

David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Francis Weller, MA

Transcribed by Ayda Cayir

Dr Dave: Francis Weller, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Francis Weller: It is good to be with you, David.

Dr Dave: Well, it is good to be here with you in your office. A lot of the interviews I conduct are over the phone and over Skype, and always like it when I can be present with the person.

Francis: Makes a big difference to be face to face.

Dr Dave: Yeah, and you’ve got such a nice space here, that you’ve created in Santa Rosa, California. You and I have travelled a lot in the same circles over the years. We know a lot people in common.

Francis: Mm-hmm...

Dr. Dave: But we've never spent any real time together. So, I welcome this opportunity to get to know you and your work better.

Francis: Thank you.

Dr Dave: Now, you’ve just published a new book titled, "Entering the Healing Ground, Grief, Ritual and The Soul of the World." And I must say your writing is very soulful, it’s really good. So, it supports your topic.

Francis: Thank you.

Dr Dave: Yeah. I think you’ve been giving some good feedback along those lines...

Francis: I've been getting some beautiful feedbacks...

Dr. Dave: Yeah, you have. Well, you know, “Entering the Healing Ground, Grief, Ritual and The Soul of the World,” it’s a big topic, beautifully covered in rather slim volume. But before we get into your book, tell us a bit about your background, your training and maybe some of the key stepping stones, and the evolution of your outlook as a thinker and as a therapist.

Francis: I've been practicing about thirty years.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Francis: And, the original key thinkers were Jung--big influence on my thought, and then...

Dr Dave: Okay, also another Jungian.

Francis: another Jungian,

Dr Dave: Yeah.

Francis: ...and then I was also blessed with some very wonderful mentors. I was licenced very young, as only twenty seven years old. And I was smart enough, you know, I didn't know anything about sitting with people.

Dr Dave: I think, I remember you at twenty seven years old. (laughs)

Francis: You probably did. (laughs)

Dr Dave: Or shortly thereafter!

Francis: Yes. And I contacted with the Jung Institue in San Francisco, and they gave me some names of people. I met a man named Clark Berry who was in his mid-sixties at the time ,and one of the most generous souls I've ever met. And I always remember the first thing he taught me, when we sat face to face. He reached over and patted a big rock he had at his side and said, "This is my clock. I operate a geologic speed.

Dr. Dave: Wow.

Francis: And if you're gonna work with the soul, you need to learn this rhythm. Because this is how the soul moves."

Dr Dave: Oh!

Fancis: And that was, you know, twenty five, twenty seven years ago.

Dr. Dave: Wow.

Francis: I would never forget that teaching and I tell every patient I sit with that story. Because all most all of them are in a hurry to change.

Dr Dave: Yeah.

Francis: . Because the underlying premise to that is that; something is wrong with me and I won't belong, I won't fit in untill I fix this.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm...

Francis: And trying to get them to get out of that fantasy, out of that fixation-- will change in self-improvement--is a big part of my work with people.

Dr. Dave: As opposed to, if they're headed that way, you're headed towards what?

Francis: Tracking soul. What is the symptom itself ask from this person? The depression?

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The addiction? The relationship struggles? The loneliness? The feelings of emptiness? These are all symptoms. These are all the ways of the soul as it's trying to get the attention of the person and their life.

Dr Dave: Okay.

Francis: And then we'll pay attention to that, we'll truly listen to what the soul is asking for. The symptoms tend to abate. They haven't improved a damned thing

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Francis: Nothing needed to be improved.

Dr. Dave: Aha.

Francis: A deepening that was being asked for-- a listening, a slowing downward, to live at the rhythm of soul, rather than the rhythm of the machine, which is what most of us are.

Dr Dave: Yeah, so not only a listening but also I would gather some kind of a deeper self-acceptance.

Francis: Yes. Yes, that is a good comment. Because so much again that pressure to change is based on trying to perfect the self. That, if I just become good enough, then I'll belong. Another strain that is come into my life a lot is the wisdom of the indigenous cultures. I am gonna make some generalizations here but, in many indigenous cultures, it is the job of the community to impress upon the individual that they are somebody worthy of welcome. We've completely turned that around in our culture where it's up to me to prove to the community

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm...

Francis: that I'm somebody worthy of being included.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm...

Francis: And that becomes a weight that we carry our entire life today. So we've created a culture based on appearance, on performance, on specialness, on rank. And these are empty things.

Dr Dave: Yeah, I have to remind myself from time to time, not to chase after another piece of paper.

Francis: Yes, exactly.

Dr Dave: I am certified in this, certified in that.

Francis: Right, right. Yeah, where we are definitely addicted to some type of proving of ourselves to the community, that I am worthy of belonging.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: We've forgotten, that is a given! We are here.

Dr.Dave: Right. (laughs)

Francis: We are in this body.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Francis: And that again, that is part of the grief we carry is that, that has not been conferred to us.

Dr. Dave: I feel that... As you say that, I can contact about a little bit of that grief. Never having really been truly welcomed in, you know, sort of like, "You've made it!",

Francis: Right.

