

Shrink Rap Radio #16, December 01, 2005. Psychology in Australia

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Frank Smolle

(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Dale Hoff)

Introduction: Hello to all of you out there in podcast land. This is David Van Nuys, aka Dr. Dave, coming to you once again from the beautiful wine country in Sonoma County, California. Shrink Rap Radio is the podcast that speaks from the psychologist in me to the psychologist in you, whether you be an amateur, student or professional. It's all the psychology you need to know and just enough to make you a little bit dangerous.

Promo: It's all in your mind. Shrink Rap Radio dot com.

Introduction: Now that bit that you just heard was created by today's guest who is a thirty-three year old psychology student who lives in Australia, not too far from Sydney. I met Frank Smolle online after he sent me an email professing avid enthusiasm for Shrink Rap Radio. Later, he indicated that he'd like to be involved in this show as our correspondent from down under. Now I'm not one to turn away such an enthusiastic volunteer so I thought I'd better take this opportunity to introduce Frank to our listening audience. There is a good chance you'll be hearing more from him as time goes by. By way of introduction, here's my interview with Frank.

Dr. Dave: Okay so Frank Smolle is my guest. And you're located in Australia about a three and a half hour drive from Sydney. Is that right?

Smolle: It's a town called Orange, just out of the Blue Mountains, and it's quite a large central hub for the district. We've got about 36,000 people here so it's not a small town.

Dr. Dave: Okay and it's about eight o'clock in the evening here. What time is it there?

Smolle: It's almost three o'clock in the afternoon.

Dr. Dave: Oh my goodness. And what's your weather like?

Smolle: The weather—it's raining at the moment. It's been a constant drizzle all day.

Dr. Dave: It's truly a small world then because it's raining here. So let's get into your interest in psychology because, of course, that's what Shrink Rap Radio is all about. When did you first decide that you wanted to become a psychologist?

Smolle: The decision—I think we can pinpoint that down to a particular date—the date I've forgotten. But the three of us—my mother, my brother and myself—were sitting in the lounge room and discussing what we're going to do with our future. All of us wanted to help people in some respect. Just departing from our former business as auctioneers, you know, it was a natural progression.

Dr. Dave: Well. I know we spoke previously about this natural progression and you said that your family has been in auctioneering for three generations. And maybe you can tell us what it was you experienced in the auctioneering business that persuaded you that it was time to leave it and get into psychology.

Smolle: There's a lot of stories. Like, being a [unintelligible] auctioneer, you know, you look around the house and everything that you can move out of the house that's the type of stuff that we sold. And we dealt a lot with bankruptcies and deceased estates and divorces. And, unfortunately, you see how people invest so much emotions in their material items and not in their families, especially with divorces and deceased estates. And you just see families tearing themselves apart about who wants what and who owns what and who's bequeathed what to whom. It can be quite a sad moment. We had one situation which stands out is two sisters—their mother just passed away. They came in—you know those little rocking chairs made out of clothes pegs. They usually have a little plastic flower propped up on the seat. They'd only be about, I don't know, about ten inches in height, you know, small little ornaments. And this item—the two sisters were bickering and arguing so much so that, during the auction, this little rocking chair that you could pick up at any bargain basement store for about two dollars, went for about ninety-six dollars because these two ladies were arguing. And beforehand they were a real model family.

Dr. Dave: My goodness. Yes. I certainly have—Fortunately, this hasn't happened in my own family but I've known people where I've seen families kind of get torn

apart after somebody has died and people are fighting over the property and so on. So that was something that was troubling to you and your mother and your brother about that business. Was there anything about psychology in particular that initially intrigued you as an alternative and that's drawn you towards psychology.

Smolle: It was the umbrella of psychology. You don't miss out on helping anybody really. We really loved the idea that psychology doesn't discriminate between race, cultural backgrounds, their religion, it doesn't discriminate. You're there to help the person in the here and now. That's what really drove us to psychology.

Dr. Dave: And you say drove *us*. So are your mother and brother also studying psychology?

Smolle: Yes. All three of us enrolled at the same time and, knock wood, we all got accepted at the same time.

Dr. Dave: And where are you studying?

Smolle: I'm studying in Bathurst, which is about fifty-three kilometers just east of us at Charles Sturt University.

