

**Shrink Rap Radio #159, June 20, 2008, Therapist to the Hollywood Stars  
David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Dennis Palumbo,  
M.A., MFT**

(transcribed from [www.ShrinkRapRadio.com](http://www.ShrinkRapRadio.com) by Susan Argyelan)

**Excerpt:** *I think at a psychological level, I learned that for me at least, living authentically was really, really important. And I learned as a patient in therapy that if I were going to live authentically, I was going to have to change my life a little bit. And there was a period in my early thirties, before I went back to school, where I lived in Nepal for four months, in the Himalayas, and started meditating and did a lot of spiritual reading and work. And what I learned was that there was a whole part of me that was deeper and more questing than was being served by my career in show business.*

**Introduction:** That was the voice of my guest, Dennis Palumbo. Dennis Palumbo, M.A. and MFT, is a writer and licensed psychotherapist in private practice, specializing in creative issues. He’s the author of [Writing from the Inside Out](#) as well as a new collection of mystery short stories, [From Crime to Crime](#). Formerly a Hollywood screenwriter, his credits include the feature film, [My Favorite Year](#), for which he was nominated for a WGA award for Best Screenplay. He was also a staff writer for the ABC-TV series, [Welcome Back, Kotter](#), and has written numerous series episodes, and pilots. He’s the author of a novel, *City Wars*, and his short fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, *The Strand*, and elsewhere. He provides feature articles and reviews for the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *EMMY Magazine*, and many others. His column, “The Writer’s Life,” appeared monthly for six years in *Written By*, the magazine of the Writers Guild of America. Currently, he is a contributing writer to *The Lancet*, Britain’s leading medical journal, and does commentary for NPR’s “All Things Considered.” Dennis conducts workshops throughout the country. Recent appearances include the Family Therapy Network Annual Symposium, the Association for Humanistic Psychology; California State Northridge University, the American Society of Journalists and Authors, and the Writers Guild Foundation, Los Angeles Psychoanalytic Society, and the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, and the Directors Guild and UCLA. A graduate of the University of Pittsburgh and Pepperdine University, he serves on the faculty of UCLA Extension, where he was named the Outstanding Teacher of the Year. Now, here’s the interview.

**Dr. Dave:** Dennis Palumbo, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

**Dennis Palumbo:** Thank you so much, David. Nice to be here.

**Dr. Dave:** It’s such a small world. I heard you give a fascinating interview on a Los Angeles National Public Radio affiliate, and my first thought was, “I’ve got to get this guy for my show,” and my second thought was, “I’ll bet he knows my friend and former student, Dr. Ron Alexander,” and it turns out you do!

**Palumbo:** That's right. We were in a supervision group together for a number of years.

**Dr. Dave:** Isn't that amazing? It *is* such a small world.

**Palumbo:** Yeah. Yeah, I think the clinical world can be kind of a small world sometimes, too.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, and Ron and I have kept in touch over the years, and we've done a number of workshops together here in the U.S. and in Europe. Now, you're a Hollywood screenwriter-turned-psychotherapist.

**Palumbo:** That's right.

**Dr. Dave:** And you know, I think it would be the rare person who hasn't, at some point in their life, dreamed of going to Hollywood and making it in one way or another. So, let's start with your history as a screenwriter. How did you end up in Hollywood?

**Palumbo:** Well, I came out to Hollywood – I guess it was, I was 24, 25, something like that – and I wanted to write for film and television. And I had a hard time getting anyone to read my material, and so believe it or not, at the time what I heard was that a lot of producers and studio executives and agents would go down to the Comedy Store and hire people who were doing stand-up. So, I worked up a stand-up act, and I...

**Dr. Dave:** Oh, wow...

**Palumbo:** ...did it at the Comedy Store. And so I hung out with Freddie Prinze and, you know, David Letterman, and I don't know what ever happened to those bums.

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Palumbo:** And did stand-up very badly for about a year and a half. I had, I thought, good material, but I never had that killer instinct, you know?

**Dr. Dave:** Oh, what cojones you have! I think that's a, I think that is one of the – to me – one of the scariest things that a person could do. I mean, I've had that fantasy for myself years back, when I used to think I was funnier than I think I am now. But the thought of getting up there, you know, and doing that, boy, that must've taken some courage.

**Palumbo:** Well, it's a rough crowd. I mean, the thing is, if you come up with a guitar or a flute, people go, "Wow!" you know, "This guy can do something!" But if you just stand there by yourself, it's almost as though the audience sits back with their arms folded and says, "You know, I've got an Uncle Buddy who's funnier than this."

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Palumbo:** And so it's really kind of an adversarial relationship at first...

**Dr. Dave:** Exactly.

**Palumbo:** ...which is *very* difficult! And then you have to win them over. But luckily, I never wanted to be a stand-up comic; it was never my goal. I wanted people to see that I could be funny. And ultimately, what happened is Gabriel Kaplan, who was starring in the show at the time, called *Welcome Back, Kotter*, saw my act and liked it. And so he asked me, he said exactly the same thing that the club owner said. He said, "You have great material, and you're a terrible comic."

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Palumbo:** And so with these words of encouragement ringing in my ears, I went on the road with Gabe and wrote his stand-up act while he was on hiatus from *Welcome Back, Kotter*'s first season.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, that's fascinating.