Dr. Dave: A little bit of that, you know, getting my Ph. D, but very pretty short lived. (laughs)

Francis: Yeah, the achievement basis for belonging is like getting a coin for having done a good job. And you stick it in your pocket and you think I am a wealthy man. You wake up in the morning, the coin has gone. I've got to go out and do it again today and the next day and the next day. We spend most of our days trying to prove our worth to the world.

Dr Dave: Wow.

Francis: And it's an empty cup. It never fills up. Because there are too many holes in that bucket.

Dr Dave: Yeah. Now maybe this next question relates to uhdidn't go on to become a Jungian analyst.

Francis: No.

Dr Dave: And, uh, why not?

Francis: Well, I developed what I called a "soul-centered" psychotherapy practice. And along with the influences of indigenous cultures and the third piece of that training, I am influenced by the man named Paul Shepard.

Dr. Dave: No, I don't recognize the name.

Francis: Paul Shepard died about ten years ago. He was a what he called a Human biologist. And he wrote some amazing books like; "Nature and Madness", "Coming Home to the Pleistocene", "The Tender Carnivore". And what he was writing about and working on, was the idea that it was our evolutionary design to be intimately connected to nature, to be intimately connected to a small group of people and to have that embedded in a sacred cosmology. And those three pieces in combination make for healthy human lives...

Dr. Dave: Okay.

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Francis: ...sane lives, rich lives rooted in ritual and mythology-- in deep participation and intimacy with the wild surrounds. His book "Coming Home to the Pleistocene," in particular, related how the mind evolved, how the body evolved, how our social connections evolved. So, those three things; archetypal psychology, indigenous traditions and Shepard's ideas have kind of coalesced into how I now do my practice and how I do my teaching.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Now the indigenous piece, I know, you studied for some time with a man named Malidoma Somé . Am I pronouncing that right?

Francis: Malidoma Somé, yes.

Dr. Dave: Malidoma Somé.

Francis: Yes.

Dr. Dave: And uh, I sort of just know that in a peripheral way, so maybe can tell us how that came about and what sort of a study you did with him.

Francis: Well, I met him in ninety four. And then did a year long training with him on ritual village. He and his partner at the time, Sobonfu Some, (they were married at the time) offered this training in Oakland. And that was one of the first times I actually touched my grief. I mean I was so well –insulated from my own grief. But there is something that happened in the midst of that training that brought up this untouched sorrow of not belonging.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm...

Francis: Here was in a village context, where everything was focused on remembering the premises of the village life.

Dr. Dave: And he is from Africa?

Francis: He is from Africa, Burkina Faso. And he was sent here by his elders to bring the wisdom of the indigenous traditions to the West.

Dr. Dave: Aha.

Francis: His name actually means "to make friends with the stranger."

Dr. Dave: Ahh. Maybe I am confusing with someone else, is he a drummer?

Francis: He is a drummer.

Dr. Dave: He is a drummer as well.

Francis: Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Francis: And after the training was over, we began our conversations about possibility of bringing our works together.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Francis: So for about six years, we taught a lot of programs together, kind of mingling indigenous traditions with Western psychological, poetic and spiritual traditions and created this amazing amalgam of what I call “The Wisdom Bridge.”

Dr. Dave: I think I remember seeing flyers...

Francis: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: ...and so on. That is how I sort of know about this. I kind of regret that I didn't participate, now as I am hearing about this.

Francis: Yeah. That's also where the grief work began. That was how I was first exposed to grief rituals and seeing the power of a community-based process for touching our sorrow-- to see dozens of men and women on their knees, sobing together. Whereas in our culture, grief is a very private, solitary event, and even that design leads to feeling ashamed of your grief, you know.

Dr. Dave: It sounds like the communal part of this is really important, being with other people who are willing to share and support and go into that space.

Francis: Well, grief itself has always been communal, it has never ever been private in our long history as a species.

Dr. Dave: It is very private.

Francis: It is very private and cultural

Dr. Dave: It's very private in our mainstream culture, right?

Francis: Yes yes. The whole idea is suffering has become very private and interior. Like Mintz called “private pain.” We don't want others to know about it. We show a strong face, we show, you know, the strong body. We hide our suffering because there is some sense that it leads to evidence of weakness. And particularly for men, weakness is a sin. You cannot, you cannot reveal weakness.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Francis: So we are left to carry our grief in solitude. I was giving a talk to a group of clergy last Fall on grief. And as I began talking, looking around the room, all of a sudden everyone's eyes were wet. So I stopped my talk and said, “Tell me what's in the room right now?” And a man said, “well, my wife died a few months ago.” A woman said, “my divorce was final two weeks ago.” Another one, “my father in law just committed suicide.” Another one, “A restaurant in town just closed down, and that was the favorite place for all of us to gather. And I said, “okay, how many of you have a place to take your sorrow?” No one raised her hand. Here, these leaders of church communities are stuck with private pain.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

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Francis: So, the message is so profound in the culture that we can not have community around us.

Dr. Dave: Right, if your parent dies, you might get two or three days out of work.

Francis: You might have an hour or so long funeral...

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: But even the funerals have themselves become so flattened. People up apologizing for crying at a funeral, "I am sorry, I've lost control, sorry."

