

**Shrink Rap Radio #227, Reclaiming Your Real Self, with Rick Johnson
David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Dr. Rick Johnson
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Erika Steeves)**

Excerpt: *So what makes spiritually oriented counseling or psychotherapy unique is that it includes spirituality as a co-therapist, and that’s really how I think about it. It’s the belief that when clients tune into what I call a life affirming spiritual practice, that it really is about – and I don’t define that. Clients define that. That’s an individually defined, very personal thing, but the factor I work with, with clients, is to the level of which it’s life affirming. So a life affirming personally chosen spiritual practice is a co-therapist in therapy. I’ve gotten to a place where I agree with Jung: it’s more powerful than therapy alone!*

Introduction: That was the voice of my guest, Dr. Rick Johnson. Dr. Rick Johnson has a PhD in counseling psychology from New Mexico State University as well as masters and post-masters training in Marriage and Family Therapy from the University of Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic. He is currently Associate Professor and Department Chair of Counselor Education at Portland State University. Previously, he was an assistant/associate professor at Montana State University. Rick’s research and scholarly agenda focuses on family systems theory and the effects of family experiences on psychosocial development in adolescence and adulthood as well as the integration of psychological and spiritual health. His research has led to over 20 published articles in professional journals. He recently published a book, *Reclaiming Your Real Self: A Psychological and Spiritual Integration*.

Rick is a Licensed Psychologist in Oregon, and a clinical member of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. He maintains an active practice in the Portland, Oregon area, focusing on couples and family therapy, as well as individual adult psychotherapy. His theoretical orientation is an integration of family systems, relational psychodynamic, and humanistic/existential. Now let’s go to the interview.

Dr. Dave: Dr. Rick Johnson, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Dr. Rick Johnson: Thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Dave: I’m so pleased to have you on the show. You’ve written a book titled, *Reclaiming Your Real Self: A Psychological and Spiritual Integration*. This idea that we somehow have lost touch with our real self seems to crop up in a lot of different psychological and spiritual theories. And in fact, you stepped through a number of psychological theories looking at this notion of the lost real self. So maybe we can go through some of those now and perhaps you could start us off with Freud.

Dr. Johnson: Sure. Well, as you know, Dr. Dave, Freud was not particularly interested in spirituality or religion. He was quite critical of it and his early writings had the idea of the ego, which was primarily defensive in a nature. The ego was managing anxiety between the id and the superego, but certainly in his later writings the ego started to have more of

its own motivations; it was able to test the environment to see if it was safe to drop defenses, and it really set the stage for the idea that the ego is a part of us that has its own wisdoms and motivations, not just responding to the motivations of the id, but it's its own health-based motivations. That idea, which I think Freud's later writings kind of set the stage for, is certainly a great starting point to talk about, that we have this potential within us to know what's right for us, or that can start to move in a positive direction in the world, rather than just responding to the id impulses and needs.

Dr. Dave: But does Freud have this idea of us having a false self, a kind of false self with a truer, more authentic self that needs to be reclaimed?

Dr. Johnson: Well, I'm not so sure he went that far. You can jump in here as well, Dave, (laughs) with your readings about it. I'm not so sure he went that far. I think his idea was through analysis we could kind of reduce neurotic suffering by maybe – yeah, I guess maybe becoming more authentic, stripping away defenses. But certainly we work in a – it was the humanists that really came on and said that there is more of a core of wisdom and transcendent potentialities within us that we can work through defenses to get to, and burst into, health. Whereas I think Freud was more moderated in his – or more cautious – in his belief that we could be that joyous. I mean I think Freud thought that we could reduce suffering through awareness and analysis...

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Dr. Johnson: ...and kind of be less neurotic and more aware, live a more aware life.

Dr. Dave: He was sort of the view that way deep down we needed to be civilized, right? And rather that there's some innate core of goodness, that rather we're little beasties that need to be tamed. But I do think that your idea that on the analytic couch there is this sense of reclaiming maybe a truer, less neurotic, as you point out, self. So what about Jung? You move on from Freud in your book to talk about Jung, and Jung put a different spin on this idea, didn't he? The idea of a real underlying self?