**Palumbo:** Yeah, and then in the second season, I had begun writing with a partner at that point. And we managed to get on the show, *Welcome Back, Kotter*, as story editors, and that's how my TV writing career began. And we did that show for a couple years. And then I went off by myself and started writing screenplays and was very lucky to sell *My Favorite Year*. So I was a screenwriter about 15 years, I guess, and very fortunate...

**Dr. Dave:** Where had you grown up? And what did you major in?

**Palumbo:** I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Palumbo:** And my dad was a grocer, and nobody in my family knew what a writer was. The plan for me, I think, was to be... I was the first of nine grandchildren, and the first one to go to college. And I think the operating understanding was, I was either going to be a doctor, lawyer, engineer, or fallback position was always priest. (laughs) But as it turns out, I left engineering school to become a writing major. Difficult time for my family. I mean, they began lighting novena candles for my soul when I said I was going to try to break into show business. But I was very lucky.

**Dr. Dave:** Wow.

**Palumbo:** I think I was very lucky. I mean, I worked hard, but I just thought I had a lot of good breaks along the way.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, that's interesting that you were going to be an engineer. I also was originally accepted into school as an electrical engineer, and I switched out to major in creative writing.

**Palumbo:** No kidding!

**Dr. Dave:** But I did *not* go on to Hollywood. (laughs)

**Palumbo:** (laughs) We had exactly the same undergraduate path, it looks like.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, it does sound that way. So then at some point, you made a transition into becoming a therapist. How did that happen?

**Palumbo:** Well, I'll give you the five-minute version, but it was a long, protracted, angst-filled journey. But the short version is, I had been in therapy myself for a while, and my first marriage had ended, and I was really just so excited and blown away by the therapy process. And I think frankly, I'd not gotten in touch with my own feelings and my own issues, and here I was in my mid-thirties, in therapy for the first time. And the first time I went into therapy, I said to the therapist, "Look, don't get too attached to me. I'll be out of here in one or two sessions." And what, 16, 17 years later...

**Dr. Dave:** Right! (laughs)

**Palumbo:** (laughs) Anyway, I fell in love with the process, so I started volunteering at psychiatric facilities and clinics and going back to school, to Pepperdine, to get my Master's. I wasn't, you know, it wasn't one of those things where, oh, gee, I'm going to leave screenwriting and become a therapist. I still was working during the day: I was taking meetings and writing scripts and developing television pilots. But I was going to school at night at Pepperdine, and once I got my Master's, I realized, well, why don't I just keep going? And you need in California, as you know, 3,000 clinical intern hours before you can even sit for the test. And I thought, I don't know if I'm going to do that, but I might as well keep working. So I went to work at a low-fee family clinic and also at a psychiatric facility. And over the years, I saw how much I loved doing this work. And then finally, one day I had a kind of road to Damascus experience. It's a little corny, but it's true. I was having lunch with a producer at this restaurant in Los Angeles, and he was trying to get me interested in doing this film with him. And I kept looking at my watch, because I thought I was going to be late to get to the psychiatric hospital where I was leading schizophrenics in group therapy. And I got out of the lunch, I'm racing down La Cienega to get to the psychiatric hospital, and I'm thinking, what's wrong with this picture? I can't wait to get where I'm going, and I couldn't wait to be

leaving where I was. And that's when I realized, my God, I do want to change my life.

**Dr. Dave:** Hmmm...

**Palumbo:** And so I ended up finishing up my internship and taking the orals and the written, and I got licensed and retired from show business. And so...it took a while; it was like 6 ½ years because I was working at the same time. But then I went into private practice, and at the time, everyone was saying, "Boy, you'd better specialize," which is really true now for therapists...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Palumbo:** ...and I figured the thing I knew best was being an entertainment professional. So I opened my practice, and I specialized in creative issues. And so my practice has grown now, and I have writers and directors and actors. And I've been very, very lucky again, you know. I think I fill a particular niche because I'm sort of uniquely qualified in the sense that I can work with creative people and have been through almost everything they've been through. If someone comes to me and says, "Gee, I'm really anxious about pitching this series idea to NBC," well, I pitched to NBC a thousand times, so I know exactly what they're concerned about. And so my practice is interesting in the sense that often, people come to me because of creative issues, like writer's block, or procrastination, or fear of failure, or whatever. But within easily a half-dozen sessions, we're doing family-of-origin stuff, we're doing their relationship issues, substance abuse. It's sort of regular therapy with a particular bent, which is, my patients have the usual issues everyone has, except they're struggling in one of the most difficult, arbitrary, and maddening businesses on the planet.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, let me ask you a little bit about that before we go more into the therapy. Let me ask you about your own experience when you were working in Hollywood as a creative person. What were the rewards of being a screenwriter, first of all?

**Palumbo:** Well, I think the rewards were twofold. Initially, when you start writing, or at least when I started writing, you think the reward is, wow! It'll be so great to see my words on screen, to see my name on screen. One of the particular pleasures of being on a weekly series like *Welcome Back, Kotter*, for example, is you would write a script, and the actors would rehearse it that week, and they would shoot it, and three weeks later it would be on television, and all your relatives would see it. So there's that immediate gratification. I think what happens over time when, because you're a writer – especially once I became a screenwriter – you're very powerless as a screenwriter. You don't have much control over what happens to your script, and you have to execute a lot of notes that people give you, even if you don't agree with them. And what happens – and it's a subtle change, but I think it's the one that most mature writers go through – is the gratification becomes personal.