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah.

Francis: I was fortunate to attend a number of funerals in my time in Africa. And they spend three days on a funeral. So the process itself involves the entire community coming together and it is the job of the bereaved to let it go. I mean, they throw themselves entirely into the process of weeping. And then they attendants to make sure they don't hurt themselves. Then they have drummers behind them and dancers. And they have wailers there to keep the energy moving. And they have people there witnessing. And there is a group up on the hill eating and sleeping. And another group just having a few mellow beers, you know, relaxing.

Dr. Dave: I think, some of that has survived in African American culture.

Francis: It has.

Dr. Dave: That are much more comfortable showing that kind of emotion and grief.

Francis: Absolutely, absolutely.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: Yeah. So having that begin to become part of what we are restoring has been amazingly healing for people.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Francis: It took me three grief rituals to show my first tear. I knew I had a ton of grief but I had to keep going back.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: Because I couldn't quite crack that at veneer.

Dr. Dave: There is resistance. I mean, I found resistance in myself even to reading your book.

Francis: Hmm.

Dr. Dave: Like, oh, do I wanna read this book about grief and sorrow, and all kinds of heavy Down stuff?

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Francis: The grief is incredibly alive. It is so vital. It has nothing to do with deadness. You know, that's our perception.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Francis: That grief is kind of deadening state. The grief is really the expression of what I've loved. It is an affirmation that something has pierced me, has touched my heart and has had an effect on my life. And now it has gone. So, what should be my response to that?

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: Numbness? Dissociation? Denial? Avoidance? Distraction? That is the cultural response.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: But what the soul wants is to fully express what that relationship, that presence, that place meant to me.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: And that is grief.

Dr. Dave: I am remembering the movie; "Zorba the Greek."

Francis: Yes.

Dr. Dave: And then had such a big impact on me, and everybody who ever saw that film. And I am remembering both wonderful depiction of joy of getting freed up and also the depiction of grieving in that part of the world for women are just shrieking and wailing. They even have, I think, "paid mourners"

Francis: Yes, yes.

Dr. Dave: to help facilitate grief...

Francis: That's right.

Dr. Dave: They are grief facilitators, I think.

Francis: That's right, yeah. Well, we think that grief and joy have no relationship. But they are intimately connected. William Blake had a wonderful phrase. He said; "the deeper the sorrow, the greater the joy." So if we cut off our access to grief, what happens to our access to joy? In a sense, what happens is the emotional field compresses.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm...

Francis: And that's why I call, we live a flatline culture.

Dr. Dave: Okay, yeah, I was gonna ask you about your use of that phrase.

Francis: Yeah, that flatline is really what happens when the range of our expected emotional life is shrunken.

Dr Dave: Mm-hmm.

Francis: And we are left with the barest range of feeling states. So we rely upon excitement, stimulation...

Dr. Dave: Aha.

Francis: ...stimulants to feel like we have a pulse.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Francis: So we need bungee jumping, you know, and race cars and...

Dr. Dave: Drug addiction?

Francis: ...drug addiction, you know, something that actually gets us to feel like we're alive.

Dr Dave: Yeah.

Francis: We have lost that range.

Dr. Dave: Aha.

Francis: And the depth of that experience is as important as the height of that experience. We've got to stretch that back out.

Dr. Dave: Wow.

Francis: In fact that every grief ritual that I've led, it ends in this ecstatic joy. I mean, it's shocking what happens.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: We enter into this place of such sorrow. But where we end up it is in this place of really delight. It is astonishing what happens when heart is for a moment released of its weight.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: It makes room for this feeling of gratitude and joy. In fact, in our work, I teach that, it is the mark of the truly mature human being that they carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Francis: And that to deny either one of them diminishes the range of our life. If you deny grief and only live with gratitude, you lack a certain depth. You lack the tempering that opens your heart to compassion. If you deny gratitude and only live in grief, that's a sorrowful world

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which leads to cynicism, bitterness, withdrawal. So the human being needs to really embrace both of those and be stretched to your maximum, holding both of those things simultaneously.

Dr. Dave: That's one of the things that I like about the Jungian orientation is that it also stresses the ability to live with opposites to hold things that might on the face of it seem incompatible,

Francis: Right, right.

Dr. Dave: that kind of recognizes the full complexity of the human dilemma.

Francis: Yes, the full catastrophe.

Dr. Dave: Yes, the full catastrophe.

Francis: As Zorba would say...

Dr. Dave: Exactly.

Francis: Yes.

Dr. Dave: You know, in your book you talk about the five gates of grief.

Francis: Yes.

Dr. Dave: Maybe that will be a good place for us to go, to have you take us through those five gates, if you will.

Francis: Those slowly evolved over time sitting with many, many circles of people in grief. The first gate is-- what we are all familiar with-- is to lose someone or something that we love.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Francis: So, we lose a partner, we lose a child which is just devastating...

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: ...a parent, a friend. We lose a home through foreclosure. We move away from a place that was just precious to us because of a job. We lose a job. Now these things really are familiar and deep and they reside in us, and when we lose them we feel grief.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: That's the one grief that is acknowledged in the culture. The other four gates of grief are basically untouched and ignored.

