

Shrink Rap Radio # 2, August 25, 2005, Dreams & The Hero's Journey

David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka "Dr. Dave" interviews Dr. David Gordon

(Transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Michelle McCall)

Introduction: Hi again everyone, this is Dr. Dave, as far as I know the first podcasting psychologist on the planet coming to you from the beautiful wine country in Sonoma County, California. If you're new to the show, let me tell you that the format centers around interviews with interesting people from around the world of psychology. This is the show that brings you all the psychology you need to know and just enough to make you a little bit dangerous. We try to keep the show to about a half-hour and we look at everything from consumer psychology to eco-psychology, from Gestalt therapy to psychoanalysis, from multiple personalities to serial killers, from hypnosis to dream work and much more. So, let's get right into today's interview.

Dr. Dave: I'm really pleased to have Dr. David Gordon on the show. I've heard him speak on two different occasions at the Annual International Association for the Study of Dreams Conference. I really resonated to what he had to say since his work is very close to my own in many ways. He lives and works in Norfolk, Virginia but I was lucky enough to catch him for a live interview on a recent trip to San Francisco.

Now I have to apologize for the quality of the recording. I had only a small lapel mic which initially we were passing back and forth so you're going to hear a bunch of noise from the scraping of the mic cord against our clothing. I did get wise to that problem early on and was able to reduce that source of noise; however, I'm afraid I was a bit too close to the mic when asking my questions and so you'll hear some pops as a result of that. Fortunately, he did most of the talking and his voice comes through just right.

Here's Dr. Gordon speaking about the Hero's Journey in Dreams.

Dr. Dave: David, let me start out by asking you, how did you get into this crazy field of psychology in the first place? What drew you to it?

Dr. Gordon: Well, that's a good question, David. Probably my own family background, you know, my dad was a sales person for many years and he was always coming home and talking about, you know, his understanding of people and the importance of really respecting what people were really saying to one and so I think that sort of oriented me toward the whole field of psychology.

Dr. Dave: How old were you when you first made that decision to be a psychologist?

Dr. Gordon: Well, actually I went to undergraduate school and after a couple of years I realized that that's just what I wanted to do so, I would say about college age – my early 20's before I realized what my, what I think, really in retrospect was clearly my own calling in my personal life.

Dr. Dave: Okay, great and are there any other, kind of, stepping stones in your career that stand out to you and your development as a psychologist that got you to where you are today? Maybe you could mention major influences or stages in your own personal development that stand out.

Dr. Gordon: Well, originally I was trained in the analytic school of thought early on and then quickly, once I got into practice, realized that my – my real interest was in less pathology based kind of psychology and initially went into doing a lot of work with families and couples and family systems kind of work. Did a lot of study of Minuchin and that Philadelphia school and then slowly moved into the area of psychology that I'm in currently that's more dream related and * related.

Dr. Dave: Well, that gets us into the area that I'm really interested in hearing more about because of my own interest in that area and my opportunity to hear you speak on two different occasions in workshops so I'd really like to hear you talk about your involvement with Joseph Campbell's, The Hero's Journey and your views of dreams and working with dreams in relationship to that model. Now, it might not be the case that all of our listeners have heard of Joseph Campbell or know his work so maybe a good place for you to start is to kind of give a little introduction to that.

Dr. Gordon: Okay. Well, I should sort of back up, even before Joseph Campbell and say that I, you know, became increasingly interested in Carl Jung's work, you know, the Swiss psychoanalyst. He talked a lot about recurring themes and motifs in our consciousness which he called archetypal themes and then when I came upon Joseph Campbell's work which was based, in some part, on Jung's ideas, that's when it all started to come together for me. Of course, you know, probably Campbell was best known through his interviews on PBS with Bill Moyers and his idea was that, yes, there are indeed archetypal themes throughout every culture and era in human civilization but that there is a, kind of, one main myth or archetypal theme which he called the Hero's Journey or the mythic journey which underlies the structure of, I think, all of our creative efforts and, of course, all of our literature, film, you name it, there's a set of stages that he identified as really the four stages of the journey.

