

**Shrink Rap Radio #271, July 21, 2011, *Happy: The Movie*, with Roko Belic
David Van Nuys, Ph.D., a.k.a. "Dr. Dave" interviews Roko Belic
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Andrea Johnson)**

Excerpt: *I was 18-years-old and I was there with a group of college students who had raised money for refugees of the Mozambican Civil War, and we had headed down to a refugee camp just outside of Mozambique, where people who had suffered through this war were struggling to survive. Now these are people who had been terrorized. Some of them had had their arms cut off, their lips cut off, their noses cut off -- just horribly brutalized. And I was very prepared on that trip, or I was trying to prepare myself before going to see extreme suffering and struggle and hardship, and I was trying to edify myself to be able to face that. And what I saw instead on this trip were people who were completely alive. They were vibrant, and they were enthusiastic, and they were curious, and they were laughing and dancing and smiling. And it just totally blew me away that people who had struggled and suffered so much could have such a sense of, you know, joie de vivre, such a sense of life and happiness.*

Introduction: That was the voice of my guest, Roko Belic, speaking about a formative experience and the chain-of-life events that led to his exploration of positive psychology and the creation of his new feature-length documentary, *Happy*. Director Roko Belic is co-founder of Wadi Rum Productions, in Los Angeles, and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary for his first feature film with Wadi Rum, the acclaimed *Genghis Blues*. Roko Belic started making films in the 3rd grade with his brother, Adrian Belic, and a friend of theirs, Christopher Nolan, who borrowed a Super 8 movie camera from his parents and started experimenting with the surreality of film. Heavily influenced by *Star Wars*, the young team experimented with special effects. Later, because his mother used a wrench to lock their TV, Roko became enchanted with programs through which he could explore the world. His first movie, *Genghis Blues*, in 1999, was made on a shoestring budget using home video cameras and was nominated for an Academy Award. Belic recently directed the 44-minute documentary, *Dreams: Cinema of the Subconscious*, which was released on the *Inception* Blu-ray. For his current project, Belic teamed up with Hollywood heavyweight, Tom Shadyac of *Liar, Liar* and *Bruce Almighty*, who executive produced and directed the feature film, *Happy*. *Happy* combines powerful human stories from around the world with cutting edge science to give us a deeper understanding of our most valued emotion. Now here's the interview.

Dr. Dave: Roko Belic, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Roko Belic: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here.

Dr. Dave: Well I'm so excited to have this opportunity to speak with you about your films, both your earlier success with *Genghis Blues*, and your new one, *Happy: The Movie*. I noticed in your bio that you got interested in shooting film at a very early age. So let's start there and have you tell us about that.

Belic: Sure. Well when I was about 5- or 6-years-old, a friend of mine named Chris Nolan, who people know from things like *The Dark Knight* and *Batman Begins* and *Inception*, he directed those films. But at the time, we were just 6-year-olds running around a suburb of Chicago, and his father gave him an old Super 8 movie camera to sort of experiment with, and Chris made a few films way back when.

Dr. Dave: Amazing.

Belic: Yeah. Absolutely. Exactly. Now when you connect the dots, you know, you look backwards, you realize that that gesture and that trust by his father led to a lot of amazing things. So I didn't really know what I was doing. I just sort of helped Chris here and there as an extra, Chris and my older brother were friends. So they made these films, and somehow, over the years, I felt that I had made films, even though it wasn't really true.

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Belic: When I got into junior high school, when it came time to do a creative science project, I asked the teacher if I could make a film about the subject. And they said sure, and so, I made a terrible, short film that didn't make any sense. But again, I had crossed this psychological barrier that I could do it. And then, in college, I made a few short films, and then, the first real film that I spent a lot of energy on is a movie called, *Genghis Blues*. It took me about 4 years to make it, I started it as soon as I got out of college. And then, one day, we found ourselves walking down the red carpet at the Oscars with an Academy Award nomination. Which was a huge surprise because, as I said, I never really made a coherent film up to that point. But I spent a lot of effort, and luckily, people responded to it.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Well, when you were in college, did you end up going to film school?

Belic: No, I went to UCSB, which is University of California in Santa Barbara, and I studied art. So I studied photography and painting and drawing, and all that fun stuff that I loved doing when I was a kid, but always in the back of my head knowing that this might lead me towards film. But I wanted to explore these other mediums first because, again, I kind of had this confidence that if I wanted to, I could always get into film. And indeed, I did take a lot of film classes at school and I made a few films. And I traveled around the world for a year. I took a year-and-a-half off from school, and I painted houses and saved some money. And during that trip that was really when I shot, I would say, my first film, which was simply a travelogue of that journey around the world, and that was my first experience really editing a long-form project.

Dr. Dave: And that was probably before a lot of the tools that are available now.