In other words, it's the process of writing that becomes its own reward, where you do the very best you can, and you be as truthful a writer as you can and tell the story the way you want to tell the story...and then hope for the best, you know. You can't control whether you've written a story for a man, and they've decided to put Reese Witherspoon in the part. You can't control that. But the only thing you can control is the integrity and sincerity with which you're writing *your* material. And so I think what happens for most writers – and it certainly happened for me – the rewards become the work, you know, the problem solving, the being in the world of the screenplay.

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

**Palumbo:** And then it sort of goes out into the world, and it's like sending your child out into the world. You do the best you can; you hope to God things go well.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, and I can understand that. And maybe you're alluding to this next question, which is, what were the frustrations? What was it about this job that kind of drove you crazy and ultimately out of that business?

**Palumbo:** Well, I mean there were a lot of frustrations. Any screenwriter will tell you that. The most striking frustration is, you don't control your material. You see, if you're a playwright and you're a member of the Dramatists Guild, no actor or director or producer can change a word of your play without your approval, whereas in screenwriting, writers do not hold copyright on their material. So from the moment you pitch an idea to a studio and they purchase it, they own it, and you're then their employee. And as a result, they can change it or do anything they want to with it, including kicking you off your own movie, which happens every day. And so the frustration, I think, boils down to the fact that I believe screenwriters are the most crucial aspect of a movie, and they're the ones with the least power and the least control.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, I found that fascinating when I heard you discuss that before.

**Palumbo:** Yeah, it's really strange; it's really strange. Now in television, it's a little different. If you're... Television – in my practice, to be honest with you – the happiest writers in my practice are TV writers, and the least happy writers are screenwriters. I think because in television – particularly if you create a show and you become a [show runner](#) or the executive producer – you're the boss, even though you have to deal with networks, and you have to deal with a censor, and you have to be worried about ratings, you control the writing. The writing all goes through you. And unlike in movies, where the director is the king, in television the director is the hired hand. He comes on and does an episode or two or three, but he's an employee. And so if you become a very well known show runner, like a [Steven Bochko](#) or a [David Kelley](#), or someone like that, those television shows belong to you. And the directors and the actors work for you. I mean, I think probably the most well known case is [Dick Wolf](#), with the Law and Order series.

**Dr. Dave:** Right, right. We're big fans in my family.

**Palumbo:** Because if he has a problem with an actor, he just dumps him. It's, unlike certain types of TV shows where the audience is there because of the actor, Law and Order is a franchise that's all about the writing.

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm.

**Palumbo:** And if the cast is unhappy, they can go, because they'll just replace them with another lawyer. (laughs) And it's about the writing, and so Dick Wolf would never have that kind of power in a film. If you're making a film with Tom Cruise, and you and he have an argument over the material, guess which one of you gets kicked off? It's going to be you.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Palumbo:** In movies (?) the star has all the power.

**Dr. Dave:** I had a kind of eye-opening insight to that. I was sort of alerted to it, I guess, by hearing you speak in that other interview that I alluded to. I was watching the director's cut – you know, the latest version of Blade Runner, which is out on a DVD – and then they've got all this stuff that you can, you know, all the feature stuff about the making of Blade Runner.

**Palumbo:** Right.

**Dr. Dave:** And it was amazing how it started as one guy's idea, and he did all the writing, and then they brought in another writer and changed it all around, you know, from his original vision. And he kind of –

**Palumbo:** Oh, yeah. That happens all the time. I mean, look at a film like Tootsie. It had 23 screenwriters working on it.

**Dr. Dave:** Amazing.

**Palumbo:** Yeah. When they had to do the arbitration for who would finally get credit on the film, the rumor is that like three boxes of the screenplays were delivered to the Writers Guild. This was before computers, you know. (laughs) And just this image of all these boxes of screenplays coming in...

**Dr. Dave:** Oh, my goodness.

**Palumbo:** But most screenplays, especially now with big, big movies – you know, they're so expensive. I understand – I don't know for sure, but I understand – for example, with Iron Man, there were two sets of screenwriters writing two separate

screenplays, and the director was sort of taking one from column A and one from column B and cobbling the movie together.

**Dr. Dave:** Oh, my goodness.

**Palumbo:** And so, you know, screenwriters really are fodder in the movie business. But there's still tremendous reward. I mean, when your film gets made, there's nothing like seeing your name on screen, and if as much of it as possible gets salvaged, it's really exciting.

**Dr. Dave:** I often think when I'm sitting in the movies and the credits are rolling by at the end, and sometimes, with all of the special effects and everything in some of these blockbuster movies, the credits roll on forever.

**Palumbo:** Oh, yeah.

**Dr. Dave:** And as an audience, if we hang around for the screen credits, we're probably sitting there kind of bored or looking for interesting names. But I always kind of pause to reflect that all those people there – the “little people” – are in some theater with their family, saying, “Look! Look! There's my name!” (laughs)

**Palumbo:** “There's my name!” That's right! My feeling is, credits exist for relatives.

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs) Yes.

**Palumbo:** So we should all sit and watch. (laughs)

**Dr. Dave:** Right, right. So, Dennis Palumbo: the early years. What did you learn about yourself through this process of, you know, being a stand-up comedian, then being a screenwriter. What did you learn about yourself?

**Palumbo:** I think I learned a couple things. Number one, I learned that if I really worked hard... You know, that thing Ben Hogan, the golfer, said is true, that the harder you work, the luckier you get.