Dr. Dave: Great, and maybe you could take us through those four stages.

Dr. Gordon: Okay. So, initially there's the stage of "The Calling," in which, again, there are many different stories and plots in world literature but there's always a beginning stage in

which the protagonist is feeling that things just aren't working the way they used to be working for him or her.

Dr. Dave: Let me hold you up there and try to get you to inject a personal note here. I'm wondering if there's a story you can share with us where you experienced what Joseph Campbell called, "The Call," or "The Calling," because one of the values of his model is that it can be applied to our lives and our own life journey so it might help people to understand the concept if you could tell us about an experience of "The Call," that you've had.

Dr. Gordon: Okay. Well, actually back in the mid-80's I, kind of on a whim went to a conference sponsored by the Association for the Study of Dreams. That was one of their first ones. It was in Charlottesville, Virginia, actually, and I was thinking, you know, this is an interesting conference and you know, just kind of interesting to hear what people have to say about dreams but I wasn't all that, you know, convinced of the efficacy of dream work.

So I did attend one workshop on dream incubation where I was introduced to the idea that one can basically meditate on or ask for or, depending on your vernacular, pray for a dream that will, kind of, help to answer a question and, you know, begin to provide you with guidance on how to solve a question or problem in your life. So, I went to bed one night at that conference thinking, now, what can dreams do for me? I'd like to have a dream about telling me what dreams do for me.

So, that night I dreamed that I was, and this was like, a great "Calling" for me. I dreamed that I was walking down a suburban street and saw a boarded up house and as we're prone to do in dreams and not waking life, I found myself walking into the house and it was very dark and dank and musty and dust everywhere. I began to feel that very familiar feeling that, I think probably a lot of listeners have had in their dreams or nightmares where there's just a sort of cold, icy, very frightening feeling that begins to run through your veins. I'm thinking to myself at this moment in time as I'm standing in this very dark, old house, I've got to get out of here. This is not for me. But just as I'm about to turn and run, I give some more thought to what I'm doing there and I think, you know, I'm so tired of being afraid. I'm just going to stand here. I'm not going to give into this fear, at which point, all the boards flew off the windows, sun began to pour in and beautiful rays of light. All the dust disappeared from the floors and I started to look around and it was this beautiful home with beautiful woodwork on the ceilings and floors and a spiral staircase and I went up the staircase and saw that it was a huge home, much larger than I thought and it was just, just gorgeous and I awoke – as I was awaking from the dream, I thought to myself, now who would abandon a house like this?

When I woke up from the dream I realized that this was a very clear answer to my incubation question which is, what can dreams do for me. I realized that this was a – this home or house was a metaphor for my own abandoned creative life and that, you know, if I persevered then I could, you know, bring my own life back to life so it was a very powerful calling dream for me on a deeply personal level.

Dr. Dave: Oh, that's a great account. So the first stage is "The Call," and you've given us an example of a calling dream. Are there other sorts of calling dreams that come to mind as you've worked with other people or more that you'd like to say about this stage before we move on to the next stage?

Dr. Gordon: Well, you know, given that there are these archetypal things that we see in fairy tales and fables and then, as you can see, also in our current lives, you know, basically what we're used to reading about is, you know, the king is ill in the land or the land has become barren and there's just this general sense of malaise and discontent in whatever story or in our personal lives – a feeling of emptiness that is, you know, basically calling us to make a change in our life and we usually go kicking and screaming into that calling because we're, you know, as much as we are an adventurous species, we also want to keep things just the same and not to change. So we're very prone to just, you know, try to hold back as much as we can from taking the leap. So, oftentimes I consider to be – I considered nightmares to be calling dreams because there's something new coming to our consciousness and because it's new, by definition, it's that much more frightening.

Dr. Dave: This is one of the points that really intrigued me when I heard you speak before because most of us look upon a nightmare as a really negative thing and as I hear you talk about it, it sounds like the nightmare may really serve some positive function.