Belic: Exactly. We basically had two videotape decks connected to a third tape deck, and you would press, you know, 'play' on one and 'record' on the other, and you would just get pieces of it that way. It's called linear editing. We had to really make the right

decisions the first time around. *Genghis Blues*, I was very fortunate to have access to an extremely expensive editing system, which is sort of the basis of what everybody's using nowadays, a non-linear system called Avid at the time. That enabled you to look at bits and pieces of the footage from all over the place, and mix and match. And sort of the reason why I love doing this is because it's creative all the way through. You know, the editing is a really, really fun process for you to look at what you did and find the best way to tell that story.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. I've heard of Avid too. So you mentioned *Genghis Blues*. And I have to say that's one of my all-time favorites and most unforgettable documentaries. How did that film come about?

Belic: Oh wow. Well first of all that's great to hear. I appreciate that. When I was 16-years-old, my Mom told me that I had to come and watch a documentary on PBS. Now she used to do that all the time. She would literally interrupt me doing my homework and say, "There's something really fascinating on TV. You have to watch it," which is kind of the opposite of what many people think parents should do. But she always steering me to really important and fascinating programs, and one of them was about an eccentric physicist named Richard Feynman who had won a Nobel Prize in physics, and who had sort of made his name as one of the youngest people working on the atomic bomb.

Dr. Dave: Sure.

Belic: Kind of a genius character but who also played bongo drums and did all kinds of eccentric things. And this film was about him, but not about him as a scientist. It was about him trying to get to this place that he knew about from collecting postage stamps when he was a kid, this very kind of far off place near Mongolia called Tannu Tuva. And it was kind of a Shangri-la where people still possibly lived in tepees and hunted animals with bows and arrows, and it really captured Feynman's imagination. And as an adult, he rekindled that interest and tried to get there, only to discover that it was safe and secure behind the Iron Curtain. The Soviet Union had absorbed it and it was off-limits to foreigners, especially Americans. So this documentary gave the account of how Feynman and his friends spent 13 years trying to get there and didn't make it. So I immediately decided, "Okay, I'm 16-years-old, at some point, I'm going to make it. Feynman didn't make it, I'm going to go."

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Belic: And as I mentioned, I traveled around the world, and I didn't get there then, it was very hard to cross the border into Tuva, but I met a gentleman who was Feynman's sidekick. Now Feynman passed away. I met a gentleman who I had seen in the film. I called him up, and I said, "Hey, I want to go to Tuva when I get out of college. I'm just about to graduate. And if I go, I'm going to bring a video camera, but there's no information about Tuva." And this was just before the internet had started happening. And I said, "You're the only guy who knows anything about Tuva. You know, I just thought you should know that that's what I'm going to do." And he told me about a

blind, American blues musician who taught himself to do a kind of singing that comes only from this area, where people sing up to 3 notes at the same time. And this blues guy had played with John Lee Hooker and B.B. King, and he was about to go for a competition of what they call throat-singing in Tuva that summer. And he said, "If my friend at the BBC doesn't shoot the film of his trip over there, maybe you could do it." And I realized he was referring to the filmmaker who made the movie that inspired me in the first place. And I realized that he had no idea that I didn't know what I was doing, so I kind of pretended to, and I said, "Well I'll see if I can fit it into my schedule."

Dr. Dave: Good for you.

Belic: Yeah, I got off the phone and I immediately started working towards that goal, and then 4 years later, we were finished with the film and we premiered it at the Sundance Film Festival.

Dr. Dave: How remarkable. And what a testimonial for Joseph Campbell's recommendation that one 'follow their bliss'.

Belic: Yes.

Dr. Dave: And it's so fascinating these thin threads in a way. I mean when they were making that film about Richard Feynman, certainly he didn't know what effect that was going to have. And nobody involved in making that film knew that there would be this young boy who would happen to see it and who would get inspired. And it's just amazing the way we impact one another with these kind of spiderwebs of meaning, of unanticipated meaning.

Belic: That's absolutely right. I was lucky enough to interview Howard Zinn, who as many people know wrote a book called, *A People's History of the United States*.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Belic: He's considered by many to be the greatest historian in America. He's also very controversial because he takes this alternative perspective of history from the side, let's say, of not necessarily of the people who won in history. And so, I asked Mr. Zinn if there is any morsel of truth, if there's any kind of single gem of wisdom that he's gleaned over, you know, his 60 or 70 years of studying history, and social revolutions, and political movements that we don't know that we should know. And he said, "There is." I thought he was going to say, "No, no, it's too complicated," but he said there is. "There's one thing that we do not recognize -- the power of our own voice, of our singular voice." He said, "We often feel overwhelmed that things are out of our control, and that bigger powers really make the world go around." But he said, "Think of all the important things that you have done in your life, the important decisions you've made." He said, "If you really trace them back, you can often trace them to a single conversation, or a single billboard that you read, or a story that you read, or some single voice, you know, from your friend or your mother." And I immediately realized exactly that was the story that

you just said, which is I saw this documentary, I called Ralph Leighton, who was Feynman's friend. And if it wasn't for that phone call and for that film, I literally wouldn't be talking to you right now.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. It's just mind-blowing.

