if you had come up with a blank, that would have been the one that I would have chosen. So, do go ahead, and give us the sense of Joanne's story.

Annamaria Hemin: Well, Joanne was a young mother, you know, with a normal young mother's life. And she was expecting her fourth child, and everything was happening as planned, except in the delivery room. A heart beat wasn't detected, and Joanne's fourth daughter, Cheyenne, was actually a stillbirth.

David Van Nuys: And everything had gone very normally right up until practically the very last minute. So that she had no clue that was going to be any problems. She was really expecting to give birth to a live and healthy baby.

Annamaria Hemin: Yes, and no preparation. Now, in Joanne's own words, through the story, we actually follow her trying to overcome her sense of grief and numbness. I want to say here, I'm in no way saying that the stages of grief we enter are not the most painful things that we can experience in this lifetime when we lose someone. So I don't want people to get the idea that we're kind of saying, "Oh it's all fine. Don't worry about it." Those

human emotional, incredibly deep pain and suffering we go through is a part of this process.

But again, through Joanne's story, we see how no one was really willing to support her. They didn't want to be with her in grief. They wanted her to be the normal person that they knew, because, again as you stated earlier, this denial of death and dying, and people who are bereaved, is very prevalent in our culture. We no longer wear armbands as people did in Victorian times to signify that grieving was taking place, that a death had occurred, that somebody had lost something very important to them.

But getting back to Joanne, Joanne was motivated when she saw the lack of support for mothers like herself who had gone through what she had gone through. She was motivated to put together a program that would help other people in the same situation. And from that little kernel, grew the MISS Foundation. Her interactions with Elizabeth Kübler also I'm sure many people will be familiar with. And this wonderful work that she is now doing.

And I think one of the most interesting parts of Joanne's story is that we see that this pain and suffering she describes in her own words, woke up a—sort of woke her from a form of spiritual dormancy. That suddenly, everything became a lot clearer to her, that she had something to do, a mission for this lifetime. And more than that, perhaps Joanne's baby's life actually did have some incredible meaning. When we look at it, rather than just in that particular moment, of when Joanne had a stillborn daughter, that something else, again, was happening. That Cheyenne actually altered and was part of thousands of peoples' lives and still is to this very day.

So it's a very interesting story from that point of view, and how Joanne realized, you know, how important it was to express caring and compassion, which she talks about in her Kindness Project. That, rather than forget about a death, a parent will actually buy one of, what she calls, her Kindness Project cards, where they will do something very charitable for someone else in memory of their dying or dead child rather than pretend it never happened. And this promotes healing. And she's sold over 700,000 of these Kindness Project cards. She's on the right track.

David Van Nuys: So that out of her grief there was some transformation that happened in her life and became manifest in the world in terms of forming an organization that's been important to other mothers who went through a stillbirth and also this Kindness Project that you're referring to.

Now how did you come to write this book?

Annamaria Hemin: Well, my own mother was going through the dying process, and it was a very painful and long journey for her. I had this sense, again, of what else was going on, and rather than, you know, just be in that place of losing

my mother, which was very, very traumatizing. It always is when we're losing someone close to us, especially a parent, because we seem to lose our connection to where we came from when the parent is no longer there with us.

But I decided I wanted to really be fully present with her on that journey that she made. And through that, I discovered that there were many other things that we can be party to. You know, moments of real clarity, beauty, love.

I think that death strips away everything that is unimportant and gives us the chance to be our most authentic selves. So if we fully engage, there's no place to run away and hide, and I think that brings out the potential in each person. To actually see what the cycle of life is really about. In some ways, I would describe it as the miracle of death. The miracle of life and the miracle of death are interwoven.

So through my own experiences I started to collect stories from other people that had had some kind of dramatic shift through engaging with death and dying or maybe just not in being physically with somebody who was in the dying process. But also people that have had a sense of what death actually means, which was people with near death experiences, people who had had some form of after death communication or some kind of healing through the power of prayer. Something that hinted at this other central subtle movement that was going on that we can, you know, miss very easily if we go into denial, which is normally a person's response.

And as I started working on the book, I found it more and more absorbing for me, and it became a very powerful project. So, all the people that were involved also had such remarkable stories that I felt it was such an important way of perhaps looking at death and dying and the whole matter of consciousness in a slightly different way.

David Van Nuys: Yes. Yes. Now I wonder about your own spiritual orientation, and what you could say about that. I went to a website promoting your book, and there seemed to be a lot there about the course in miracles, and I'm wondering if the course of miracles played an important role in your journey.