Dr. Gordon: Right, right. And probably a good example of that is again, you know, we dream about beasts and monsters and frightening characters in our dreams. You know, for example in the fairy tales and fables where there's – well, like Beauty and the Beast for example. The idea is that there's this repulsive or frightening, terrifying kind of figure that's – that we are going to be likely to run from and what we ultimately have to do is embrace the beast and then there's a transformation. But initially in our calling, all we know is that we're being chased, for example, that's one type of nightmare, where we're being chased or persecuted in some, you know, mortally terrifying way. And we haven't yet come to a greater consciousness that this, what seems to be a very frightening figure is actually bringing a gift to us that, if we embrace will lead to a transformation in our life.

Dr. Dave: Okay. Now I sometimes struggle with, you know, is this a call or not a call? Is this a call or is this just a wild and crazy impulse? How do you distinguish between that? Are there any guidelines or signs?

Dr. Gordon: Well, you know, in our culture we're always thinking about how we can, you know, come up with a clear, black and white, kind of quick idea about how to do just that. Really, as much as I consider dreams and dream work to be a very, very powerful technique for understanding what our calling is, I would never say to somebody that a single dream would, as much as it may feel like, you know, this is the direction I need to go. I think we need to test that out, always in our waking lives. See what other dreams we have, move as slowly as we may feel we need to into that new direction. So, you know, it's in part an intuitive process, in part a kind of empirical process in which we try out new behaviors that our dreams are prompting us to move toward.

Dr. Dave: In my view, dreams would be one form in which the call might come but I think it can come in others ways, for instance, a job offer or, I don't know, are there other forms that come to mind?

Dr. Gordon: Oftentimes we have even accidents or illnesses that completely undermine our sense of how life ought to be, you know, we're no longer able to do the things that we were once capable of doing and that forces us – that's that kicking and screaming aspect to the calling and that's like, I don't want to have to change but the universe somehow brings us a situation externally in our life that basically puts a roadblock in our way that says you're going to have to find a new kind of consciousness with which to negotiate a new life.

Dr. Dave: I really understand what you're talking about because I've been dragged kicking and screaming at a couple of notable junctures in my life where it turned out to be a good thing but boy, I resisted it like crazy. So, let's move on to the second stage – the first stage being “The Call,” what's the second stage?

Dr. Gordon: Well, this is called “The Quest” and this is, you know, the fool in the fairy tale or fable is sent out to find the princess who's been kidnapped or abducted from the land and that's why the land is barren or there's a plague in the land. And so the first thing that that fool does is he walks into the darkest part of the woods, you know, and this is what is necessary in terms of our journey. We have to basically be willing to make the sacrifice. Let go of the old hallmarks and landmarks of our earlier life and find our way in the dark. And thus begins the classic tale, The Lord of the Rings, type tale where we feel both that we're getting somewhere but we're lost at the same time. There's a constant, kind of, background dread or anxiety that this is not working out, I shouldn't have taken this leap in the first place. But then allies and mentors come to help us out and give us direction. But it is usually the longest part of the journey and the most fraught with anxiety for us.

Dr. Dave: How do I recognize when I'm in the “Quest” part of the cycle in my life? Or are there, for example, certain kinds of dreams that I might have that you would characterize as “Quest” dreams?

Dr. Gordon: Well, basically both in waking life and in our dreams, “The Quest,” manifests as a feeling of ongoing conflict either with dream characters or with people in our actual personal lives. A sense of, again, as I said earlier, of feeling lost, confused, disoriented. Things just don’t seem to be going right but there’s a sense of, I’ve got to find an answer to this suffering that I’m doing and I have to understand what it is that’s creating this unhappiness and get to the other side of that dark wood, as it were.

Dr. Dave: I hope there is another side – some happy ending to this. Let’s hear about the third stage.

Dr. Gordon: So, it’s always darkest before the dawn and after many trials and tribulations there is a breakthrough and that’s what Joseph Campbell called “The Illumination,” in which all of – there’s a sense of redemption at this point – all the suffering that I’ve done, all the hard work, the pain involved now has meaning to it. There’s a sense of – clearly not just a sense but an experience oftentimes in our body of a breakthrough. It’s not just an intellectual insight. There’s a sense of knowing that, okay, everything that I’ve set out to do – there is an answer here and I have the beginning of that answer at this point. So, if there – in fairy tales and fables if the monster or the dragon at the foot of the cave is finally vanquished, the hero or heroine goes inside the deep dark cave and reemerges with the treasure. That’s, metaphorically, “The Illumination.” Or, of course, the classic story is the Grail story – searching for the Grail that will bring eternal life and youth and spiritual understanding.