Belic: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: Now the blind blues singer was a fellow named Paul Pena. Is that right?

Belic: Yes.

Dr. Dave: And he went on to enter a competition there in Tuva that you so well-document. The people were so happy to encounter somebody from the West -- I think they hardly ever saw anybody from the West -- and here was somebody who had gone to trouble to learn this very difficult technique of throat-singing. And he entered a competition, I don't recall if he won or not.

Belic: You have a great memory. That's right. The story of *Genghis Blues* is really Paul's journey to Tuva for this competition. And in America, although Paul had played with these great musicians like B.B. King, and John Lee Hooker, and T-Bone Walker, in America, he was really down and out, and his career hadn't quite ever gotten over that threshold where it became easy for him, and he was blind. And actually the way that he discovered Tuvan throat-singing is while he was trying to distract himself from the pain of realizing that his wife was dying of kidney failure -- and it was something that happened over the course of many months -- late at night, Paul would tune into the shortwave radio. And again, you know, this single thread of, like you said, of communication that can change somebody's life...Paul heard one broadcast of this throat-singing and recorded it, and then, spent 10 years listening to that same tape over and over and over again, and teaching himself how to do this multi-harmonic singing technique.

Dr. Dave: Incredible.

Belic: Absolutely amazing. This is a guy in a small apartment in San Francisco, fairly unknown. If you saw him walking down the street, you would think he was homeless. He looks fairly disheveled, but an extremely talented person, extremely talented. He had written a song called *Jet Airliner*, which the Steve Miller Band had made famous. And on Paul's first album, there's people like Merl Sanders and Jerry Garcia. He was a very high-caliber musician. He just somehow fell into relative obscurity. So as he went to Tuva, not only had they never really seen a Westerner sing their music, but he even learned the lyrics. Now he didn't necessarily know what they meant, but he pronounced them perfectly. And on top of that then he did learn some of the Tuvan language, just enough that people were absolutely blown away. And so, you know, seeing him on stage with this kind of crooked Afro and a steel guitar, a Mississippi delta blues guitar, and speaking in their language, it was just a truly amazing event that I'm extremely fortunate

to have witnessed, you know, from a few feet away as I was standing on stage shooting.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Belic: Incredible.

Dr. Dave: Now did he win the contest? I'm trying to remember.

Belic: So there were different categories, and yes, Paul won the Audience Favorite Award.

Dr. Dave: I bet.

Belic: Now you can imagine there are people who road horses for dozens if not hundreds of miles around to enter this competition. And the Tuvan people are extremely gracious and they're extremely good hosts, and they really made Paul feel welcomed. And so, in these different categories of different styles of singing, Paul was among what they called the 'laureates', which is one of the few people who gained master status in a style called *Kargyraa*, which is a very deep style. It sounds like an earthquake, or a bullfrog with a whistle in its throat. And he was one of the 'laureates' and he won the Audience Favorite Award.

Dr. Dave: Amazing. I was thrilled to be able to attend a couple of events here in the Bay Area, where I got to see some of those Tuvan throat-singers from the film perform.

Belic: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: How about you? Did you learn to do the Tuvan throat-singing?

Belic: Well you know, it's funny. Many people have said to me after they have seen the film that they cannot resist trying to throat-sing. And I did it usually in the shower, or in the car -- it's kind of irresistible to just see if you can do it -- and I wouldn't say I ever gained any proficiency. But the exciting truth is despite the fact that some people thought it may be a genetic trait that only these Tuvans had the ability to do, despite that idea, it's not true, and it is a learnable and teachable skill. The advantage that the Tuvans have, of course, over most people is that they learn it from infancy, and they actually hear throat-singing from before they're born. And many of the lullabies are multi-harmonic lullabies, which are absolutely beautiful, and haunting, and enchanting. So that's advantage that the Tuvans have, but there are many Westerners who have since then gained proficiency.

Dr. Dave: Well I was surprised to learn that. I actually went to, believe it or not, a didgeridoo camp...

Belic: Oh wow.

Dr. Dave: ...over a weekend, I think it was, or maybe a little bit longer. And among the

various classes that they had there, there was a class on Tuvan throat-singing, unfortunately, I didn't take it. And then there's a fellow who teaches at Sonoma State University, who teaches shamanic sorts of things, and I recently learned that he's pretty good at it. He can do it as well.

Belic: Yeah, yeah, and that's what's interesting. The same way that Paul combined Delta blues with Tuvan throat-singing was something that the Tuvans were really excited about, because there was something really kindred in the fact that they're both really folk music, and there's a resonance there, despite the fact that the folks are 10,000 miles apart.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Belic: What's really interesting now is that more and more people are combining throat-singing with different styles of music and it's really expanding and stretching the art form.

Dr. Dave: I haven't encountered that, but I'll have to keep alert for that. Now I have the impression that you named your film company, Wadi Rum, am I saying that right?

Belic: Yeah, Wadi Rum. Wadi Rum.

Dr. Dave: And what does that mean? And did it come from that part of the world?