Dr. Dave: Before we leave this one,

Francis: Yes,

Dr. Dave: because loss often triggers depression. I remember losing one romantic

relationship along the way, that really triggered a pretty deep depression in me. What is the relationship between grief and depression? And a, I guesst that's the question.

Francis: Many people come to see me come in with the symptoms of depression. What I find sitting with them for not very long is that; what they really are doing is living with the oppressive weight of untouched grief.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Francis: So, when we begin to unpack the sorrows that they carry, the depression typically resolves. So, it is almost a mixed diagnosis at times. These losses that you're mentioning frequently are carried again privately.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: You know and so we don't have the access to a communal process to really work their grief down to the ground. So it is what, we end up what I call "recycling our grief." There are two things required to fully release grief; there is containment and release. The containment is the field within which you can pour your grief. Typically, that's supplied by the village, by the community, by your friends. My job then is just to pour the grief to the ground. If I am carrying it privately I have to do two jobs simultaneously. I have to be containment and release, and guess which one wins out.

Dr. Dave: Containment?

Francis: Containment. So, then I am never allowed full release. So I cry alone, I weep alone. But it almost like it goes out but it comes right back in. It does not have the full cycle of expression and release. Because the containment is not there. I can't fully let go to it. So we have long periods of, prolonged--even in the, you know, diagnostic and statistical manuals—"complicated grief". Well, how do we have that complicated grief? Except for the fact, primarily that we don't have the support we needed to really drop into the grief.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Francis: And fully emerge ourselves in it adequately, to move through it.

Dr. Dave: So have you never found that by involving someone in grief work, that it triggered a depression?

Francis: Symptomatically, sure. There will be symptoms of depression which are often times secondary pieces of an un-lived life, you know, pieces of their own soul like that haven't been fulfilled, haven't been acknowledged. So, lose a partner like you just described, you know, may trigger off the fact that I've not risked in my life, that I've lived a very careful life, that I've been cautious with my heart. So it may trigger secondary grief that needs to be tended which may first appear under the symptoms of depression. And that depression is again the voice of the soul calling our attention to that place. This has not been touched and that is the second gate of grief. Shall we go there?

Dr. Dave: Yeah, let's go (laughs) to the second gate.

Francis: The second gate of grief is--what the first gate was losing something or someone we love--the second gate has to do with losing something that has never really known love. Some part of ourself that has never been really touched by love. For instance, many of us were told as we were growing up that our anger was not welcomed, or our sexuality wasn't welcomed, or our sadness wasn't welcomed, or our exuberance was not welcomed,

Dr. Dave: Right.

Francis: And those things were shunted to the what Jung would call "the shadow", what I called the "waste land."

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Francis: These are losses to the integrity of the psyche. Any loss should be acknowledged by grief. But we can not grieve for what we hold contempt for. So we are stuck. We live with this persistent, untouched sorrow for these pieces that we've lost and have not been able to grieve over. So, a lot of the work in here in my office, but also in grief rituals, is to begin to put our arms around these pieces that've been lost to us, bring them back and to weep for them. To make amends that I've treated parts of myself with so much cruelty, hatred, you know, shame, and to bring them back is a big part of that second gate of work. Does that make sense?

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I feel a sense of loss around music...

Francis: Aha.

Dr. Dave: ...that I was not given or forced--my grandmother tried to force me to learn to play piano and she said: "David you're gonna regret this for the rest of your life." Unfortunately that script (laughs) got in pretty deep because, in fact, I have regretted it. I have tried to learn piano as an adult. And you know, I got a little ways, but I just couldn't get to the level that would be fully satisfying. So I feel real grief about that.

Francis: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: Is this part of gate two?

Francis: Yeah, it can be. That somehow the message was given to you either you were not good enough or that it would be a waste of time. So some aspect of your own that would bring you vitality, would bring you alive was cut off, was silenced.

Dr. Dave: It is not so much that I have got a negative message about it. It just didn't happen, you know. I probably needed somebody to say okay. I know many people hate the fact that they were forced to study music. I sort of wished that I either had a way to have been welcomed into it, so that I would have loved it. Because there is a place in me that feels very musical. Or that I'd been forced at least I would have the tools to call upon it at the stage of my life.

Francis: Right, right, right. So there is grief.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah.

Francis: And how do you carry that grief? How do you acknowledge that grief?

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: That is a good question.

Dr. Dave: Well, I'm telling you about it right now (laughs). That is something I have spoke about and shared with friends...

Francis: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: ...and try to remediate as I say about taking music lessons with all kinds of different instruments, still having fantasies, you know.

Francis: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: The didjeridu, for example, has just got basically one or two notes. (laughs)

Francis: That's fine. The third gate of grief is the sorrow of the earth. That is around us all the time. Pablo Neruda had a line, "I know the earth and I am sad." This sorrow, I've wrote about in the book, the impact that the Gulf of Mexico oil spill had on me.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Francis: How I would wake in the middle of the night, hearing dolphins screaming, you know, and just feeling the death that was happening to thousands and thousands of birds and turtles. It just pierced me. Now the gulf is three thousand miles away from me.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: But that sorrow was touching my soul as well as I think for this entire country. It was impacting us. The sorrows of the earth are with us all the time. When we do the grief rituals, invariably there are many people who speak to loss of wetlands, the death of the salmon, the clearcuts of the forests near their homes, clearing away acreage that used to be wild for more graves. These are losses.