Dr. Johnson: I think that the part of Jung's theory, or several parts that really highlight these ideas, the first is the idea of the Self archetype, that we do have this part of us that strives for meaning—deeper meaning. Much of life is devoted to trying to survive, continue to work through this personal story of what he called the ego. It was a little different view of the ego than what Freud had. The ego was more of our consciousness of self and this personal story of self that's developed from early on and throughout our lives, and that much of our life (and least the first half of our lives) we really struggle to survive. We work and we compensate based on those early experiences and we get restricted in this idea of ourselves in the world, this personal story. But the Self, the Self archetype, is this part of us that has real access to deeper pools of knowledge, that is striving for something beyond just surviving and staying in the same old restrictive, compensatory ways. And that staying within that personal story and sort of saying there's something transcendent here about life and about being that is different than this personal story. It's more impactful. Jung said that we strive for that primarily through religion or

spiritual means because that's a way to access that deeper meaning. Of course he also has the concept of the collective unconscious, of the transpersonal consciousness, that's this larger inherited, evolutionary pool of knowledge that is kind of with us all, that's possible for us all. That senses that many times comes through symbols and other kinds of non-linear experiences that point to deeper wisdom, deeper knowing. We have our best chance to access that collective unconscious through the self. The self, again, is that part of us that is really striving for deeper meaning outside of the box that gets created by the personal story of our lives and in how we're supposed to live it.

Dr. Dave: As I hear you speaking, I'm thinking of his term "individuation."

Dr. Johnson: Yes.

Dr. Dave: ...which is really about – I mean it fits in well with the title of your book, *Reclaiming Your Real Self*, in as much as I think individuation refers to the process of Jungian analysis, getting in touch with one's uniqueness, separating oneself from the crowd, from the group.

Dr. Johnson: And don't you think it's also meaning integration? Integrating of our various parts of ourselves, including our shadow parts, the parts that we consciously wish we weren't.

Dr. Dave: Definitely.

Dr. Johnson: And that we would banish. So I think you're right. It is the coming together of who we are and integration of the variety of parts. So it's a much more sustainable, more meaningful sense of self, which tends to happen through spiritual practice. Jung talked about that; that spiritual practice many times is more powerful than analysis alone.

Dr. Dave: I'm trying to keep our focus for now on the psychological part because I'm going to...

Dr. Johnson: Yes.

Dr. Dave: ...I'm chopping things up artificially, and then we'll be moving into looking at the spiritual part of it.

Dr. Johnson: Sounds great.

Dr. Dave: Another thing that strikes me about Jung—because you talk about the search for meaning, what Jungian psychology is very much about—and I think there's also a sense of purpose in there, that is of destiny, that Jung feels that each of us has the seed of something that's unique and special.

Dr. Johnson: Yes.

Dr. Dave: ...and so his psychology is, I can't think of the right word, it's prospective as opposed to just being focused on the past. Because he felt – my impression, and correct me if I'm wrong because I wouldn't call myself a Jungian “scholar” (laughs), but my impression is that he felt that there is a future that's kind of drawing us forward.

Dr. Johnson: Yes, like a purpose that helps make us unique within the world, within our lives.

Dr. Dave: Yes, definitely.

Dr. Johnson: And that is connected to a larger wisdom.

Dr. Dave: Now, moving along, there's a place in your book where you talk about object relations and attachment theory, and so I'm wondering, how do those notions play with the idea of reclaiming your true self?

Dr. Johnson: Well, I think the object relations and attachment theorists and interpersonal theorists are going to focus on the idea, first and foremost, that we need people, and that we are drawn to – well, we're not like gazelles born on the African savanna where we can drop out and a minute after being born we can be galloping across the savanna. We are born completely dependent and that we need to develop relationships in order to survive. So that has pretty great consequences for us psychologically in the development of who we are. That our selves, our very self-concept, our very idea of who we are at a core level, a basic level of survival, is contingent upon how we are relationally. And so our very sense of self, the blueprint and the foundation for who we are, the patterned ways of being, and just the very sense of who we are, is based on those relational interactions, interactional sequences, minute to the large ones, really dictate basically who we become. These ideas are being supported by research in interpersonal neural biology that are talking about the kind of mirroring experiences that we have throughout childhood in particular, and beyond, that not only affect us psychologically but our brain development, our very sense of who we are.