Belic: Well it actually is related to a conversation I had with Chris Nolan. While we were in college, he visited the Middle East with his girlfriend at the time, and he was describing a place in the desert that was truly enchanting to him, where the light was kind of orange, and red, and pink because the sunsets were super-long, and the dust was in the air. And along these expanses of sandy deserts, they would be defined by these extremely tall and steep cliffs on either side. So you were in this kind of cavern, but this gigantic cavern that stretched for miles and miles. And the cliffs were made of sandstone, and the sandstone had eroded, and the shapes looked like figures and skulls eroded into the side of these cliffs. And then, in the distance, you might see a few figures in a mirage...

Dr. Dave: Wow.

Belic: ...you weren't sure if they were floating, or if they were real or not. And these were the Bedouins who were the only people who lived there, these nomadic shepherds. And it was just a magical place that he described. And when I asked him what it was called, he said "Wadi Rum". And you know, related to *Genghis Blues* and Tuva, I sort of thought of it as a kind of a Shangri-la that I have to reach someday, and so, I just thought of it as a point to aspire to -- it was a beautiful destination. And I did end up there a few years later. I thought I was going to get eaten by wild dogs, but then we spent a couple of nights in the desert, and it was absolutely incredible and worth all the attention that I was giving it.

Dr. Dave: Wow, what a life you've been leading. Now as you mentioned *Genghis Blues* was nominated for an Oscar. I assume that you must have been surprised by the film's

success. I mean you didn't set out thinking, "I'm going to make an Oscar-worthy film."

Belic: Correct. Not at all. It was a huge shock. What happened instead is when we started to learn about the process of making a real documentary-- and learning about fundraising and trying to get sponsors, or investors, or contributors and donors -- I started to realize that there was no support for the film. Because essentially nobody stepped forward for about 3 years, except for a small handful of people, including Feynman's friend who told me about Paul in the first place -- his name is Ralph Leighton. So Ralph and his family, and a few other people, helped me very, very sincerely and greatly. But for the most part, we could not find any organization or institute that would help fund the project.

Dr. Dave: I could see that would be a hard sell, you know. We have this blind guy who's a folk singer, and he's learned to do this esoteric kind of singing that nobody's ever heard of, and he wants to be in a contest in the outer reaches of Mongolia.

Belic: That's right. "And you've never heard of him, and actually you've never really heard of this place, but I swear it's going to be really good."

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Belic: It just didn't work, especially from two filmmakers, my brother and I who had never done anything professionally. So exactly. It didn't surprise me. It was a little bit disappointing. I said, "Oh God. You know, I guess we're going to make this film, and then, have to get a real job afterwards." So because of that lack of support making the film, I didn't expect that there would be any interest. And a lot of people have said, "We can't fund this because nobody's going to want to see it." They essentially said that, or "We're not going to invest because nobody's going to want to buy tickets to see it." And in fact, the movie was theatrically released, and it played in something like 15 or 20 countries and film festivals all over the world. And it was a great success in my eyes, and I feel extremely fortunate that that happened. But you're right, when we were nominated for an Academy Award, it was just like it didn't make any sense, it was a shock. And I'm sure that we were the least well-funded production at the Oscars that year. We've heard that you could not show up at the Red Carpet unless you're in a traditional limousine. We had some ideas of how to gain some publicity. Without spending much money, we thought maybe we could somehow find a couple of camels...

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Belic: ...some Asian camels that we could ride up to the Red Carpet and that would surely get us in some magazine somewhere to help the film out. But they said, "No, you have to come up in a limousine." So through some friends of friends, and my brother's college roommate, we got a couple of limousines that apparently had been sitting in a lot somewhere for awhile because when we did pull up to the Red Carpet, the car wouldn't start again once we were dropped off. And there's a picture in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, in the arts section, of 3 gentlemen in tuxedos with white gloves,

pushing our limousine away from the Red Carpet because it wouldn't start.

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Belic: And that kind of symbolized the way that we showed up at the Oscars, really just by any means necessary and with all the resources we could muster.

Dr. Dave: That's a great story. Now I understand you also recently directed a 44-minute documentary, which unfortunately I haven't seen yet, *Dreams: Cinema of the Subconscious*, and this was released on the *Inception* Blu-ray. Is your *Dreams* documentary available anywhere else? I'd like to see it.

Belic: You know, that's a good question. Yeah, I did spend the last few months making this film. It was a fascinating project because I've been interested in dreams ever since I was a kid. And to have an excuse to talk to some of the leading experts in dream research is, as you referred to what Joseph Campbell said about 'following your bliss'. It was such a treat and such an amazing thing for me to do because it had been in me, the interest for such a long time. So I don't know if it's available anywhere else. All I know is that it's on the Blu-ray of *Inception*. And I was hired to do that project. It's slightly different than *Genghis Blues* and *Happy* in the sense that I was hired on to direct a project that somebody else had conceived of, for a very specific purpose. So yeah, I can't quite distribute it freely the way I would films that we make on our own.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I've had a long-standing interest in dreams myself and taught dream classes. And I have to say I didn't like *Inception*, and I actually walked out about three-quarters of the way through. And I feel like I'm in such a minority because most people really love that film.