Annamaria Hemin: I think, for myself, I started off as a Roman Catholic for many years. I went to a convent all my school life. My mother was Italian. I was very imbued with Catholicism. And as I became older and started to embrace my own ideas and beliefs, I have come to a place where every thing has a kernel for me. Of course miracles have been important in my life. Buddhist philosophy. Indian religions. Native American religions. And African religions. They all, actually, for me anyway, seem to point to the same thing. Have the same message. They're all culturally different in some respects, but I guess I'm more ecumenical now. I like to embrace all religions. And rather than, you know, hone in on anything particular, I like

to look at the message that is in all of these sacred texts that belong to various religions. And I think, actually, is a place that resides in us. That we have an inner knowing of these texts and sacred information that we have lost connection with now.

David Van Nuys: Okay. I can certainly relate to that.

Now, a number of the stories involve the tunnel of white light experience, and it seems to me, that in each of those cases that I read, the person either was currently religious or had been in the past. Do you know of any instances in which someone who is, and always has been, a complete atheist has had a white light experience and has been turned around by it?

Annamaria Hemin: Well yes. One of the things about the near death experience is that it's not necessary to have any religious conviction to have such an experience. You know, one of the perhaps better known stories is that of the Reverend Howard Storm, who was a complete agnostic, atheist, or had no belief, but he had a near death experience, and as you can tell now, he's a reverend. His whole understanding and belief system changed. So I think this can happen to anybody.

But the usual outcome is, I'm not saying that they're going to become a religious person, but perhaps spiritual values seem to be of paramount importance. Compassion. Kindness. Connectedness with all life forms. And when we see the incredible cruelty that goes on in the world in so many places, I mean, just now I'm looking at the news this morning, and I see this little piece about some animals that were slaughtered. And when we feel what actually the world we live in, we see these people who seem to come back with a whole different way of viewing life. And whether one believes that they went to an afterlife or whether they didn't is up to individual belief systems.

The one thing I am firmly convinced of is that these people are changed permanently. It's not like something that happens, and then after a few weeks, they go back to their normal lives, and it's like it never happened. This is a permanent change, and these people tend to go out and live very different lives. Often in service to other people.

So all I can say is something very extraordinary happens, and that happens to a person whether they're religious or not religious. Or spiritual or not spiritual.

David Van Nuys: Yes. I had a friend who did a doctoral research around out of the body experiences, and he found something similar that I think you would attest to, which is that these people lose all fear of dying after that.

Annamaria Hemin: Yes. Certainly. I mean, that's one of the reasons that these stories are so powerful. Because these people do lose all fear of death, and have an

unshakable belief in a continuum of consciousness. But perhaps more importantly, is that they don't fear death. And I think it's a subconscious anxiety in all of us, that makes people power driven. The way we live our lives in this very materially driven society. You know, one lot of people warring with another lot of people. I think it all goes back to this place where we're so centered on this life we're living, and we really believe that that's the ultimate reality. And that one of the main messages from the near death experience is, live your life a little differently. View the world a little differently.

Again, I think one of the ultimate realities that you don't have to have a near death experience to understand, is that when the moon comes out, or the sun sets, and we look up into the sky, and we see this round globe or sphere out in space, in infinite space, that is the earth. You know. Just that one sort of observation can change our whole outlook I believe. Because it changes our reality.

David Van Nuys: Okay. Now, I'm sure you know that the skeptical position on white light and other sorts of near death euphoria has to do with certain chemicals that are released in the brain at the time of death. What are your thoughts about this?

Annamaria Hemin: I think that, again, you know scientific and medical knowledge is very helpful and certainly there's a lot of interest in trying to discover what is going on, but there have been studies. There were studies taken in a Dutch hospital where a number of patients who had had drugs or who hadn't had drugs or certain trauma or not, were all monitored. And we have this sort of—On the one hand we have this very skeptical outlook. That this is something that happens because the dying brain is trying to protect us from death or this change of chemicals occurs. Hallucinations or whatever.

But I think that the problem with this is, again, we're grounding it in very sort of human-day[?] terms. The truth of the matter is we don't actually know what happens in that moment. We have stories from people who tell us of their experiences, and we're trying to prove all the while, could this be true? Could this be, you know, just this? Could it be hallucinations? Could it be drugs? But the truth of the matter is, we don't know. And we don't know anything about the mysteries of death ourselves until we ultimately experience it.

All we can take from these experiences is the possibility that something else is happening, and maybe even look at it from the point of view that we don't have to try and explain it rationally. Because perhaps all that may take place, but something else may be taking place at the same time. That's the only thing I really feel very strongly. That these people come back and they are certain of what has happened to them. The white light. The not wanting to come back to the body.