Dr. Dave: Okay and how far along are you in your studies now?

Smolle: I've got one subject left.

Dr. Dave: Just one subject?

Smolle: One subject.

Dr. Dave: Is that a whole year or a semester?

Smolle: It's a thirteen week semester.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Smolle: So it's Advanced Stats. That's all I've got left and I'm done.

Dr. Dave: Ah. Statistics, Advanced Statistics, the bane of many a student, many a psychology student. So what are your plans once you get your degree? Is this a bachelor's degree that you're working on now?

Smolle: Yeah. It's a Bachelor of Social Science, Psychology.

Dr. Dave: From the conversations that we've had, I have the impression that your university system may be somewhat more rigorous than ours. It sounds to me you like you've got a grasp of psychology that would at least be the equal of a master's degree student here.

Smolle: Oh. I'm honored to hear you say that.

Dr. Dave: Well, they're doing a good job on you.

Smolle: Well they're currently thinking about extending the time of the degree at the moment. At the moment, for a Social Science Psychology, it's a three year degree. For a BA in Psychology, it's a four year degree. And they are thinking about making it more of an experiential course so they'd like to extend the time limits. At the moment it's just talk. There's nothing new in the pipeline.

Dr. Dave: Right. What are your plans once you get your degree?

Smolle: We're allowed to take minor subjects and I chose Theater Media so in the near future, I'll be studying up a little bit more about psycho drama and theatrical techniques in psychology.

Dr. Dave: Okay. And is that what theater media means? Does that refer to some kind of integration of theater and psychology?

Smolle: No. They're two completely separate disciplines. I believe us as humans, we're categorizing everything. In our minds, we categorize everything. And, with theater, it's categorized to be in the theater. It's purely one thing. And to mix two disciplines together, what I've found so far, is quite a novel thing for the doctors and professors that are currently teaching me.

Dr. Dave: So, you're kind of looking forward to getting out of the program so that you can do your own integration.

Smolle: Yes, yes, very much.

Dr. Dave: What is it about the theater approach that speaks to you? There's something in there that's kind of pulling you, you know, what part of you is it that this is calling to?

Smolle: It's the power. I've always, being an auctioneer, I use my voice a lot and being an auctioneer is very much theatics in itself, trying to coax people to put their hand up and start bidding on items. And with theater, I just realized that the power of theater, the power of getting up and speaking to a large audience can truly drive their emotions to where the actors want them. And using theater as a tool in, say, group therapy—it has a—you can use the techniques of theater to create a situation of reality so the patients or the clients are able to make mistakes in a safe environment and stand back from the theater to see what they've just done and analyze it so they can go out into the real world and not be frightened of making mistakes.

Dr. Dave: Okay, I see. And in pursuing this line of thought, is there somebody whose work you've been most influenced by?

Smolle: There's a person at Charles Sturt, Bill Blakey. He's really been a big influence. It's a shame that he hasn't written any books because he's a wealth of knowledge. And also, I've fallen in love with an author of *The Rainbow of Desire* by Augusto Boal. He talks a lot about theater of the oppressed and it's very much an experimental theater base where you give power back to the people. Instead of being a one-way conversation from the stage to the audience, you get the audience to come up on stage.

Dr. Dave: Okay. And so that's interesting. And you see yourself somehow being able to integrate that into a therapeutic approach?

Smolle: Yes. I believe I've got the skills. It's just the confidence that I'm lacking at the moment, although I'll be working on that.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Yes. We all have to start somewhere and, you know, we start from zero and then build up from there. What's the mental health licensing setup there in Australia? You know, what kind of hoops are you going to have to jump through in order to be able to work with people to do this?

Smolle: To be recognized as a counselor or a psychotherapist, there are no real legislative hoops to jump through. I could hang up a shield now and call myself a counselor or a psychotherapist, although if you want credibility, you have to join an association such as the Australia - New Zealand Counseling and Psychotherapy

Association. To be able to call yourself a Psychologist, that is governed by legislation where you have to obtain a master's or above.

Dr. Dave: Okay and so do you see yourself joining an association like that?

Smolle: Yes. I'm looking into joining the—I'm not quite sure of the name of it—I'm going to a seminar on Friday of the Psychodrama Association in Sydney.