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Palumbo:** Because I used to just ascribe a lot of my success as a writer to luck. But then I thought about how hard I worked, and how I wrote every day, and how much I worried and everything. So I came away with a sense of yeah, if you really, really work hard, it doesn't guarantee anything, but it increases your chances of success. I think at a psychological level, I learned that for me at least, living authentically was really, really important. And I learned as a patient in therapy that if I were going to live authentically, I was going to have to change my life a little bit. And you know, I went through an enormous amount of sort of stereotypical types of behavior. I mean, I ended up... One of the, a film I had been working on about a mountain climber named Willie Entzel (sp?) required that I go all over the world and climb

mountains. I climbed the Grand Teton and Mt. Rainier and ended up in Asia. And finally, even though the film didn't move forward, I fell in love with that kind of travel. And there was a period in my early thirties, before I went back to school, where I lived in Nepal for four months, in the Himalayas, and started meditating and did a lot of spiritual reading and work...

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm...

**Palumbo:** ...and what I learned was that there was a whole part of me that was deeper and more questing than was being served by my career in show business. That the more authentic I felt as a person, the less authentic I felt in my career in show business. And this is not to put down a career in show business. You can be quite authentic and live in show business, but how I'm constituted, that wasn't the case. So for me, being a therapist seems like coming home to a place that I was waiting for a long time, which is to live in a world of feelings and less a world where I had to perform to get love. And I think my show business career was a lot about handing in a script and hoping for an A, if you know what I mean.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, definitely.

**Palumbo:** And no matter how much they loved it, they never loved it enough. It was a hole that wasn't getting filled. And I still struggle with that. I mean, my new book, *From Crime to Crime: A Collection of Mystery Short Stories* is out, and it's still hard. When I get a good review, I think, well, they sort of liked it.

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Palumbo:** I still have some of that where criticism of the material can be hard for me because I associate so much sense of my own value, lovability and self-worth, but it's much better than it used to be.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Palumbo:** I used to live and die based on reviews. And so that has been a really important part of my journey, I think.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, boy, you know, even as a teacher, teachers get reviewed, too.  
(laughs)

**Palumbo:** Oh, I know!

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs) And so I know what that is! It's...you can get 99 raves and one really critical, negative review, and it's so hard not to elevate that one critical one and have that be the whole thing that dominates your consciousness.

**Palumbo:** Well, I think depending on how you were raised – what your family dynamics were – the criticism feels true. And the praise – in my case, I always feel like I fooled ‘em...

**Dr. Dave:** Ahh....

**Palumbo:** But if somebody says, “I wasn’t so impressed,” I think to myself, “Ah! Got me!”

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, yeah...

**Palumbo:** I either feel bad or else I get angry, and I go, “Now who is this bum?”

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Palumbo:** You know, when I used to teach at UCLA and I’d get usually really very positive evals – I mean, I have no complaints – but there would always be one eval where they, “Ah, I don’t think he was that great,” and I’d go, “Who...who...where was that guy sitting? Did I say something to him?”

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs) Right.

**Palumbo:** “Does he have an axe to grind? What’s goin’ on?”

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Palumbo:** It was, it’s very funny. And the thing that I learned in therapy, to be honest, when people go, “Wow, how much has it helped you? How much have you changed?” After, you know, 17 years of therapy as a patient, I can tell you that I’m as neurotic and insecure as I ever was. I just don’t hassle myself about it anymore. And that is a tremendous change for me.

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm...

**Palumbo:** You know, my sense of being okay with me is the biggest growth. I mean, here at 57, I feel like for the first time, I’m really comfortable in my own skin.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Palumbo:** I mean, it’s just who I am.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Palumbo:** And that’s a tremendous relief, as opposed to in my early years in therapy, I had this fantasy there was this perfectible version of me, that if I just did enough therapy I’d get there.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, yes.

**Palumbo:** Again, that's a real trap, and I also tell colleagues and interns, "Be careful that you don't give your patients the message that there's a perfectible version of them in the future that will then be lovable and worthwhile." That they're lovable and worthwhile *now*, just the way they are.

**Dr. Dave:** Good point. Good point. Is there a particular model or theory of psychotherapy that you're working out of?

**Palumbo:** Well, I work out of a blend of two. My initial training was in Gestalt. I trained with David Gorton for about six years, and Gestalt was very good for me. I had always been – and still am, a lot of the time – up in my head, and with Gestalt, I learned about my breathing and body awareness, and staying in the moment. It was very helpful. But at the time for me, after being in practice as a therapist for about three or four years, I began to miss some of what I thought was a crucial developmental component. And so I went back and did supervision for six years with Bob Stolorow, who is one of the proponents of [intersubjectivity](#) theory. It's a little bit of an offshoot of [Kohut's](#) self psychology, and it has a much more analytical and developmental aspect to it. And so now... I used to do, as a therapist, a lot of the Gestalt exercises. You know, empty chair, that kind of thing.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Palumbo:** I don't do that anymore. I'm very grateful for the experience I had as a Gestalt therapist, but I probably see myself much more as an intersubjectivity theorist now, coming much more out of a self psychology framework. And I like the combination of the two for me.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, yeah. I think a lot of people have gone through that sort of an evolution of starting with something like Gestalt and then feeling like they needed to get deeper. And the sort of more modern offshoots of psychoanalysis seem to provide that for people. What are the challenges of working with creative people in Hollywood?