So we develop a sense of who we are and a whole toolbox of interpersonal ways of beings, or interpersonal strategies you might call them, to first and foremost maintain connections with caregivers that can take care of us. Over time this is what, from these theoretical standpoints, this is the ideas of who we are become intertwined with our learned ways of operating interpersonally. The good news is that with relatively healthy parenting we can develop a stable sense of self and be able to imagine caregivers that are caring for us, which builds our sense of self-esteem and helps us learn how to self-soothe so that when we're not in contact with others we have the courage and the sense of efficacy to be able to go out in the world and develop mastery and autonomy as we have the ability to self-soothe and return to a kind of home base within us, a sense of, “I'm okay,” or “there I am” as I go out into the world. Unfortunately what happens under less than optimal parenting conditions, we develop more and more restrictive or compensatory ways of operating. So we move away from that grounded home base

within us to be more reactive and restrictive in our interpersonal strategies. Certainly as I talk about in my book, that's one of the problems that develops, is people, their consciousness becomes more wrapped up in these interpersonal strategies than in more of a grounded sense of self.

Dr. Dave: So when people don't get adequate mirroring or don't have an adequate sort of attachment experience, then that's when sort of reclaiming a true self, or maybe even developing a truer self, comes into play.

Dr. Johnson: Yes, I think that's a big part of it and it's the type of mirroring they get. We all get some mirroring, and it might be absent mirroring or dismissive mirroring. So it's certainly not enough quality mirroring and mirroring that reflects back to us a sense of worthlessness or shame or that's disregarding in some level, is going to prompt a more defensive response. We're going to need to more urgently figure out why that's happening and how we can – so it develops a more reactive or restrictive compensatory consciousness, if you will.

Dr. Dave: I just saw a movie that comes to mind as I hear you talk about this. I don't know if you've seen it yet. It's called *Precious*.

Dr. Johnson: I haven't seen it yet.

Dr. Dave: Oh boy. I recommend it to you and all of my listeners. It's a very, very powerful film about a young African-American teenage girl who's pregnant and in poverty, etc, but the mirroring that she gets from her mother is just absolutely destructive. You couldn't find a better example if you wanted to teach students of how destructive that can be. It's a wonderful film; it's probably going to get an Academy Award, so keep your eye out for it.

Earlier you mentioned the humanistic perspective, which is one that I've been identified with in my career, and one of the people you cover is Carl Rogers. How do Carl Rogers and the humanists deal with this notion of reclaiming the real self?

Dr. Johnson: I'm a big fan of Carl Rogers. I just watched one of his videos again for the thousandth time...

Dr. Dave: Yeah (laughs)

Dr. Johnson: ...with students in one of my classes the other night...

Dr. Dave: Me too. I've watched those videos thousands of times as well!

Dr. Johnson: (laughs)

Dr. Dave: Are you talking about the Gloria...?

Dr. Johnson: Yes, yes. And I have to admit, I still like it. I mean I know he's been criticized for being so non-directive, sort of maddeningly so in that video, but I just think he's a master and the subtlety of his work – he just truly believes that we know what's right for us. That he, as a therapist can't possibly – it's very destructive to think that he would know what's right for someone else. He steadfastly believes that we all have that inner wisdom, that when we can quiet that external noise and challenge conditions of worth, conditions of worth being conditions that are placed upon an individual; for example, saying, “You're only worthy if you get good grades,” or “you (fill in the blank) become something, practice a certain religion, do something,” that you must accomplish these conditions to be worthy. That messes people up! It gets them knocked off of – they start trading in their inner wisdom—what they know is right for them—and kind of in a way ties into what you were saying before about Jung's idea that we really have a plan or a path or there's a purpose moving forward in our lives, that if we're busy trying to please other people and live up to their conditions, our energy is now externally reactive. We're basing it on what other people think we should do rather than quieting that noise long enough to really listen to what's right for us. And obviously in his perspective the therapist's job is to help the client do that. Help the client quiet the noise enough to come in and turn inward, be self-reflective and therefore increase connection with that inner wisdom, that sense of clarity about that feeling of, “Yeah, that feels right to me.”