Dr. Dave: Or urban blight

Francis: Urban blight, yes, and strip malls. These are all sorrows that befall the earth. And, if we have some fantasy that we're separate from that. We are not. What happens to the earth is felt in our tissue every day. One of most powerful examples of that was, when I was leading a ritual called, "Renewing the Earth" --which is, we do this ritual every year. It is our attempt to put something back into her belly. Because we are such an extractive culture. We take, we take, we take and we place nothing back into her body. And I was planning to drum for that ritual, and I began by saying in an invocation. At the moment I was done saying the prayer, I

was on my knees and I wept for four hours. As we named, we begin that ritual with the funeral. We built a funeral pyre and put onto the funeral pyre all the things that have left the earth this year. It can be for very personal things like family members, but also cultural things like, democracy, you know, mercy, you know, kindness.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Francis: And then we name manatees and you know, everything that was being put onto this funeral pyre was just hitting me like a body blow.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Francis: And it was one of the first times I really got that, this is something we are all experiencing all the time, but we are very good at keeping it at bay.

Dr. Dave: I think so and I think, I mean, could it be argued that this is a defense mechanism that makes some kind of sense because otherwise we might just feel so overwhelmed as to throw in the towel?

Francis: Well, it makes sense in the absence of community. It makes sense in the absence of things that help us hold us. So, yeah, I mean, a lot of the defense mechanisms we have are the results of what we've lost. You know, Jung calls, neurosis "illegitimate suffering." We're gonna suffer, no way around it.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. (laughs)

Francis: But if we are given what we need to support us in our experience of loss and death and suffering, we are okay. But in the absence of that, we have to erect amazing strategies...

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Francis: of disconnection, of avoidance, of numbness, of anesthesia. All of these are strategic moves to cope with something that is missing which is the fourth gate of grief.

Dr. Dave: Before we go there,

Francis: Yes.

Dr. Dave: something is coming up for me, as I've read in paper just this morning. You may have seen it, too. The Press Democrat talking about, that consumers have lost confidence in the economy. And that we're doing worse than we might need to, because of this kind psychological loss of confidence. And what occurs to me, as I hear you speaking here is that, in a way this could be a kind of unseen accumulation of all of these various assaults, not just to the economy, certainly that was this major economic assault, and a sense of betrayal.

Francis: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: You know, the whole world got betrayed by some crazy manipulations

Francis: Yes.

Dr. Dave: of the economy. So, we're all carrying that grief at some level...

Francis: Absolutely.

Dr. Dave: ...as well as the gulf, as well as the nuclear disaster in Japan.

Francis: Yes.

Dr. Dave: And we try to put these things out of our mind, but somewhere they are there lurking and maybe effecting even something like consumer confidence.

Francis: Right, right. That is a very good point, David. I think, we are a culture saturated in grief and we don't know what to do with it. After 9/11, I was in New York about a month after the Trade Towers were destroyed. My son had just started going to school at Sarah Lawrence and we went up there to see him. And he took me downtown, as close as you could get to where everything happened. And what I saw was quite extraordinary. Grief shrines everywhere; photos, candles, flowers, people gathering in parks in small circles, some singing, some silent, some doing ritual. It is as if the soul had an elemental need to come together, to touch these things, to move towards grief together, communally. Unfortunately, that was not our collective response. Shortly after that, we were told to go shopping. And then we went to war. So, that initial response of sorrow and grief quickly became silenced and suppressed. And we went back to our business.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: You know, and unfortunately what lingers in us is this unresolved grief.

Dr. Dave: Right, right. Another thing that gets triggered is there is an ad that appears in the paper that really irritates me. It's got this phrase that says, "Shop Brilliantly."

Francis: Hmm.

Dr. Dave: Shop Brilliantly! (laughs) Talk about the message of consumerism as if you're going to be showing your brilliance by going to the mall and shopping.

Francis: One of the things we talk about in the work that I do is that we need to restore, what I call primary satisfaction. The things that we evolved with over hundreds of thousands of years that satisfy the soul at the most basic level; adequate levels of touch, you know, comforting in times of sorrow and loss, celebration and gratitude, gathering food together, eating together under the stars, telling stories around the camp fire, you know, laughing and playfulness together, sensuous erotic connection to the wider world. These are what made us human. But for the most part these things have disappeared. Now, we are left with secondary satisfactions--material goods, seeking power, rank, prestige, addictions--and these things never satisfy the soul.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: So, they actually produce a hunger. So, in some ways, this lack of consumer satisfaction I find to be very comforting-- that many were not continued to be stupefied by "buy the next thing." We're beginning to look to see how are we doing with one another, how are our communities doing, how are the children, how are the generations that are gonna follow us?