**Palumbo:** Well, there are many, many challenges. I think unlike most people, my patients do work that is perceived and seen and marketed to the public at large. Their work is critiqued, reviewed; people go to see it in droves or stay away in droves, you know. So their successes and failures, both personal and professional, are played out on a more public stage, which sort of intensifies the heat, if you know what I mean...

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm.

**Palumbo:** ...of what they're going through. If you are a very successful film director, and your son or daughter is bulimic or having substance problems or gets a DUI,

that's a very different experience than if you're a bricklayer in Dayton, Ohio, and your son or daughter gets a DUI. It's not in the newspaper; it's not in the tabloids. So there's that huge public focus. And secondarily, to be honest with you, I think in my experience, many people, creative people – not all, but many – come to Hollywood in search of an approving parent, and it's the worst place in the world to find one. And so creative people tend to make the audience, a studio, their agent into a parent figure that they have to constantly appease or impress to maintain the connection, the emotional tie.

**Dr. Dave:** That's interesting, because I think most of us have a stereotype that you have to have a really big ego or be extremely narcissistic to make it in Hollywood, so...

**Palumbo:** Well, the thing is, you kind of do and you don't. A friend of mine said, talking about writers, he said they're egomaniacs with low self-esteem.

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Palumbo:** And that's really a great description. I mean, you do have to have a certain amount of grandiosity to be a writer or director or movie star. You do have to have a certain amount of narcissism. Again, in defense of people in the entertainment industry, I would argue that the narcissism that's necessary to say, "Gee, give me \$150 million because I want to direct this movie," isn't that different from the narcissism that says, "Give me \$150 million; I want to be your president." I mean, most achieving people have a very large amount of narcissism and grandiosity. And Goethe said that writing, for example, is so difficult, you need the hubris to believe that the world cannot live without what you're doing.

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm.

**Palumbo:** 'Cause it's so hard to do!

**DD:** Yeah.

**Palumbo:** And so I don't have quite the problem with the narcissism or the ego because you find narcissism and egotism in big-earning CEOs and lawyers, and – you know what I'm saying? Most captains of industry...

**Dr. Dave:** Sure.

**Palumbo:** ...hardly have what I'd call small egos. In fact, if anything, I remember one time, a reporter from the Los Angeles Business Journal asked me a couple questions about all these titans of industry, like Jack Welch and those guys, all publishing these sort of self-congratulatory autobiographies about how they became rich and famous.

**Dr. Dave:** Right.

**Palumbo:** And to me, they have the vanity of actors, you know what I mean?

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Palumbo:** I'd be hard-pressed to say, well gee, some poor screenwriter has more narcissism than someone like that. That's foolish. So to me, the hardest thing if you're a creative person is dealing with the insecurities of the business, number one, and the fact that the raw materials of your work are your interior life. You know, if a bricklayer is depressed that day, he doesn't even know it's depression, usually, and he'll go to work, and the bricks will still be there. And no matter what his frame of mind, he can lay the bricks. But if you're a writer, the raw materials – your bricks – are your internal world of experience, your feelings. And so as a result, how you feel affects how you work very, very much. And so if your marriage is in trouble, or you're financially strapped, or the critics have slammed the last three things you've done, it's a tremendous burden to try to stay focused and do your work, particularly as the marketplace changes and there's a new trend every week. I mean, the ground is never steady under your feet, so you have the same issues everybody else has, and you have it in an industry that's changing and swirling around all the time.

**Dr. Dave:** Ah, I can just imagine that. You know, I'm wondering, too, if everybody there is creative. One of my favorite writers and screenwriters is this [Elmore Leonard](#)...

**Palumbo:** Mm-hmm...

**Dr. Dave:** ...who I'm sure you must know...

**Palumbo:** Oh, absolutely! Wonderful writer.

**Dr. Dave:** ...and he's got such an eye for psychopaths and an ear for their dialogue.

**Palumbo:** (laughs)

**Dr. Dave:** And you're probably familiar with his book which was turned into a movie called Get Shorty...

**Palumbo:** Oh, sure!

**Dr. Dave:** And in that story, there's this East Coast Mafioso, and he comes to Hollywood to collect on a loan for his loan-shark boss and decides that the Hollywood director gig looks attractive and easy. And he ends up being very successful because he's shrewd, and he's got a lot of moxie. So I'm wondering, how plausible is this scenario in your experience? In other words, are there certain

types of people who have a lot of hustle but who are not particularly creative who manage to con their way into one or another Hollywood niches?

**Palumbo:** I would say there's a great deal of those, particularly among studio executives and producers and managers...

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm...

**Palumbo:** I would say that easily, half of the most successful big shots in Hollywood are not creative in the traditional sense. They're not interested in that. These are people whose model is Sammy Glick, from What Makes Sammy Run?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Palumbo:** They're people who, you know... [Budd Schulberg](#), who wrote that, always talks about the fact that when he wrote What Makes Sammy Run? Sammy was a model of what you didn't want to be. And now, young Hollywood producers and executives come up to him and go, "God, I loved your book. I want to be just like Sammy." And so that kind of, you know, take-no-prisoners, hustle-hustle-hustle... You know, it's stereotypical, but it's true. Those kinds of people often thrive in Hollywood, I think, because the entertainment industry is so, it's so embedded in a bowl of fear that anyone who seems like they're sure and they know what they're doing attracts a lot of focus. People go, "Gee, this guy's on a train that's leaving the station. I want to be on that train."