I wanted to just go back to Karen Horney's theory. She's one of the interpersonalists and I actually named the book, *Reclaiming Your Real Self*, after her concept “the real self.” **Karen** Horney is called a psychoanalytic humanist because she believed in this idea of the motivation and the wisdom of our real or authentic self—or what I sometimes call our natural self. Who we would be under relatively optimal parenting and life circumstances; the consciousness that would rise to the top of awareness. That's who we would be, that's the life trajectory, that's the real self. And so it brings in that humanistic idea. It integrates that idea quite well. Karen Horney contrasts that with these compensatory selves, or interpersonal positions that we get into in our lives. For example, being more in hiding or withdrawing in our lives, or being someone who wants to fight and be reactive in their lives or others who are more ingratiating in their lives. These are interpersonal positions that can really develop into personality types, but unfortunately they're moving us away from that inner wisdom that Karen Horney and Carl Rogers talk about.

Dr. Dave: You know, I see to recall that Carl Rogers used the metaphor of an onion, which really gets at that idea that there's an inner core with all of these layers surrounding it. I believe that he thought that his approach of treating people with unconditional positive regard, which we could think of in the mirroring terms that you talked about before, of really holding a loving, positive mirror up to the client that someone that gives rise to then the person being able to maybe peel their own onion, if you will, or to go deeper into the layers.

Dr. Johnson: Yes. Just to digress a little bit, I watched a DVD the other night of Leslie Greenberg's emotion-focused therapy. And boy did he just really provide that kind of mirroring that you're talking about. Just really staying with the client and mirroring back their experience, including the complexity of their experience, all really designed to help

turn them inward to develop that awareness of what really is right. It was one of the best sort of humanistic therapy sessions I've seen in a while.

Dr. Dave: You know I don't recognize his name.

Dr. Johnson: Leslie Greenberg does emotion-focused therapy—that's an experiential-based model. He and Susan Johnson created emotionally-focused couples therapy, an attachment-based model. It's just lovely stuff.

Dr. Dave: Great. I'll have to try to follow-up on that or maybe you can send me an email and I'll add him to my long and growing list of potential guests. When I got started doing this podcasting I just thought I know some people that I could maybe interview, and it very quickly networked out to way beyond the people that I personally know. It's just amazing how many people are out there that really need to be interviewed! (laughs)

Dr. Johnson: (laughs)

Dr. Dave: So I'm chipping away at this. (laughs)

Dr. Johnson: (laughs) Well I'm glad you included me.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, well definitely. Now we get to the place that you've been trying to go to, the spiritual part. The subtitle of your book refers to a psychological and spiritual integration. What led you to want to bring in a spiritual component?

Dr. Johnson: Well, the sort of short answer to that one, and a long answer...

Dr. Dave: Well we've got plenty of time.

Dr. Johnson: I'll follow your lead on the time here. The first part of that is I've been teaching these counseling theories for many years and just struck by—as we're talking about it—these theories that point not only to our inner wisdom, but point to the possibility that spirituality could be connected to that. Now psychology and spirituality have a sordid history (laughs) ...

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Right.

Dr. Johnson: ...I don't know if we have time to get into, but even many of the theories (other than maybe Jung) haven't really embraced spiritual ideas. They keep talking about it in psychological language, and yet I kept seeing this link between, let's just say, the real self, that authentic part of us that has that inner wisdom, with ideas of spirituality. Certainly Jung provides a real nice link there, but I started to – you know I've been a practicing therapist for over twenty years as well and worked with many, many people with a variety of issues and socio-economic status and what I found that sort of cuts across that is this idea that people do seem to know what's right for them. And when they're practicing having certain experiences that I would start to say, broadly speaking,

are spiritual, that seemed to help them have access to that inner wisdom. So whether it was someone who went horseback riding, or somebody who went walking on the beach, or someone who took a hike or was walking along next to a stream, or was in prayer, that they would come in and talk about that (if they realized that I was open to it, because a lot of therapists aren't, but I very much am) that would be a way to connect to that inner wisdom. And so of course I've had my own history, so I'll just share just a few personal stories around this and how the book then developed.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, we'd be interested in that.