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I've been looking at the child piece in some recent interviews. Just a couple of days ago, I interviewed Joel Bakan, the fellow who wrote the book "The Corporation" and also produced that film. You may have seen it.

Francis: Yes, I have.

Dr. Dave: He has written a book about the corporate influence on childhood. I've been reflecting with people lately, remembering the childhood that I grew up with. You know, was already far from the ideal but, you know, I grew up in Los Angeles, a city but I could get on a bicycle as a young kid and ride my bike, miles and miles away from home.

Francis: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: I have grandchildren growing up now and they can't leave their yard.

Francis: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: And that is how it is for most of kids.

Francis: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: Their parents are not comfortable with their kids leaving the yard. They'll take them to all kinds of activities and try to keep them busy and occupied but they don't feel fundamental safety.

Francis: Of course, a form of grief.

Dr. Dave: Okay. Have we done the four?

Francis: We haven't done the forth gate.

Dr. Dave: Okay, lets name the first three again.

Francis: The first three again; the loss of something or someone that we love,

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Francis: those places within us that have never known love, the sorrow of the earth. The fourth gate is, it is a hard one to really describe, but I find it always present when we gather together, in ritual space. When we arrived here on the planet, we came wired for certain expectation, all the things I've just named, you know, touch, laughter, play, comforting in difficult times... all those things, we are wired for that whole symphony of humanity. We expect to get up in the morning and walk out and see forthy pairs of eyes looking back at us.

And asking us, “what did you dream last night? Come, lets go get water.” You know, we expected that. That’s how our entire wiring, but none of that materialized. So, there is this fog, this absence in our psyche, and the worst part about it is, we typically blame ourselves for this absence. Because we expected it on some level, even unconsciously...

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: ...its absence is perceived as a flaw.

Dr. Dave: We see ads, for example, Budweiser ads of people, you know, on tv, and they’re all having a great time!

Francis: Great time, great time.

Dr. Dave: We are having, yeah, great sense of community.

Francis: That’s right, that’s right.

Dr. Dave: And Cheers. And we wonder, “What’s wrong with me?”

Francis: Yeah, “what is wrong with me?” Paul Shephard I mentioned before, he had a brilliant line-- once he has been interviewed by Derek Jenson. And I can’t remember the question, but Shephard’s response was the grief and sense of loss. Though, we often attribute it to a failure in our personality, is actually a feeling of emptiness, where beautiful and strange otherness was meant to be experienced. It is a brilliant phrase. We expected to encounter something beautiful and strange and other, you know, wildness, and even in each other certain wildness, you know. But we’ve become quite domesticated and quite tame,

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Francis: very cautious, very careful. And that wildness comes out now in very shadowy ways, violence, you know, warfare. So, that fourth gate is always present, too, as a background echo in our life that something fundamental is missing, some sense of belonging that I anticipated is absent...

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm...

Francis: ...and I am the cause. You know, we are doubly punished in a sense. Do you know what I’m saying?

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I do.

Francis: You know, the absense is already there and I feel somehow it is my fault that this did not materialize.

Dr. Dave: “Where is my larger family?”

Francis: Exactly, exactly. I mean, when we gather in the circles, there is something so familiar about it. Jung had a phrase, once called that “ the unforgotten wisdom” at the core of

the psyche. “Unforgotten wisdom.” There’s some deep memory echo in us that, when we’re provided with what we have expected, some part of us recognises that, even if we’ve never tasted it before. So people that had never come to these grief go, “That was oddly familiar... Even though I’ve never done anything like that before in my life...”

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: ...some part of the psyche recognises what just transpired. Because we are wired for ritual, we are wired to be in community that way, we are wired to lean into each other to show what is most vulnerable and what is most intimate with other human beings.

Dr. Dave: You know, years ago I had some experience of that in the encounter group movement.

Francis: Yes.

Dr. Dave: And it wasn’t so much conceived around this issue of grief, but certainly I think many of the same things transpired, one way or another. That people would put something out that was painful and then find some acceptance in the group and didn’t work through the resistance and the group would be kind of prodding and prodding, “come on, show us who you are”, kind of thing. And I remember the first couple of times I went through something like that, I felt like a newborn child afterwards.

Francis: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: And was a little obnoxious, in a way, because you come out of that experience and start encountering people that haven’t gone through it. I remember going up to somebody and saying, “Hey, we’ve never really talked!”

Francis: (laughs)

Dr. Dave: “How are you? Who are you?”

Francis: Yes.

Dr. Dave: And you know, they’re kind of going whoa! (laughing) What is this?

Francis: Mm-hmm, you are breaking a lot of laws here...

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: a lot of rules

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: Yeah. That is part of that domestication. We don’t know how to meet each other in what is most genuine and raw at times.

Dr. Dave: And the result, also the phenomenon, and maybe you run into this too in the workshops that you do, what we discovered that there was a sort of post-encounter group low, Shrink Rap Radio #279: Grief, Ritual, and The Soul of the World

where it would kind of wear off and the person would feel kind of depressed and at a loss, and that was probably because of that encounter with the everyday culture in which there was no support for the insight, the new way of being.