Dr. Dave: So that would be excellent if they have an association and you could join it and then you would get additional training and supervision by virtue of being a member of the association. Is that right?

Smolle: That's right. Yeah. They hold a year-long course in psychodrama which is purely experiential. It's made up of four modules and they hold your hand as you go through the experience of developing yourself as a proficient psychodrama therapist.

Dr. Dave: Excellent. I really think that the experiential work is so important for people who want to work with other people. You can only get so far reading books and really it's the hands-on experience and also the experience in working on your own issues.

Smolle: True. That's correct. Yeah. Well, that's a big debate at the moment. I've noticed at uni that there's one school of thought that says, "Yes. Psychology must be an experiential-based learning" where there is another school of thought that maintains, "No, it's a discipline and experience is not necessary in a discipline." So that's rather sad to hear.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah. Now, I'm wondering do you see, you know, a few years down the road, do you see yourself going on to do any advanced academic study in psychology or do you think this will be the end of the road for you academically?

Smolle: I don't know. I've really enjoyed my academic life, writing the assignments and doing the research. I've really enjoyed it. So if I do go on to further studies, it'll be on a part-time basis. Yeah, I do see myself continuing in the field because human nature is just so fascinating.

Dr. Dave: Right. From your studies in psychology, do you have a sense of what the dominant theoretical outlook is there in Australia? I'm particularly interested in what the dominant theoretical approach to clinical work is there.

Smolle: It's very much a fight between the qualitative and the quantitative components. The people that are true behaviorists maintain that the quantitative methods and the rigorous statistical procedures must be carried out whereas there's another group of teachers that maintain, no, qualitative is the way to go. It gives democracy back to psychology instead of questionnaires and surveys to give out to people. With the qualitative psychology, you give the people a voice so you can hear what they have to say instead of assuming what's in their mind.

Dr. Dave: Dare I ask which camp you are in?

[laughter]

Smolle: Qualitative.

Dr. Dave: Yes. I thought I detected that. We certainly have that same schism here in the U.S. We've probably exported it all around the world, is my guess. Do you have any particular heroes in the field of psychology that inspire you?

Smolle: No one hero. I'd like to maintain a sort of an eclectic sort of a thought about the history of psychology. From your previous interviews that I've listened to on the internet, it's the most I've ever learned about Jung. So Jung is quite interesting.

Dr. Dave: Well, good. I hope we can bring you more. I know we will bring more guests on who will be speaking about different aspects of Jungian psychology since that's one of my biases. What books have influenced you most?

Smolle: Well, besides the one I previously mentioned, *The Rainbow of Desire* by Augustos Boal, which is not really a psychology book, it's more of a theater book—I'd have to say *Emotional Intelligence* by Goleman.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Daniel Goleman.

Smolle: Yes. Daniel Goleman—it's why I.Q. is so inadequate for measuring people.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. His book has had a tremendous impact and is an often-cited book. I'll put links to both of those books on the show notes in case people want to follow up on those. I'm always interested in the practical value of psychology and I'm wondering if you have found any theories or tools or techniques in your study of psychology that have helped you in your own personal life.

Smolle: Techniques of memory—that has helped a lot, being able to chunk information into blocks. But, really, it's that ability to be more reflexive, to look within myself and to understand why, say for instance, I get an emotional reaction to something that's just a visual stimuli. And it's quite fascinating to realize that my cultural upbringing, my family history has had so much of an impact on how I see reality and how I see other people. And it's all these little biases that we carry around in ourselves that has been socialized in us since birth that we realize I'm not correct. They're false beliefs. And it's been a big thing changing, just changing myself.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. That's a major learning when we begin to be able to stand outside of ourselves and realize something about the extent to which we are shaped by family and by culture and realizing that there are other people in other parts of the world who have a different set of experiences and don't necessarily experience things the way that we do.

Smolle: And, again, I've got a couple of friends that have suffered mental trauma through either a severe change of lifestyle and just being able to listen to their story and understand myself what they're going through. Just changing from an important job environment to being retired or retrenched is a massive blow on one's ego and I've got two friends that have been retired and they had to go seek either mental counseling or they had to go into the mental hospital.