Dr. Johnson: Okay. I started to have probably – it took me four years to write the book, but I had a series of experiences that happened that basically led me to get the book outlined in a week. I went from a vague idea of a book to it all just coming together. Some of it was just feelings of deep gratitude. I kept having these experiences, after seeing clients in my private practice, where I would feel filled with gratitude and that there was some – it felt like an energy, like a warm light that was in my body or with me around this feeling of gratitude. Just feeling so thankful that I get to do this wonderful therapy work and be in this relationship with my clients. And it wasn't just that I am giving to them; they're giving to me. It's the exchange in the relationship itself that I was feeling moved and touched and changed by. I was feeling just so grateful for it.

Right around this time, I went to a poetry reading in Portland. It was by a jazz musician and poet by the name of Anson Wright. It was not something I typically do, go to poetry readings, but it felt like something was coming through a different channel. I'm so intellectual usually, I'm writing, this was a heart-based thing...

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Dr. Johnson: ...and this was something different. I just sat there open to this different kind of channel and energy that was happening, and as I was driving home I had that really deep experience of gratitude again and I just started crying. I started balling my eyes out, with joy, and I pulled my car over and I just felt this warm light and energy—and I'm not trying to get too spooky on you or anything—but it was a really powerful spiritual experience. And it was this sense that there's more to life than meets the eye. When we can open up more kinds of heart-based channels, wow!—there's some real energy here! So what came to me, I called it spiritual energy. Then basically in that moment of weeping, this idea of the real self is the same thing as the spiritual energy, or at least the real self has access to spiritual energy. There was some connection there and that's what came to me, and I basically said, "I'm going to write a book!"

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Dr. Johnson: And this is what this book is going to be about. Literally it felt like it just poured through me. David, for a week all I did was write, write, write, write, write, on everything, little scraps of pieces of paper that I could get my hands on. Literally it just poured out of me and it was these ideas of the real self and the connection between

spirituality and the real self. Like I said, it took me four years to actually get it into a publishable form (because I don't have a lot of time!) but that first week I really thought I might be having a manic episode or something! The good news was I was sleeping, so I was pretty sure I wasn't having a manic episode. But I was clearly lit up by these spiritual experiences.

Dr. Dave: This is fascinating. I'm so glad that you shared that. It sounds like you had a really spontaneous breakthrough, the kind of thing that I think Maslow talked about when he talked about peak experiences. Many people seek that sort of thing through meditation or prayer or some spiritual practice. Had you been engaged in any practice like that? Or was this really just out of the blue for you?

Dr. Johnson: Well, I've been a seeker my whole life and I can tell you some stories about the things my mother tells me I've said as a kid as I was seeking. I've always been very interested in spiritual and religious ideas and philosophical ideas, even as a young kid. But there's been quite a path for me. I was raised Catholic and then went through a period of pushing away all of that and then I really adopted a Buddhist practice, and I've been meditating for about thirty years. One of the things that I do regularly that is very nourishing for me is I belong to a Buddhism and Psychotherapy study group...

Dr. Dave: Oh, okay.

Dr. Johnson: And it's a group of psychologists here in Portland. It's just so wonderful. Many of the ideas in my book also were nourished and percolated and supported in that context as I would bring in ideas and we would talk about them and challenge them.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, so there was a kind of groundwork that had been laid for this kind of experience to happen. I'm curious about what your mother said (laughs) about what you said when you were a child.

Dr. Johnson: (laughs) Well, she would say things like, I would ask about time and space. So if I've been to this tree once and I come back the next day, is the tree the same or is the tree different? She said I asked that in kindergarten and she didn't know how to answer the questions. She said, "Well, I think it's the same." I'd say, "How can it be exactly the same? Am I the same?" I was already, I think, fussing with ideas of impermanence and what is the self and no-self? Are we connected to what's around us?

I remember distinctly having flashes, glimpses into the future, and I would tell my mother about it. Eerily a lot of the things I would say would come true within the next week or two, things that I would say, "Hey, has this happened?" And then we'd find out a week later in the news that something had happened. I remember there was something with George Harrison and I had something about the Beatles and lo and behold it came true. Again, I don't want to be spooky about all that, but I do believe that I think all of us have the ability to access that collective unconscious, or something that's beyond just the normal, linear way that we think about life, the kind of dual way that we think about life.

Dr. Dave: Well I certainly believe that, too. I've had my own experiences—mostly through dreams—where something will happen in a dream and then something very synchronistically happens the next day. That's one kind of personal experience that I've had quite a bit.