Francis: Yes, I will answer that two ways; one of them is that; I used the phrase before, primary satisfaction. When we are together in a community space like that, we are living inside of primary satisfaction, temporarily.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Francis: So, for a while we are primarily satisfied. But now I go back into my solitary world, watching tv at night or sending an e-mail, but I'm back into my solitude. The soul then carries with it its echo, its longing. Longing is the memory of having tasted, having been inside of primary satisfaction. A different thing we try to do is, make sure we have enough repetition of this ritual process.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: I don't like doing one shot deals. In fact, nothing I teach, any program, I don't do as a drive-by event. You know, where you come by and it's kind of cool and intense, and then I'll catch you later. I don't wanna do that.

Dr. Dave: Aha.

Francis: I want repetition. Repetition is what's her name, anthropologist Helen Thomson, I can't remember her name but, she said, "repetition is a form of permanence." That's why, even in very intact indigenous cultures, those rituals are happening all the time. Why would they need to? It is an intact village, you think they'd already know that they belong. But even there, repetition of ritual process is the means whereby the stages are reinforced all the time, all the time, that we are a part of one another, that we belong. You know, Armstrong a Canadian Indian from the Pasific North West, in their language, they say "we are of one skin." That is a beautiful image. Imagine if you knew that you had a shared skin with the rest of the village, and whatever happen to you, David, everyone would know about it. And everyone will be there to respond to it. Again we go back to, it is my private pain, it is my private event, I have to cope with it.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: Fix it and then maybe I can come back and be welcomed.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Some people might think that you are romanticizing indigenous life?

Francis: It is hard. I mean, I would not want to live [that life]. What I am trying to do is understand the values that are traditional. These indigenous values have a meaning to us, reciprocity, mutuality, gratitude, you know, restraint, these values have survival in them. These cultures have survived like the Kalahari Bushmen, at least seventy five thousand to a hundred twenty five thousand years.

Dr. Dave: Wow.

Francis: How come? And their possessions are bow and arrow, loincloth and osterich egg to carry water.

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Francis: No iPad.

Dr. Dave: No, no! (laughs)

Francis: And you know, Laurens van der Post described them as the happiest people on the planet.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: Because they live inside of primary satisfaction. The life is hard. But there are values that are innate in these cultures that allowed them to survive. We are struggling for breath after only five hundred years in this continent. You know, something is OFF in the value structures of our culture. You know, individualism, greed, you know, self as God, basically, you know, advancement, achievement, they are not bad values, but we're missing the values of sustainability. We are missing the values that would help us to endure, and to remember what the soul actually requires to survive.

Dr. Dave: And, the fifth gate?

Francis: The fifth gate is what I call ancestral grief. And ancestral grief is the grief that we carry in several different ways. One of them is, our ancestors left something to come here. Often times a lot of hardship but they also left a context that had survived for thousands of years. All of us come from an indigenous culture, all of us, every single one of us that survived and made it. That had its own rituals, its own myths, its own songs, its own prayers, its own food, its own embeddedness in a geography, in a locale. That was lost. When they came here, many of our ancestors stopped their language, they certainly didn't practice the rituals. These things began to be silenced in an effort to fit in into a culture made sense but it is a loss. Another part of ancestral grief, I think of many families I work within here, and their coping with that loss led to rage, to alcoholism, to disappearance, you know they would just leave. So, there is a lot of this lingering grief of the injures to and a shame that was part of the loss. Am I making sense?

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Yeah. What about joining cults, is that maybe an attempt to recreate or find or discover that place that has been lost?

Francis: I think, the longing for belonging is so core to our being that we will almost do anything to establish some rudimentary experience of that feeling state. We will betray ourselves to end up having at least some pseudo-sense of belonging to something. So, yes, we will do that almost in a heart beat. Because we can't bear an existence that is so solitary, that there is no promise of belonging. That's a fundamental need of the psyche.

Dr. Dave: You know, thinking of the paradox about the Jungian approach of--ne the one hand he talks about the collective and the collective unconscious, and on the other hand he talks about individuation. So, it seems like there is a real strong thread there, of you've got to go deep inside yourself to discover and achieve your full self. And is there something left out there?

Francis: Well, he also said that the soul cannot become itself without an "other" which is always found in a "you." So individuation, yes, I love the inner work of people that I spend time with, the spontaneous explosion of imagery and dream and intuition. It is beautiful, but it is not complete. And I tell everybody I work with, you know, working here can take you so far, then you're gonna need community, you know. He also said, "marriage is the fastest force to individuation."

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Right.

Francis: So it is the intense engaging with others that actually does the work of individuation. And this isn't such a solitary thing as it's made out to be. There is a tribe in South Africa, says, "I am because we are." You know, and I think that and also if you dug deep enough into Jung, I think, you will find out that is a truth. I am because we are. I become myself in the container of intimacy, in the container of relationship, not in my solitude. In fact, there is a phrase from the alchemist Sendevogious. He said, "the greater part of the soul lies outside the body." So, you and I are connecting right now because there is an overlap of soul right now. We are meeting in a soul place. Intimacy and self-awareness is an in-between experience. It isn't a private one.