Another thing is that often these people come back with very enhanced gifts. Healing powers. Telepathic gifts. So, why would that happen? Again, some people might say, well some rearrangement of chemicals in the brain has taken place. But we don't know.

David Van Nuys: Okay. Well, that's a very good response. Now how did you find the people whose accounts are in the book?

Annamaria Hemin: To a large extent, they just happened. Once I decided to write this book, I believe very strongly in synchronicity—

David Van Nuys: Yes.

Annamaria Hemin: That once something is on a roll, it takes a life of its own, and certainly that was what happened. A friend would say to me, "Oh, I know this man." Peter Samuelson, for example, he would have a wonderful story, and I would get in touch with him, which I did. Peter's story is in the book, which again is a wonderful story of how engaging with a young boy dying from inoperable cancer actually led him to start the Starlight Children's Foundation, which does so much for seriously ill children that it's now a huge, huge organization all over the world.

So, these were the kind of the contacts I was getting. Reuben Beckham, the first person who's story is in the book, who is a personal friend of mine, I met when my mother was dying. And for me, meeting Reuben, who had had a near death experience, was a very comforting thing for me to experience when I was going through my mother's dying process. And his story, again, was very powerful, because he's such an unassuming man who has had an incredible life and still does, with an energy that now works in death and dying, you know, as a spiritual counselor. Which one would be finding it hard to follow a man of nearly seventy who's working sixteen hours a day round the clock sometimes, with, you know, having had failing health, but he does.

So, I found these stories as I sort of just—They just came to me, or I got introduced to them. And I would speak to the people, and they sort of all just came together.

David Van Nuys: It's wonderful the way that happens. That once you have that intention and set out on your project that the universe just seems to open up and provide you with exactly the material that you need.

Annamaria Hemin: Yes. And I think once again, what you just said, again, is something I'm trying to put forward in the book is that that is what happens. Once we just open a chink in ourselves, or we allow something to come in whereby we can then put it out into the universe, something does seem to align. And, again, this is one of these things that you can't explain. But it happens.

David Van Nuys: You mentioned your seventy year old friend who's done a lot of work with dying people, and I know you've done a lot of hospice work. What has being with the dying taught you?

Annamaria Hemin: Well, I think I've noticed most of all—I'm not saying this in all circumstance, because obviously there are times when people would say, "Well, none of this happened. It wasn't a very pleasant thing." You know, when so-and-so died or whatever, but I think again, if we fully engage, and we're really with the person ourselves, stripped down, we allow this energy that we were just talking about that is similar to what would happen in a synchronicity to happen.

And I was working in an AIDS hospice a few years ago at the time when there were no cocktails available. Unfortunately, a large number of young men, especially, as we all know, died very premature, and often quite painful deaths. And I remember on one occasion there was somebody that I had known for a few months. And he had started off when I first knew him walking with crutches, and then gradually in a wheelchair and then having surgery and deteriorating.

One day, it was the most beautiful October day, and I saw him. He was very, very frail at that time, and he had an oxygen with him, but he turned round, and he said to me, "Isn't this the most beautiful day." And I looked at him, and I thought he's so close to this place of leaving this world, and even through the physical pain and deterioration he's going through, he just connected with that place and the only thing he wanted to do was to be taken down to the sea. To be wheeled down to the sea.

And I thought of how incredibly amazing it was that he was transcending that place. You know. Connecting with something else. And he always stuck in my mind. I've never forgotten that moment or him because of that. And I believe that we have those moments, those very precious moments that sometimes the most simple thing can be so profound for us. So that, for me, was very memorable.

David Van Nuys: You quote Gandhi as saying, "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

Annamaria Hemin: Yes. I think one of the things from the stories that people will see is that, after people have gone through these very incredible experiences, something that they tend to do with their lives is to be in service in some way to humanity. And I think the quote of Gandhi is so powerful, because it's so true. We can sit on a chair at home bemoaning this, that, and the other, what's happening to us, or what isn't happening to us, or what we want, and what we're not getting, and we can just stay stuck in that place. But like Peter Samuelson and Peter's story says, you know, go out there and volunteer. Take that piece of you. Go out and volunteer for some worthy cause, and everything for you will change in an instant. And I believe that to be true.

David Van Nuys: Well, Annamaria Hemingway, that's a wonderful place for us to close. So I want to thank you so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Annamaria Hemin: Well, thank you very much for having me, and you know, I do hope to encourage people to perhaps overcome their resistance, and take a look at these stories, and perhaps find that they're very helpful to them.