Belic: Well people did love the film. I absolutely was blown away by it. Now Chris, the director, is a friend of mine, and so, whenever I see his films, I don't know if I'm biased or not. But I grew up with him and I understand, you know, the things that interest him are things that interest me as well.

Dr. Dave: Well he made *Memento* too, right?

Belic: Exactly.

Dr. Dave: And I loved *Memento*.

Belic: Yeah, so he's extremely talented. And yeah, I think *Inception*, most people that I know loved it and a few people either didn't understand what was going on, or they didn't think it was accurate to their experience of dreams. But you know, in a way, the whole point of dreams is that they're extremely individualistic. And yet, we all have them, so we can all relate on some level to other people's dreams, but we can never really get in the head of someone else in their dreams. And in a way, that's what films, to me, are. Any film is about as close as it gets to sharing a dream. And so, filmmaking and dreams

are completely intertwined in my head, and I think Chris really wanted to explore that in a kind of extreme way and see what are the dramatic plot potentials to make a film set almost entirely in a dream state.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I'm going to need to rewatch it. Maybe my head just wasn't in the right place that time. I can get that Blu-ray disc through Netflix, and I can watch your film, your short, and rewatch it and see if I can like it better a second time around.

Belic: There you go.

Dr. Dave: So yeah, now we should really talk about your newest documentary, which is called *Happy: The Movie*. So tell us about that. How'd you get the idea for *Happy*?

Belic: The genesis of *Happy* is really straightforward actually. A friend of mine named Tom Shadyac, who is a very successful Hollywood director of blockbuster comedies -- like *The Nutty Professor* and *Bruce Almighty* and *Liar, Liar*, all of these huge Jim Carrey movies, Eddie Murphy movies -- he looked in *The New York Times* one day, and there was an article about happiness and it compared countries in terms of happiness. And it said although America is one of the richest countries in the world, it's nowhere near the happiest. We were down at like No. 25.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Belic: And Tom, at the time, was living in a 17,000-square-foot home, on 14 acres, and he had literally dozens of people working for him as gardeners, and housekeepers, and all of that, and he flew privately. He really was living a very luxurious lifestyle, a kind of extreme version of the American Dream. And he said that he was surrounded by friends and colleagues who were even more successful, and more wealthy, and more famous, and more talented, and better-looking, you know. They had it all.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Belic: And he said that some of them were really miserable and some were just not any happier than you would expect a normal person to be. And it was very clear to him that it seemed that this increase in luxury just wasn't helping people get any happier, despite the fact that his colleagues and himself, and most people he knew were still striving for more and more and more. And so, Tom called me and told me about the article, and said, "Look, I think we should explore this. We've all heard the idea that money doesn't make you happier, and I know that to be true. But if it doesn't then what does?" And *Happy: The Movie* is the result of my 5-year journey exploring that subject.

Dr. Dave: Well I recently saw Tom Shadyac's next film, *I Am*, which is very inspirational. And I understand you had some role in producing that film, and he had some role in producing yours.

Belic: Exactly. So about 5 years ago, Tom said to me, "Let's make this movie on

happiness. I don't know how to make documentaries, you do. So why don't you do it, and I'll help you pay for whatever you need to do to make it happen." And I said, "As a documentary filmmaker that's kind of a dream come true," especially when it's a subject that I had been interested in for a long, long time. So Tom is the executive producer on the film, on *Happy*. And of course, I would show him rough cuts of the film and get his opinion, and he's an extremely good storyteller, so he really helped shape the film. And then, a couple of years into the process, Tom decided he wanted to make his own documentary about something that was very important to him. And I shot *I Am*, that's Tom's documentary. I shot that with him on and off for about a year, and then I think they edited it for another year or two. And indeed, now we have two documentaries. They're very kindred in spirit, although they are very different films. A lot of people have said they're kind of like Pfister films, like if you like one, you'll like the other, and I think that's very true.

Dr. Dave: And you know, his title and your title make a sentence, "*I Am Happy*". Was that deliberate?

Belic: Partially it was. I mean we recognized that right off as soon as we were figuring out the titles, and we both thought that was cool, especially because the films do play well together. I've always thought that a double-feature would be perfect, so that on the marquee it could say, "*I Am Happy*" all in one line. I was just up in a theater in Corvallis, Oregon, where both films are playing, and it was really great to see because it's a kind of a closing of a circle that started about 5 years ago.

Dr. Dave: Oh yeah, wonderful. I would love to interview Tom Shadyac as well, and I'm hoping I can get some contact info from you once we're off the air. I heard him speak at the premiere of "I Am" in Marin County, where I'm hoping your film will come as well. And I could have gone up and given him my card. My friend that I was with went up and talked to him, and I stupidly didn't think to do so at the time.