Dr. Johnson: Yeah, one of the things that really spurred that development for me as a young adult was noticing coincidences and thinking about this idea of synchronicity and just really starting to work with that idea. Is there some intentional energy that's around us? Is that similar or different than how people talk about God, and how do we think about those coincidences? And can we influence them and tap into them? So that was definitely a part of opening to the possibilities of something beyond rational thinking.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Now I know on occasion you've listened to Shrink Rap Radio. There's an episode that you might not have heard that I think you'd be very interested in. I have a good friend in New Hampshire who wrote a book called *The Soul of Counseling*. He's also, like yourself, involved in counselor education. His name is Dwight Webb and I interviewed him in Shrink Rap Radio #68. He too was reaching for a way to integrate the spiritual dimension into counseling theory. So you might want to take a look at his book or listen to that podcast.

Dr. Johnson: That sounds great.

Dr. Dave: I love your personal stories and I'm glad that we were able to get into some of those. Let's see – coming back to (laughs) some of the things I've got written down here. Yeah, go ahead.

Dr. Johnson: I may be able to help with the segue back. I started having these experiences, or more of them—obviously as I've talked about, I've had spiritual experiences throughout my life—but these were kind of rapid-fire ones that I was having related to clients and then this poetry reading and this idea of this coming together. But I must admit, I'm a psychologist, I'm trained that way, and I felt like I don't have a degree in Theology or something and even though I've been studying philosophy and religion for years myself, I thought, "Hmmm, I need to do some research here," some other way to validate what's happening to me and these thoughts that I'm having. I'm not sure how it will be received by the psychological community if I tell them this just happened through a poetry reading.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Dr. Johnson: Let me do some research. So over about a year period, I would call it kind of loose qualitative research, but I asked about 100 people three questions. I asked them, "What is your definition of spirituality? How do you experience spirituality? And how do you access spirituality in your life?" And I really tried to do it very open ended so that I could get a common person's thematically-based – because what I wanted to do was pool these ideas together and combine them with the insights that I was having and had

developed over the years to really help be an accessible way of viewing spirituality that wasn't related to any particular faith or religious position.

Dr. Dave: What did you find out?

Dr. Johnson: What I found out was a few things. First is, it's really personal (laughs). You know the old adage, "You don't talk about this with polite company"? It takes a little while for people to think that you're not going to judge them, but once they relax and realize you really are interested, it is a unique experience. It's very personal and very unique. So going back to that Jungian concept of our uniqueness and our place in the world, everybody's got a story and everybody has had some level of spiritual experiences.

So I have just found it to be amazingly rich, certainly talking about it with my clients. It's very personal and some people are quite protective of their belief system. Some equate religion and spirituality, others do not. Everybody is comfortable with certain language and not as comfortable with other language. I really found out that words matter. If there's one person that says "God", another person doesn't like God; they want to use "life force." Where I've come to is, I'm open to it all. It doesn't really matter to me if someone says God or Jesus or Life Force or synchronicity or interconnecting energy – I've come to believe that we're all talking about the same thing and I don't get reactive around those words. But many, many people are.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Dr. Johnson: Primarily because the kind of life experiences that they've had. They've been told, one way or another, that this is the right way or that's not the right way, and it's created reactivity for them around the conversation, which is very important and instructive for us as therapists. We need to understand the power of the words and really meet clients where they are with their words, and work through our own reactivity around those words: What I call being differentiated spiritually, or spiritually differentiated. It is to be able to manage our own reactivity and come to a place of balance with these so that we're not projecting our own reactivity onto our clients, but we can meet them with whatever words they use.

Dr. Dave: This segues nicely into the last chapter of your book on spiritually oriented psychotherapy. So maybe you could talk about what you would regard spiritually oriented psychotherapy to be. What might psychotherapists who are maybe listening to us who want to move more in that direction.

Dr. Johnson: Well, first I think spiritually oriented psychotherapy uses the same factors as normal psychotherapy, or affective psychotherapy in general, which is all the same elements, the common factors, of psychotherapy across models, I think is what we should really be focusing in on and not so much on technique. I'm one of those who really buys into the common factors. What are the aspects of therapy that are effective? First and foremost, relationship.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Dr. Johnson: I don't know if we want to go in that direction, but maybe they'll be time later to talk more about that, but basically utilizing the aspects of therapy—relationship, insight, awareness—relationship both as a sense of a team and home base with the client, but also a sense of corrective, the psychodynamic ideas of it being a corrective relationship or practicing new things.