Dr. Dave: Okay, well, I’m always interested in sort of bringing things back down to earth so let me again ask you, in your own life, what comes to mind in your personal experience that you would characterize as that second stage, “The Quest,” and then the third stage, “Illumination”? Are there any events or stories that come to mind?

Dr. Gordon: Now are you asking about “The Illumination,” or “The Quest,” or ---

Dr. Dave: I thought maybe you could cover both.

Dr. Gordon: Okay.

Dr. Dave: You were not prepped for this in any way.

Dr. Gordon: Well, gosh, a lot of questions. I think that’s what we mostly have but ---

Dr. Dave: Or maybe not even a dream but there may have been a place in your life when you felt you were in that difficult patch?

Dr. Gordon: Well, that’s been many years. I’ll give you perhaps a relevant aspect of this as a psychologist. As I began to veer more and more in the direction of this kind of psychology and working with dreams and trying to bring this kind of thinking out into the

professional community back in Virginia, I found that there was a lot of resistance to this. And on a very personal level I felt like there was always this sort of background anxiety that I had about, how am I going to be viewed by the community of people around me. Not the people I'm bringing the service to – not laypeople, but my own peers. There were people, in fact, that would – stopped referring their patients to me – their clients and yet there was a sense of, well, I'm doing what my heart tells me to do.

But that's a very classic experience in "The Quest," which is that we are called to make a willing sacrifice and it's not – by willing sacrifice I want to make the distinction that it's not enough to just have something taken away from you and then feeling kind of remorse or regret about it. It has to be a choice that we make on a conscious level – well, I'm going to do this even though other people around me, whether it's on a professional level or if it's a personal decision I'm going to make, where those around me, my family or friends, may consider this too far out or too not to their liking. So ultimately the journey is about our own personal, solo journey. Our own solo path and it wouldn't be a journey if we could just get everybody to approve of what we're doing.

Dr. Dave: Well put. What about "The Illumination" phase? Have you had some experience of that yet?

Dr. Gordon: Well, I guess I've probably shared some of these stories with you before in our personal conversations but I've had a number of dreams, again, they were more "Quest" type dreams that led to a breakthrough in my own life. At the time that I was going through this, I considered myself to be a pretty introverted person and loved doing what I did but I did not like to go out in public and speak into microphones and so on. And I began to have a lot of dreams that were full of anxiety but I would find myself on stage and there would be a crowd of people out there and I would be, for example, facing the curtain instead of the people out in the audience and they would be cheering for me to turn around and these kinds of promising dreams – they felt inspiring on the one hand and on the other hand they were full of anxiety for me. That led to, interestingly, on a waking life level, an offer to do a call-in radio program on public broadcasting in the area where I live and that was a kind of breakthrough for me because I discovered I really enjoy doing this and it was not part of my conscious identity but there I was, on the verge of whether or not to accept this producer's offer, I had another dream in which I was being handed a contract and the contract had no writing on it. "I'm about to tell the producer, I'm sorry, but I just can't do this. There's not enough detail here in this contract", you know, all kinds of rationalizations. Then I hear this voice that's sort of like God's voice that says, "Sign the contract."

Dr. Dave: That's great – that's great. You know, the first dream that you shared with us had some of the "Illumination" feel to it in the way that it ended when the dusty boards fell

away and everything was brightly and colorfully lit up. So now we come to the fourth stage.