**Dr. Dave:** Fascinating.

**Palumbo:** You see what I'm saying?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah!

**Palumbo:** I always think of that thing that Bertrand Russell said, "The problem with the world is that the stupid are cock-sure, and the intelligent are full of doubt."

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Palumbo:** And most creative people are full of doubt. They're ambivalent and they're worried, and they think, "Gee, maybe I could make this better," and, "Oooh, I wonder if this really works," or... whereas a lot of less creative but more ambitious types are more like a bullet. They're just like, "Well, let's go!" Bang. And Hollywood is so fear-based; they respond to that, which is why so many kinds of hustler types often rise to the top really quickly.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, the reason why I ask that question is that some years ago, I met somebody who was exactly that. He was a hustler; I think he had been some kind

of a street hustler. And he's now a very successful TV director. I won't say his name, but you would recognize it if I did.

**Palumbo:** Mm-hmm, yeah.

**Dr. Dave:** I seem to –

**Palumbo:** I mean, the thing is, talent is the least important thing. I mean, the world's full of talented people. Hollywood is such a difficult environment that you're much better off having moxie, luck, and connection.

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm.

**Palumbo:** The *least* important thing is talent. And the only thing, in my experience with my most successful patients, is that if you work really, really hard, that offsets a lot of those other traits. Some of my most successful writer, director, and actor patients are very insecure, and they're wonderful people. And they're very neurotic; they're very self-doubting. But their work ethic is so great, that they achieved a level of success that a lot of non-creative schmucks have achieved just by being schmucks. So being a hard worker and having a real vision and never giving up balances the scales against those who, I think, are just a little more mercenary.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, and maybe this accounts for some of the, some of the dreck that we see on TV. I seem to recall there was a period in which cocaine was particularly rife in the Hollywood scene.

**Palumbo:** Oh, yeah, in the seventies. When I was on *Welcome Back, Kotter*, on the ABC lot it was so funny because cocaine was rampant: all the writers, staffs, and everybody – all the stars. It was considered kind of a safe drug in a funny kind of way, but it was... What I always used to find so humorous is that security was pretty tight at the studio, and if someone was coming on to visit – whether it was a studio executive or your relative, whatever – you had to call down to the kiosk where the parking lot was and get them a drive-on pass. There was only one guy who had an eternal drive-on pass, and that was Charlie, the cocaine supplier. He had a standing drive-on pass (laughs) for every day...

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs) Amazing.

**Palumbo:** ...which I thought was so funny. (laughs)

**Dr. Dave:** Amazing. Has that changed? Or is it still...

**Palumbo:** Oh, yeah, absolutely! No... There's still a lot of substance use in Hollywood, but the long-term effects and even some of the short-term rigors of cocaine use has made it less tempting for a lot of creative people.

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm.

**Palumbo:** But it's still pretty rampant. There's still a lot of substance use in Hollywood. The pressure – people use substances to self-medicate.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Palumbo:** But again, I have many friends who are doctors and lawyers, and they believe that in their world, that substance use has gotten rampant, too. I think right now, where the culture is – from a sociological standpoint – in terms of the competition and the ethic of more, more, more, I think in almost every achieving profession, you're seeing a rise in substance use as a way to deal with the stress, as a way to self-medicate. I mean, it's a shame, but that's what you see. And you know, it doesn't have to be some guy on the street you're getting it from. Look at the rise of prescription drugs. The amount of prescription drug use and abuse is at an all-time high in the country right now.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. One of the things that intrigued me when I heard you on NPR was that you have such a finely differentiated understanding of the roles and the psychology and the pitfalls of writers vs. actors vs. directors.

**Palumbo:** Mm-hmm.

**Dr. Dave:** Maybe you could kind of give us a thumbnail sketch of each of those three categories, as you've learned.

**Palumbo:** Well, I certainly don't want to speak as though I'm on high, here. I'm just saying from my own experience. First of all, as I writer, I can speak for my own experience. Writers tend to value insight and intellect, and their struggles tend to be more based on having felt kind of insecure and an outsider. And the big struggle, I think – even if you're a successful writer – is that what you have to bring to the table is not so appreciated by the corporate structure of the business. I think with actors, in my experience, actors have the same kinds of insecurity growing up, often, and often struggle with the feeling of fraudulence. They struggle as actors for years and years, and all of a sudden, boom, they're on a television show or in a film, and they become very well known and very lauded for their ability. But they're often quite suspicious about it. Somehow, it doesn't seem like it's enough. I think one of the reasons you see actors doing things for the environment and racing to Darfur, and stuff like that... People think, well, it's just an extension of their egoism. I don't see it that way. I see it as they're trying to justify their existence, because they're ridiculously overpaid for what they do. And they're suspicious of how much value it brings to the world.

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm...

**Palumbo:** None of this is true for directors.

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Palumbo:** Directors seem to be the most comfortable with the idea that their vision should be realized on screen. If we were in World War II, they would be the ones that would be the generals.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Palumbo:** And they have insecurities and doubts, too, God knows. Usually, what that has to do with is more a sort of panoply of great directors. If you're a director nowadays and you're making a film, what you think is "Oh, my God, how does this compare to [Willie Wyler](#)? How does this compare to [Billy Wilder](#)? How does this compare to [Orson Welles](#)?" You know, directors are very conscious of the list of great directors. And when you're directing, you know, Dude, Where's My Car? Part VI...