Belic: Oh, no problem. No problem. Tom is extremely busy right now as you can imagine.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Belic: I think he's opened the film in over a hundred cities so far, and he's been at as many of the screenings as he could. But I can put you in touch with the people that he works with who can help figure out a time and if it's possible for him to do an interview. He's a great, amazing person.

Dr. Dave: Oh, that's great. I would love that. And yeah, he came across that way on the stage when he made his remarks before and at the end of the movie. He's got a great sense of humor. He was very entertaining.

Belic: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: You mentioned the article that you read in *The New York Times*, and there's been a lot of research and writing in the field of psychology on happiness recently. Martin Seligman and other have been very active in what's come to be called *positive psychology*. So beyond that article that you read, did positive psychology, or any of that literature, or those people play a role in your interest in happiness?

Belic: Yes, absolutely. So when Tom suggested we make the film, first of all, agreeing to make a film, especially in my case, I know can be a multi-year commitment. So it was a big step. As soon as we took that step and said yes, I started looking online to see what information was out there, and I wanted to read the article again that Tom showed me. And I discovered immediately that there was this growing, fairly new field of science called *positive psychology*, and that a handful of people were kind of pushing this forward through the research and the books they had written. And so, I started reading books by Ed Diener, and Martin Seligman, and Jonathan Haidt, and Gregory Berns. And Sonja Lyubomirsky, I was looking at her research at the time, she hadn't written a book yet. But a lot of fascinating research had been done fairly recently, and that was very exciting to me to recognize that we weren't only going to talk about happiness, but we were going to talk about these new insights that scientists were gaining into the study of happiness.

So that became a kind of a skeleton for the project. I wanted to find the most fascinating discoveries in the field and then combine those with what I hoped would be emotional and personal stories, so that the film could be a cinematic experience where you're really going on a journey, and you're having an emotional experience. So that's what we did. We contacted as many of the researchers as we could who had done some fascinating work and then set out to find the people whose lives would illustrate the findings. And that is a journey that took years to do, but yeah, finally we have a film called "Happy".

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Now were there any surprises for you along the way? I mean you kind of knew what you hoped to be able to substantiate. but as you started encountering people in these other countries and profiling them, were there any surprises or personal discoveries?

Belic: There were. I guess, first of all, I should tell that you when Tom suggested making the film, I had a very strong and clear flashback to the first time I had been in Africa. I was 18 years old, and I was there with a group of college students who had raised money for refugees of the Mozambican civil war. And we had headed down to refugee camp, just outside of Mozambique, where people who had suffered through this war were struggling to survive. Now these are people who had been terrorized. Some of them had had their arms cut off, their lips cut off, their noses cut off -- just horribly brutalized. And I was very prepared on that trip, or I was trying to prepare myself before going to see extreme suffering and struggle and hardship, and I was trying to edify myself to be able to face that. And what I saw instead on this trip were people who were completely alive. They were vibrant and they were enthusiastic and they were curious and they were laughing and dancing and smiling. And it just totally blew me away that people who had

struggled and suffered so much could have such a sense of, you know, *joie de vivre*, such a sense of life and happiness.

And you know, I immediately thought of some of my friends at home who would complain about things like not having, you know, a new car for their 16th birthday, or you know, weren't getting paid enough at their job. And something felt incongruous, and that raised a question in me, like the article, or like Tom's first experience being in Beverly Hills. That raised the question to me: How could these people be so happy with so little? And so, I wanted to tell that story. I wanted to tell audiences who hadn't been to Africa, specifically to see refugees of a civil war, who hadn't seen that kind of suffering, I wanted to tell that story. And so, that I was able to do, of course, because that story is all over the place. That story is not just in Africa, or in war zones, it's everywhere. We told that story through a rickshaw puller in Calcutta, India who lives in a slum and pulls a rickshaw. Not a bicycle rickshaw, but pulls a rickshaw through the streets everyday barefoot.

But the surprises really came when I spoke with the scientists. When I spoke with Richard Davidson, he told me about the affect of meditation, not only on a person's cognitive ability and emotional control ability, but physically on the brain, I was blown away. What he said was that a certain type of Tibetan Buddhist meditation that they had studied called *compassion and loving-kindness meditation* was so powerful and effective that, if a person who had never done it before having done it only a couple of weeks, a certain part of their brain would physically change in size. It would physically grow to an extent that they could measure it with a ruler, and that was amazing to me. And that part of the brain specifically correlated with areas that are related to positive emotions, specifically, the left prefrontal cortex and areas related to that. And that blew me away that doing some meditation built on compassion, in other words, practicing your ability to be compassionate and to care about other people, physically changed your brain. That was amazing.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. And you might be interested to know that I had the privilege of interviewing Richie Davidson on this same series.