Dr. Dave: What's the attitude, by the way, towards that in Australia? What's the attitude toward people seeking out counseling or psychotherapy?

Smolle: It's slowly changing but the stigma behind counseling and psychotherapy—in the city, like Sydney, Melbourne, it's far more accepted but in the bush, out here in the sticks, it's still very much of an old school, you know. If you can't see a problem, the problem just does not exist. And they even say, you know, if a person has a bad injury, you know, it's a case of, you know, "Oh, she'll

be alright. We'll just carry on with the job at hand." For instance, I know of one poor girl just further out west from us that I suspect, and others do as well, that she's got—I forgot the name of the eating problem where, the opposite to bulimia is—anorexia.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Anorexia. Yes.

Smolle: And the parents just do not see that she is not eating and every time she does eat, she winges and complains and goes to the toilet and throws up and they just deny that there's a problem there completely. So she's going down real quick, quite drastically. And even trying to tell somebody that there's a problem that just doesn't want to believe it, you just can't help. It's like telling a drunk that they're drunk. It's very hard.

Dr. Dave: Right, right. As you will experience as you move more and more into becoming a counselor and therapist, you will discover that change is slow and usually there aren't any magic bullets. I know you shared with me—do you mind my sharing your age here on the air?

Smolle: No, not at all.

Dr. Dave: Just because people might be curious. And you are thirty-five now. You went back to school after—

Smolle: No. Thirty-three. Sorry. Thirty-three.

Dr. Dave: Oh, thirty-three. You're thirty-three and so you went back to school actually after having a kind of an adult career so you've been going through a transition yourself. How has that transition been, by the way? What's that been like for you to be in that sort of transition?

Smolle: Oh, wow. We were doing nothing once we closed the auction down waiting to be accepted at university. We had about six months of doing nothing. We were basically unemployed, just waiting to get into uni and I didn't want to take a job in case I'd start muddling in my life. And it was very, very much like retiring. The phone used to ring all the time. The phone just stopped ringing. And, then the first year of university—wow. It was a real culture shock.

Dr. Dave: In what way?

Smolle: Well, the words that you'd use don't seem adequate enough. You'd go along to lectures and there were these doctors and professors standing up in front of this crowd of kids—when they come out of school they're about nineteen, twenty years old, eighteen, nineteen—and they'd be using this multisyllable lingo that was just flying over the top of my head. And reading a lot of the papers that we'd have to take home, I'd be there with the paper in front of me, a dictionary and a psychology dictionary. It was painstaking work just trying to catch up on this new language that I threw myself into.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, boy, that is a big transition. You must have been one of the older students then. What was that like for you?

Smolle: Yeah, an older student and a minority male. You somehow don't feel accepted by the other students. I don't know whether they're frightened of coming up to you or it's just your own ideas about the uni culture that you really feel isolated as a mature-age student. To combat that situation, the university has got a mature-age club, students' club going.

Dr. Dave: Good. We have something like that at my university sort of a, I think they call it a re-entry program. I think that's been important and at the same time, having been a university professor, I can tell you that it's the returning students, the re-entry students that you really prize because in general they're mature. They've learned things in the world. They know more than they think they do coming in. They often come in feeling insecure but actually turn out to be the best students. I've often said education is wasted on the young.

Smolle: Well, that's one of the biggest critiques from some of the lecturers there is that younger students that have come straight out of school into another schooling system don't have that life experience. And I've noticed myself, doing organizational psychology, psychology of management that I can draw on the knowledge that I gained in business. I mean I read pages and I think, "My goodness, I know this one. Why does it take somebody with a degree to write this? I know this."

Dr. Dave: Good for you. Perhaps you'll be writing your own books down the line. As a matter of fact, you know, you're thirty-three now, when you look back at your

life and your career twenty-five years from now, what would like to have accomplished?

Smolle: That's a difficult question.

Dr. Dave: I know. I'm glad nobody ever asked me that question.

[laughter]

Smolle: What I'd really like to accomplish is being able to help as many people as I can. And I think that, to feed my ego, which is well that's what we all want is just a pat on the back to saying, "Well, Frank, you're doing a good job there" is to be able to have the results behind you to say, hey, this technique of using theatrical techniques and drama is worthwhile pursuing and shouldn't be laughed at.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah, good for you. What qualities or skills do you think you'll need to develop in yourself so that this scenario can come true?