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Palumbo:** You say to yourself, "I'm never going to get a chance to be [David Lean](#). When am I going to get to make Lawrence of Arabia? And so the sense that you're never going to achieve your vision, that regardless of how much money you're making, you're working beneath your gifts, is a big issue for directors. And I see that as well. Now, oftentimes, too, I see that directors are made a little nervous and intimidated by the screenplays that they're working with or the writers they're working with. Directors are often worried that the writer is smarter than them. But the director has all the power in film; not in television, as I said, but in film. So they sort of trust their intuition and their insight as sort of having the guiding vision of the film. And directing is a very hard job. As much as I think writing is really, really hard, I think in terms of your ego, the hardest thing is acting, because your rejection is personal. You stand there, you do a scene, and people don't choose you.

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm.

**Palumbo:** So you're rejected to your face.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Palumbo:** Writing – very hard, too, because when you send the material out, you know, it's like I said: You're sending your child out in the world, and you hope people are nice to it. And it's really, really difficult to deal with the response. I think directors have the problem where they are overly lauded for the success of a project and overly criticized for its failure. And a good example – certainly, this person is not my patient, or I wouldn't talk about him is – [M. Night Shyamalan](#), the guy who did [The Sixth Sense](#) – his last couple movies haven't done too well. And so he's very

much victim of that thing in Hollywood where they put you on a pedestal; they instantly make you the next big thing because of the success of *The Sixth Sense*...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Palumbo:** ...and then, when the succeeding films don't do well, you not only drop in everyone's estimation, but then they run back and reevaluate the film that they loved, and say, "You know, it wasn't that good after all."

**Dr. Dave:** Mmm...

**Palumbo:** So you're very much in public, getting slammed. And he's certainly going through that now.

**Dr. Dave:** Wow. I marvel at directors; you liken them to generals. You watch a movie like [Iron Man](#), or the latest [Indiana Jones](#), and those screen credits just roll on and on and on and on, and I just marvel: How do you pull together that many people and have them all working together on a project, you know, that ends up with some kind of a hopefully successful result?

**Palumbo:** Yeah, or a cohesive result.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Palumbo:** No, it's quite difficult. I mean, if you're a director, you're making decisions from six in the morning 'til midnight every day. And hopefully, you know how to delegate, and hopefully, the people who are running your [CGI](#) division, you know, have a good leader, and the people who are doing all your...you know, [second AD's](#) a good guy. You need to have lots of really talented people working at their best, but you have to be the one that makes sure that what this unit over here is doing doesn't conflict with what this unit over here is doing.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Palumbo:** And on top of which, you have to deal with the actors and their egos and their concerns. And they're valid concerns, because the writer and director, their faces aren't up there, sixteen feet high. When people make fun of movie stars, I always think to myself, yeah, but they're the ones whose faces are up there! And they don't want to be in a turkey any more than anyone else would want to be in a turkey because it's so public. And so of course, they're going to be fanatic about how they're being photographed, or very fanatic about what lines they're saying, or how their character is coming across. So it's easy to make fun of that as, well, it's just a conceited actor. But when you think of the stakes, and when you think of the fact that the public doesn't sit there watching a movie, going, "Look at that stupid writer!" or, "Look at that stupid director..." They watch the movie and they go, "Wow, look at that stupid Adam Sandler! He thinks that's funny?"

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm...

**Palumbo:** So they have to bear the brunt of what the audience is experiencing.

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm...

**Palumbo:** And so I have some sympathy for them trying to protect themselves.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. You've spoken a lot about fear, and I wonder if the level of fear isn't actually rising due to changes in the business model. It seems like there's a threat from the Internet, and also, it's like as in publishing, it's like you have to have a blockbuster. Only the blockbuster's going to get funded, etc.

**Palumbo:** Yeah. No, that's very true. The business model has changed radically, and it seems to me a silly one. You know, I'm not a businessman. I'm about as far from an understanding of the financial world as anyone could be. But even I think it makes more sense to make 20 movies that cost \$30 million and make \$100 million each than to make four movies that cost \$200 million and need to make \$600 million to be in profit. But that's the business model. And primarily, it's because – and I think the average person doesn't realize this – but certainly this is the way the industry thinks... movies have become essentially platforms for video games and merchandising.

**Dr. Dave:** Ah, boy...

**Palumbo:** And so Iron Man's success isn't just that it made whatever it's going to make worldwide – like probably \$500 million or something – but in the merchandising and the video games, it will move into the billions. So as a result, a studio would much rather spend \$200 million making Iron Man than \$20 million making, you know, some small film that brings back maybe \$30 million in profit. See, to anyone else, they'd go, "Wow! That's a great return! It cost 20 and it brought back 50." But in Hollywood's understanding, once that 50 is in, you're done! It's not going to make you any more money. There's no merchandising or video games that come from [In the Bedroom](#), or [There Will Be Blood](#). But with Iron Man and [Raiders of the Lost Ark](#) and [Batman](#), the movie is just there to motivate people to go buy the action figures and the video games. And so the business model has changed. And I think that's very frustrating for creative people who want to make meaningful films or meaningful television shows, because the business model has changed so much.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, this opens up a whole 'nother direction that I would just love to talk to you... (laughs) We could talk a lot more and a lot longer about that, and the whole question of whether the bad drives out the good, if this is another example of that. But we're going to...