Belic: Mm-hmm. He is an amazing guy. And you know, again, back to the 'following your bliss' concept, he's somebody who's really doing work that he loves, and it's clear that that's why he's finding out these amazing things. Because he's really passionate, he really cares about it, and he's interested, and the world is better because of it. You know, we're all lucky for Richie's work. So that was one of the things that blew me away. He also said that when he saw, for example, the effect of alcohol on people's brains, he stopped drinking. It's not that he ever was a heavy drinker -- he just drank mildly -- and he just thought, "You know what, this doesn't look healthy," and he stopped. And similarly, when he saw the effects of physical aerobic exercise, he started riding his bike again.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Belic: And these are things that affected my life directly. I didn't realize at the time, I thought that I was already pretty happy, and I thought the key to happiness was simply being able to appreciate what you have -- whether you're rich or poor, or living in luxury or not. I didn't realize that there were these other components that I could affect -- of my own happiness -- with a conscious will. So I started surfing again after about 12 years of feeling that surfing was not very important, and it took a lot of time, and it took me away from my work, and it distracted me from promoting my career as an independent filmmaker, which is always a struggle. I listened to the social hum, which told me that surfing was irrelevant and just frivolous. But after talking to Richie Davidson, I realized it's not at all and is an integral part of me feeling fulfilled and happy in my own life. And it's been a great gift to me -- that one conversation I had with Richie has really changed my life in that way -- and I moved to a place near the beach.

Dr. Dave: Well that's another one of those examples of something said, you know, that has an effect.

Belic: Yes.

Dr. Dave: You know, as a teacher over the years, I've had students come up and express appreciation for something I had said in some lecture, or presentation years before that I didn't even remember.

Belic: Right, right.

Dr. Dave: And probably all of us are sowing seeds that bear fruits that, you know, we don't know. We don't even know we're sowing the seeds some of the time.

Belic: I think most of the time we don't know.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Belic: And I think that we're sowing them and those seeds can grow into positive things or negative things.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Belic: And you know, I've heard people tell me that somebody told them something very bad -- a teacher who said, "Oh, you'll never be good at math," or "You'll never be a good student" and that affected that person for decades afterwards in terms of damaging their self esteem. So we are sowing these seeds, I agree with you, whether we know it or not, and they're positive or negative, whether we know it or not -- maybe they're both sometimes. But I really enjoy the idea that so much of what we do is simply more important than we may have thought. Every interaction we have with a person is an opportunity to have an impact -- positive, or negative, or neutral, you know, inspiring or discouraging, or whatever.

And that kind of ties into another bit of research that I really enjoyed hearing from Ed Diener, who I consider to be kind of the 'godfather' of happiness research, simply because he was doing it for so long, when very, very few others, if anyone, was doing it. And I asked him if there was a single trait, a key to happiness. And you know, I told him, "I am not looking for a sound bite. I'm just wondering if there is a single source." And he said, "Well the formula is different for everyone. Some people need to go surfing and some people need to find time to read poetry." That's different. But the common thread among all happy people that he had ever studied in 30 years is that they had good relationships. It doesn't mean they had a lot of relationships. It doesn't mean that they were outgoing, or they were the life of the party. But it meant that they had at least a few people who loved him and who they loved, and I thought that was fascinating.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Belic: It's something that our grandmothers' had told us. We kind of know it intuitively, but we're often encouraged to put friendship on the back burner, and instead, prioritize your job, for example. It's easy to accept that somebody's going to move to another city because of a job promotion, but it's very rare that somebody moves to another city just because one of their friends lives there.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Belic: You know, and I thought that was a clear indicator of how sometimes our priorities maybe shifted a little bit, skewed away from things that really will bring us happiness and towards things that simply create this illusion of happiness, like material wealth and comfort and luxury.

Dr. Dave: Well you know, earlier, you mentioned that African refugee camp, and you also mentioned the example of the rickshaw driver, which I got to see a clip of that on YouTube. Remarkable fellow. What would you say is the key to happiness in those situations that you observed?

Belic: Well first of all, in both situations, among the refugees and with Manoj Singh, and his family, and his community, in both cases, there was a very, very strong sense of community. And in communal suffering comes bonding, it seems to be. And Manoj lives in a slum at the outskirts of Calcutta, which had just been moved. I guess a couple months earlier, they had all these people, 200 families were living under an overpass in the middle of Calcutta, in a kind of really scummy, dirty area, but it was the only place they could go where people would leave them alone. And finally they were not left alone, and the police made them move, and they simply marched until they found another spot they could settle down. And it was a vacant field on the outskirts of the city, which by the time I got there had open sewage ditches running in between these huts made from bamboo sticks and plastic tarps.

But despite the material hardship, what was immediately apparent as soon as we set foot in there is that there was a very strong community. And it felt like as soon as we

walked into this community, everybody knew that there was somebody from the outside who was walking around. And they weren't defensive or aggressive. They just knew we were there. They were keeping an eye on us. You know, they wanted to check us out to see if we were going to do something, you know, positive or negative. And once they realized that we were there just to hear their stories, and I was actually there with a researcher who was collecting happiness data, a guy named Robert Biswas-Diener, then they welcomed us. And I immediately saw that the community that Manoj had around him was much stronger than the community I had in the neighborhood I lived in outside of San Francisco for 10 years.