Dr. Gordon: Right and that's "The Return," and there's this old Zen saying that, "First the ecstasy and then the laundry." Basically the idea here is that we can't just rely – rest on our laurels or rely on this breakthrough of insight and into this new perspective on life. We have to integrate it into our life. We can't just talk the talk; we have to walk the walk. And so there's this fourth stage which Joseph Campbell called, "The Return," in which, again, in fairy tales and fables, the fool comes back having found the princess and brings the princess or brings the Grail back to the community and there's a whole new phase in which the community comes to life and then on a personal level in which our own lives are reawakened and yet there is a period of time in which the new values and new perspectives have to be integrated into our day to day life and that's the work of "The Return."

Dr. Dave: Right and maybe again, I'll challenge you again to talk a little bit about your own sense of "The Return," and I suppose a footnote that I should put in here is that there are many of these cycles in our life. There's one large arch but within that arch but within that arch there are lots of repetitions of these themes.

Dr. Gordon: That's right. You can look at it in terms of, that there's a cycle going on in one's work life, in our personal lives, if we're artists or we're in some kind of creative field then there's, you know, just the creative act itself which cycles over and over again. And so you can apply this on a micro level to all kinds of facets of life and then, yes, there's this overarching arch in which you can see over a lifetime or over large parts of our life that we've been working toward an evolving of our consciousness.

Dr. Dave: Okay and let me bring you back to my request for a personal example of "The Return," in your life where you've had some sense of being in that stage.

Dr. Gordon: Well, probably in terms of my own life, currently a lot of what I'm doing now professionally, is just what I've been discussing with you where back in the community where I live, I am offering all kinds of dream related and other kinds of healing services that I once would never have thought that I had the courage to do in the area that I'm – in the local that I'm doing it. So I'm kind of hard at work standing as my own authority and much less concerned, at this point, about what others will say or think about what I'm doing. Of course, the gift of the journey will is that when you really stand resolved – and resolved is a key word for the return. There's an experience of, this is right for me and others may judge me or not but this is what I'm going to do and that's the ultimate gift of the journey and when we stand firm, like in my initial calling dream of I'm not going to listen to my fear, then the dawn breaks and so I'm doing a lot of the kinds of work that,

again, 20 years ago I wouldn't have permitted myself to do. I wouldn't have had the courage to do.

Dr. Dave: From our conversations off mic, I can say that it's, as an outsider, it appears to me that there's been a real flowering of your work as a result of that resolve and as a result of your courage to go in directions that, in earlier times, intimidated you.

Dr. Gordon: Right.

Dr. Dave: Can you tell that I'm a psychologist though? I like to go for the personal stories.

Dr. Gordon: The journey is about our personal lives, ultimately. Joseph Campbell wrote a lot about it in terms of our spiritual literature and fairy tales, fables and showed where it's just omnipresent in every creative act we do but ultimately it's meaningless unless we see its relevance for our personal lives.

Dr. Dave: Well that is great, you know, we're about at the end of our time and that would have been a good wrap right there but maybe there's some question I failed to ask you or some last word of advice or wisdom that you'd like to share with our listeners?

Dr. Gordon: Just that a key aspect of the journey, is that while it's a solo journey, it is very much a journey with allies and mentors and we have to stay open to giving the benefit of the doubt to those who can teach us and who have some, even partial gift of wisdom along the way. We're not expected to come up with a new strategy for life on our own and we need to stay open to those around us who may have a new perspective and of course, what I love about dream work is that it sort of helps us to come in contact with a source of wisdom that's not part of our conscious every day, waking life, ego strategies. Every spiritual tradition has a path to connect with that source. My own personal path is dreams and dream work. But ultimately we have to remember that this is not a matter of new conscious strategizing. It's really about standing out of the way of, if you want to say, the universe providing a new direction for us and learning to not stand in the way of that new path.

Dr. Dave: Great. Dr. David Gordon, thank you so much for sharing with us today.

Dr. Gordon: Thank you.

Dr. Dave: I hope you enjoyed our interview today. You can find out more about Dr. Gordon by going to the show notes at www.shrinkrapradio.com. You'll also find a link there to subscribe to the show on a regular basis. We'd love to hear from you. Send your emails or audio clip comments to shrink@shrinkrapradio.com. I hope you enjoyed our show and will tell others about it. I'll have a brand new interview for you next week so until next time, this is Dr. Dave reminding you – it's all in your mind.