Smolle: Building on the confidence at this stage. I've run one workshop and I'm coming up—I think in about two weeks time, I'm giving a talk at the Masonic club here in Orange and just being able to experience the job now so I can move ahead, I suppose. I hope that answers the question.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. And I'm remembering from a previous conversation, you know, you just mentioned giving a talk to the Masonic club and you were telling me some things about Masonry that I was unaware of. Maybe you could just, you know, as we begin to close off here, just give us a kind of a brief overview of your take on Masonry.

Smolle: Well, Masonry—for one, I am a Mason, a third-degree Mason myself. The thing about Masonry is that it's got this stigma about being a secret society and all that. And there're so many books available now that you can learn about Masonry and how the *Volume of the Sacred Law* is the bible that we use. Do you think about what do you have in your possession right now to identify yourself as a psychologist to people that you don't know? And that's the certificates you have of the degrees that you possess, isn't it?

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Smolle: And, you think back a thousand, two-thousand years when stonemasons could not read or write. They knew their trade about how to cut the masonry slabs of granite or whatever but how do you go to a new town and prove yourself to be a mason? So, that is the secret component about it. Their certificate of their proficiency as a mason is held up in these secret handshakes and these secret words and that was their certificate to be a qualified mason. So it was all revolving around how do you prove yourself. Nowadays we can—well, the majority of us can read and write and we can read what a certificate says. In those days, they didn't have that knowledge. A lot of people were illiterate. And Masonry itself, it's a passing on of knowledge through theatrical techniques.

Dr. Dave: So there actually is theater involved in Masonry?

Smolle: Well, it's more to do with a ritual theater, like the Aboriginals here in Australia. They pass on their knowledge through song and dance and storytelling. I presume it would be the same with the American Indians that a lot of the wealth of knowledge that was passed down through the ancestors is through song, dance and storytelling. It's the same in Masonry. We don't have a lot of dance but through song, through storytelling and through placing people in certain roles, information can be transmitted from one generation to the next. And by transforming these tools of masonry like the hammer and the chisel and the plumb rule and all these different items, you turn them into being a symbolic representation of morality and—I could talk for quite a while on Masonry but we're running short of time.

Dr. Dave: Okay. Well, maybe some future time we'll have a chance to do that. Actually, you have volunteered to sort of help the cause of Shrink Rap Radio so you and I will be having lots of contact with one another as you become our correspondent from down under and listeners will be hearing—

Smolle: I hope so. I hope so and I truly appreciate your acceptance of me.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. I'm looking forward to it. I mean, you've stepped up to the plate with energy and enthusiasm and so I look forward to our association and we'll see what comes of it. So, I want to thank you for this interview and we'll be talking to each other.

Smolle: It was a great pleasure. Thank you very much.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Promo: It's all in your mind. Shrink Rap Radio dot com.

Dr. Dave: Okay, Frank. Thanks for taking us out with that promo you created. One of the Jungian topics we've touched upon in passing is synchronicity, which refers to coincidences that are too coincidental to seem merely coincidental. Now to understand the story, you have to first know that if you set Skype to the Skype Me setting, you can receive phone calls from absolute strangers anywhere in the world who also happen to be on Skype. You may recall that last week's show was about Islam in Morocco. While I was putting that show together, I received my first such unexpected Skype call from a stranger in Morocco. We didn't get to chat because my computer settings were off but I did get to instant message him, asking him, "Where are you?" and his reply was, "I am in Morocco." And, of course, I hadn't yet posted the show about Islam in Morocco to the internet. Now if that's not synchronicity, I don't know what is. Well, that's it for today. As usual, we'd love to hear from you. You can see what it did for Frank in Australia. Send your emails or mp3 audio comments to Shrink@ShrinkRapRadio.com. You'll find our show notes at www.ShrinkRapRadio.com. On Skype and Gizmo Project, our name is ShrinkPod. If you are enjoying our podcast, please rate us on the Yahoo directory at podcasts.yahoo.com and on the Odeo directory at www.Odeo.com. Be sure to stay tuned after our ending theme music for your bonus selection of podsafe music. In the meantime, this is Dr. Dave saying, it's all in your mind.