You know, my neighborhood, I had houses built where the garage is in the front and everybody's lives were conducted in the house or in the backyard. Whereas, in Manoj's case, in this slum, the houses were so tiny, they were single little rooms, little huts, but everybody was sharing their lives with everybody. And you know, some people would say, "Oh my God, that sounds horrible. I need my space," and maybe that's true. But what it does mean is that they were there for each other, and they knew each other. And so, when one person had a problem, there were 5 people who would volunteer to help. And that was something very beautiful, and I think it's very directly related to the fact that Manoj could be happy. As a matter of fact, according to the research that was collected that day, he was exactly as happy as the average American, despite the fact that he didn't own shoes and didn't have a job that earned more than \$0.20 a day, and he wasn't sure if he'd be able to pay for his child to eat the next week.

Dr. Dave: Well I would say that his face and bearings seem much more radiant than the average American.

Belic: Well I mean, Manoj suffered too. You know, while we were there, he was sick one day, and he thought he was coming down with malaria. And he was so exhausted, despite the fact that he was accustomed to waking up at 4:30 in the morning and coming back at 6 in the evening, he's a very durable, rugged person. Despite that fact, he stayed in bed the entire day because he felt so miserable. And what I learned the next day is that when he went to work the following day, his boss, or the person who rented him a rickshaw was angry that he didn't show up and punished him by not allowing him to rent a rickshaw that day, depriving him of yet another day's wages, which as I mentioned, at \$0.20-\$0.25 a day was so minimal. You can imagine how quickly that could spiral into an unfortunate situation for Manoj. So he did suffer and he did struggle. And that's maybe something that's very important to say. You know, just because people have been through horrible experiences doesn't mean they don't suffer from that. But there is a sense of resilience that is normal to humans. I didn't realize that most of us have it whether we know it or not. You know, many of us think, "Oh my God, if I lived through that I wouldn't be able to survive I wouldn't be able to take that."

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Belic: But the truth is most people can survive and they can figure out a way to find a new perspective, and find things to be grateful for, and find ways to regain their sense of

well-being.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Well said. Well said. By the way, do you know the novel, *Shantaram*?

Belic: Yeah, I know it, and my friends are very big fans of it, and I have not read it yet.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, it's a wonderful novel, and it really captures life in that sort of slum, and so, I think you'd love it for that. And plus, it's just a good tale, and it's based on true events, more or less. You have any ideas for what your next film project is going to be? Is that something you can talk about, or do you need to keep it under wraps?

Belic: No, no, I can talk about it if I knew what it was. There are a few projects, one actually relates to *Genghis Blues*. There's this fascinating book that was written by Richard Feynman's friend at the time, Ralph Leighton. And Ralph is the person who told me about Paul Pena, and basically told me the story of Richard Feynman, and he's the one I saw in the documentary when I was 16. And Ralph wrote a book called *Tuva or Bust!* and has written a script based on that book. A fascinating story that Ralph is developing right now, and we're looking to see if that may be the next project.

Dr. Dave: Okay. Do you have any advice to any aspiring filmmakers out there?

Belic: Yeah. Frequently, people who say they want to make films, both young and old, ask me what they can do. And the one hurdle that I see that really separates people who do it from people who don't do it is simply their unbending desire and sincerity to just do it by any means necessary. And I don't mean of course committing crimes to get your movie done. But I mean the people who just say, "I'm going to do this, whether I get funding or not, whether I get a famous actor or not, whether I find a wonderful script, or if I have to write it myself," the people who just say "I'm going to do it by hook or by crook," those are the ones who end up succeeding.

So there are many ways to feel discourage about filmmaking. You know, if you compare your movie to *The Dark Knight*, for example, you may feel like you'll never be able to compete with something so big and, you know, amazing and cinematic. But I guess the key is to simply do something that you can do. Find a story you can tell, that you can shoot with your home video camera, or even your phone, and just do it. And the more you practice, the better you'll get. I mean that's one sure thing is you're not going to get any worse by making films. Even if the films are terrible, you're always going to learn from it. So what I really want to say is just do it. It's just like the Nike ad.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, that's right.

Belic: Just do it.

Dr. Dave: Just do it.

Belic: That's the simple truth. Most people who want to make films will not become

filmmakers simply because they didn't make their first film. Once you make one, and in my case, again, I sort of felt like I did it when I was 6-years-old, so I feel very lucky, even though I didn't, it wasn't my movie. But once you get over the psychological hurdle that you can do it, that opens up a kind of plethora of opportunities and possibilities, and it gets all the creative juices flowing. And I really think the way to do it is not to wait for anybody else's blessing, or for funding to come in, or anything. Just figure out what you can do and do it.

Dr. Dave: Well Roko, I hope that you keep 'just doing it' for some time to come and keep blessing us with your creative filmmaking. And I want to thank you for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Belic: Well I'm very grateful to you for giving me the opportunity to speak today. It was a great conversation. I really appreciate it.