**Palumbo:** You know, the funny thing is, to end on a more positive note, the good always shows up. You know what I mean? It shows up, it finds light. If you shut the door on the good, it comes in through the window. I've just seen that a million times. One of my favorite quotes is, someone asked [Harold Clurman](#), the Broadway director, "Does it bother you, all the bad plays that are on Broadway?" And he said, "No. Bad work is the manure from which good work comes." And I think that's a great quote.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, yes. And (laughs) thank you for that reminder that, that ray of light! Now, even though you're working as a psychotherapist, you haven't stopped writing...

**Palumbo:** Oh, no.

**Dr. Dave:** You mentioned this book... Your most recent book is called *From Crime to Crime: Mind-Boggling Tales of Mystery and Murder*. And it's an interesting genre that you explain kind of at the beginning. I didn't realize it was a genre, but I guess there's a genre of... a crime happens in a closed room in which nobody could've come in or gotten out, and so how did it happen? Am I describing that correctly?

**Palumbo:** Yeah. The story, these are classic whodunits. I've always liked classic mystery stories, particularly where there's what's called a "locked room mystery," which is the "no-way-for-the-crime-to-have-happened" and yet it did. And there's also a form called "armchair mysteries," where a group of people try – sitting around, hopefully, with interesting and humorous personalities - try to solve a crime just using their minds. And I've always liked writing whodunits. My first mystery story – actually, the first fiction that ever was published – I published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* way back in 1978. And I've always liked writing crime stories, so I'm very pleased about this new collection, *From Crime to Crime*, because most of the stories feature a group of characters based on me and three of my friends. We used to meet every Sunday for deli and beer, and just to talk about the issues of the day, sort of like a poor man's [The McLaughlin Group](#), you know?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, that's great.

**Palumbo:** And then I, what I did was I decided to, well, what would happen if we had to solve a mystery every week? And so that's what I did, and I'm very pleased with how the books turned out. I think if people liked classic whodunits – if they like Agatha Christie and *Monk*; or *Murder, She Wrote* – it's very much in the light, cerebral style of those kinds of mysteries.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, yes. And you've even got one that alludes to Freud, and one with Einstein...

**Palumbo:** Oh, yes, yes...

**Dr. Dave:** Einstein is in one of them...

**Palumbo:** No, I have a lot of fun in this book. I really, really do, and I've been very gratified because the response has been really good. And I've garnered some really nice blurbs from writers I respect a lot in the genre.

**Dr. Dave:** Excellent.

**Palumbo:** So I'm very pleased, and I'm hoping to do more, but I'm very pleased with the book.

**Dr. Dave:** You've also written a novel I saw on the flyleaf, a futuristic thriller called City Wars.

**Palumbo:** Yeah, that was published by Bantam a number of years ago, and they're trying to develop it as a film now. That was a fun project. I came up with that years ago and wrote it years ago. And it was sort of based on, I was watching a football game one time. I'm a big football fan, and I was watching Pittsburgh vs. Cleveland; we've had this rivalry for years and years, Steelers vs. the Browns. And I thought, well, wouldn't it be weird if Pittsburgh and Cleveland really went to war? Not like their football teams, but the cities themselves! And so I imagined a future where New York and Chicago were at war...

**Dr. Dave:** Ahh...

**Palumbo:** They were separate city-states like Athens and Sparta...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Palumbo:** ...and they actually were at war. And that's City Wars; that's the book. And right now, the producer, a guy who produced a recent movie called [Jumper](#) is trying to develop it as a film.

**Dr. Dave:** Hey! (laughs) Well, I'll keep my fingers crossed for you!

**Palumbo:** Well, thanks!

**Dr. Dave:** That would be great.

**Palumbo:** Yeah, and I'm retired. I don't do any of this stuff. You know what I mean? I give them the book, and if they can put it together, great. I'm not writing it; I'm having nothing to do with it. I'm just sort of in the sidelines here, hoping that it does well.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay, well, look, as we wind down here, you've made some career changes in your life, and I know some of my listeners are in that process, or thinking about

being in that process. What's your advice for any of my listeners contemplating making a shift?

**Palumbo:** The most important thing is to cut out the noise of your life, and be quiet with yourself for a while. The thing that helped me – and you don't have to do this – but when I was in the Himalayas, I had many, many weeks sitting up in a Himalayan village with no distractions, not having to do my daily job; not having to talk to my lawyer or my agent or my manager, which I had to do when I was in Los Angeles. And I thought, how do I feel? What do I miss? What do I yearn for? What am I going to do with my one and only precious life that I know of? How do I want to spend it? Do I like the people I'm with now? How do I want to feel when I get up in the morning? And most of the time, we're all so busy completing tasks that we don't have any space to think about those things. And many, many people in history have sat down and done that, you know – whether you're Van Gogh or just a regular guy – and gone, “You know, I don't want to live this life anymore. I want to live *that* life.”

**Dr. Dave:** Okay...

**Palumbo:** And it is, I think, important for everyone to take seriously if you have a yearning to take a pilgrimage away from the life you're living now to one that you think will be more fulfilling. You owe your life to no one but you, and so I think you really need to sit down and do that.

**Dr. Dave:** Those are great words of wisdom to close on. Dennis Palumbo, thanks so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

**Palumbo:** My pleasure, David.