Dr. Dave: Right, right

Francis: It is where we meet.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah.

Francis: There is a point of discovery, a revelation...

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Francis: ...you know.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I am so captivated by what you are saying that I have lost track of whether we've gotten to the fifth gate or not.

Francis: (laughs)

Francis: Absolutely. You know, we can talk more about it, but I think there are a few other things you wanna talk about.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. You know, we've just touched on so many things without me even meaning to look at some of the questions that I've thought about. And so, you know, I think, we've probably covered most of it. Maybe one thing that I do want to touch on. Oh, yeah, do

you know Edward Tick and his book “War and The Soul”?

Francis: I’ve read an interview with him. I haven’t read that book but I really like what he is attempting to do.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I think you guys are much on the same page.

Francis: Yes.

Dr. Dave: He’s worked with veterans of Iraq and brought in some kind of Native American traditions and try to restore the sense of “The Warrior.” You know, there is the archetypal experience of the warrior. And also the Lakota “sun dance ceremony” where people kind of take on the grief of the tribe.

Francis: Right, right. Yeah, our work is, frequently... when we are down with a ritual, I’ll often quote The Dalai Lama who has said the next Buddha would not come as an individual, but as a community. And we are now the shamans, we are the healers, we are the Buddha, the community is it. We will not find our healing in solitude any longer. We must bring it here. This is the container for our work.

Dr. Dave: So, what is your message then to listeners who are sitting alone somewhere and they’re listening to this interview. They might be in their car or they might be working in the garden or off running, I hear people tell me what they are doing, quite a range, they might be at work.

Francis: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: Where are they suppose to find this community?

Francis: Well, my hope is they have at least one friend. And, if they can, just sit down with them and say, “Today I feel sad, I am carrying great sorrow for my children, I am carrying great sorrow for our community, I am carrying great sorrow for our country right now. We seem to be lost. We don’t know where we are going. I carry so much sorrow for the Arctic and the polar ice caps melting and the polar bears are drowning. I carry so much sorrow in my body, and I have not spoken it to anyone. So I am daring to speak it to you today. Can you hear me, can you sit with me, can you tell me your sorrows?” Maybe we can bring another friend. And maybe the three of us can sit together even quietly, and say a prayer and then maybe we can pour our grief into a communal bowl. And then we can offer that as a nutrient for the trees, for the plants that need our water. So we just need to begin. We need to become ritually literate again. That’s a great form of illiteracy in this culture. We don’t know how to gather and address our communal sorrows or individual sorrows. So just to begin to take risks, to try to find ways to expose and reveal what you’ve been told to carry privately. Don’t believe that story any longer. We’ll die in that place. We are dying in that place. We need to come together and begin to speak the deep truths of our lives. And the irony is when we do, we find our joy again, we find our vitality restored. There is a short little poem by Denise Levertov. She said, “To speak of sorrow works upon it, moves it from its crouched place barring the way to and from the soul’s hall...” So, unless we speak of sorrow the pathway to our soul is blocked, is congested. We need to remember how to speak of sorrow, to touch the soul and in that place recover beauty, recover intimacy, recover our deep belonging to all things. We come home.

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Dr. Dave: Francis I think, that's a great place for us to wrap it up.

Francis: Thank you so much for this time, David. I've enjoyed it thoroughly.

Dr Dave: Yeah, me too. You know, we could go on and on. That would be really good. So, Francis Weller thanks for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Francis: My pleasure David.

[MUSIC TRANSITION]

Dr. Dave: I hope you enjoyed this conversation with local therapist, Francis Weller. I am so glad that, our mutual friend, Larry Robinson, who I interviewed way back in my first year of podcasting, recommended that I review Francis's book and interview him. I was very quickly drawn into his warmth and immediacy despite my initial resistance to getting into the topic of grief. I hope that the sense of connection and spontaneity that arose between us came through on this recording.

Actually, I had a brush with grief after I got home and discovered that the iPhone app I was using to make the recording had developed a glitch, such that I couldn't see the list of recordings on the device and had no way of retrieving the one with Francis, even though I'd been very careful to listen back to a portion right after the interview to make certain that it was recorded. I felt certain that it was still on the iPhone somewhere and was able to contact the software developer the next day and with their help find the file and got it safely off the iPhone and managed not to go into full panic over this, trusting that I'd be able to get some tech support and somehow retrieve the file. But nevertheless, I didn't sleep too well that night, (laughs), as you can imagine. So another source of grief in my life and maybe yours too, is that I often find myself needing to use technology that I don't completely understand and am not completely in control of. Anybody know what I am talking about here?

I feel lucky to have such a treasure as Francis right in my own backyard, so to speak. After the interview he shared with me that his book which we discussed in the interview is actually a chapter in a much larger book that he has been working on. So we have that to look forward to as well. It is ironic or perhaps adventitious or maybe synchronistic that this topic popped onto my radar when I've been tracking positive psychology so closely in recent episodes. I suppose it helps to right the balance. I am thinking of the blind man and the elephant. It seems to me that grief and gratitude and joy and faith and optimism and thriving and tragedy and so on are each parts of the elephant. At least that's how I am holding it.