So what makes spiritually oriented counseling or psychotherapy unique is that it includes spirituality as a co-therapist, and that's really how I think about it. It's the belief that when clients tune into what I call a life affirming spiritual practice, that it really is about – and I don't define that. Clients define that. That's an individually defined, very personal thing, but the factor I work with, with clients, is to the level of which it's life affirming. So a life affirming personally chosen spiritual practice is a co-therapist in therapy. I've gotten to a place where I agree with Jung: it's more powerful than therapy alone!

When clients can tap into that, it's a wonderful resource because that spiritual practice, if it's life affirming, tunes them into their real self, tunes them into what they know is right for them, helps them in their decision making, and it builds their sense of personal integrity. In the book I spend some amount of time talking about what is personal integrity. I basically believe that that's really all we have in life. I mean at the end of the day I think we have to live our lives based on what we know is right for us, our personal integrity and have the courage and the convictions to stand by that. And we do the best we can. That's what I tell my kids. We do the best we can in life; as long as you're trying to live your life based on that personal integrity – that's it. We're all just swimming in this weird soup...

Dr. Dave: Right. (laughs)

Dr. Johnson: ...trying to figure out meaning and how to pay the mortgage and keep our heads afloat or pay the rent and have meaningful relationships and meaningful activities—we're all trying to figure out what's it's all about. I think the guiding light, or energy, is our integrity, the real self. When that real self is connected to a spiritual practice that's life affirming, it's going to help a great deal. I think about doing therapy without it is like you're running naked in the streets! You're missing some major components here! Having a life affirming spiritual or philosophical grounding is, I think, essential to effective human functioning.

Dr. Dave: Well, I hate to bring you up short, but I think that's a wonderful place for us to close. That's a wonderful statement for us to end on. Dr. Rick Johnson, it's been my pleasure to get to meet you in this way, and I want to thank you so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Dr. Johnson: Thank you so much for having me. It was great. I really appreciate it.

End theme music

Dr. Dave: I hope you enjoyed listening to this conversation with Dr. Rick Johnson as much as I did having it. I thought he really caught fire when he started talking about the experiences of extreme gratitude that led him to write this book. As you heard me remark, his description of being overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude to the point of tears really seemed to exemplify what Abraham Maslow described as a peak experience. As Maslow, one of the pioneers of the humanistic psychology movement, wrote in 1971, the highest peaks include “feelings of limitless horizons opening up to the vision. The feeling of being simultaneously more powerful and also more helpless than one ever was before. The feeling of great ecstasy and wonder and awe. The loss of placing in time and space.” This seems to capture something of what Rick was describing for us.

In fact, this sort of peak experience is one of eight characteristics Maslow defined the process of self-actualization, and I underscore here that self-actualization is a process rather than an actual point at which one ever arrives. But of the eight characteristics that he listed, of which peak experiences is one, first he listed concentration, by which he meant a kind of absorption. I think it would be the same as what Csikszentmihalyi has later written about in terms of flow.

Another is that the self-actualizing person makes growth choices, chooses growth, and chooses to take risks rather than to stay in the comfort zone. The third one is self-awareness, which makes me think of the whole interest today in mindfulness and mindfulness meditation. The fourth one that Maslow talks about is honesty; that is, taking responsibility for your actions. The fifth one is judgment. He thinks that this involves making better life choices, making the right life choices in one’s progress towards self-actualization, the right choices in terms of marriage and career and how to use one’s time. The sixth factor was self-development, self-actualization. This continual process involves a way of continually living, working and relating to the world rather than to a single accomplishment, working on oneself, developing one’s capabilities. The seventh one that he mentions is peak experiences that particularly seemed to characterize those people that he saw as transcending self-actualizers. And the final characteristic that he mentions is a lack of ego defenses, so that we reduce the amount to which we distort our images of ourselves and the external world through repression, projection and other defenses.

These are goals to which we all can aspire and I think you can agree that my guest, Dr. Rick Johnson, seems to be well along the way.