

## **Shrink Rap Radio #3, August 26, 2005. Victimhood, Responsibility and Choice with Dr Dave**

### **Dr. David Van Nuys, aka “Dr. Dave” in conversation with Jerry Trumbule**

(transcribed from [www.ShrinkRapRadio.com](http://www.ShrinkRapRadio.com) by Jo Kelly)

**Background:** It would be the rare young person who has not faced the humiliation of bullying at some point in his or her growing up. I let my hair down in this episode by sharing a somewhat traumatic experience that transpired my first year away at college. And, I describe how I was able to move from a sense of victimhood to empowerment by reframing the incident.

The story emerges in the course of a phone conversation with my old friend **Jerry Trumbule, MA, ABD** of Denver, Colorado. He was present at the incident we discuss, and even admits to playing a role in precipitating it.

Jerry and I have led remarkably parallel lives. We met during our freshman year at the University of Pennsylvania and hit it off immediately. We were both there on scholarship. We both won scholarships through the U.S. Navy (but I didn't accept mine). We both began in electrical engineering. Independently, we both switched out of engineering into creative writing. Circumstances forced Jerry to leave Penn after his freshman year but we stayed in contact. Independently, we both ended up getting M.A. degrees in psychology and later getting into doctoral psychology programs – me at the University of Michigan and him back at the University of Pennsylvania. We did diverge inasmuch as I studied clinical psychology and he was into physiological psychology. There have been other parallels since those days but I won't burden you with them. This background may help you to understand the comfort with one another that you will hear in the recorded phone conversation.

**Introduction:** Hey everybody, this is “Dr. Dave” of Shrink Rap Radio, the planet's first psychology podcast, and we are coming to you from the beautiful wine country in Sonoma County, California. We like to say that this is the show that brings you all the psychology you need to know, and just enough to make you a little bit dangerous.

Today's guest is – me! You know normally I interview a psychologist about some topic in and around the world of psychology; well today I thought I would share with you a Skype conversation that I had with an old buddy going back to early college days.

Here is a segment from a longer conversation. In the segment we recall an incident from our freshman year at University of Pennsylvania in which a bully picked a fight with me. At the time it was a fairly humiliating and traumatic experience as you can imagine, and one that has stayed with me all these years. I'm fairly certain that this story will resonate with any males in the listening audience, perhaps for some females as well.

There is something fairly archetypal about young men being picked on or bullied and ultimately forced into a fight not of their choosing. At the time I felt very much the victim; later I came to see it in a somewhat different light.

I apologize for the fact that my friend Jerry is difficult to hear. I'm still trying to master the technical challenges of podcasting, and actually this taped conversation was not captured with a podcast in mind. The upside though is that you get to listen to a very spontaneous, unvarnished account. Let's take a listen.

**Dr. Dave:** I remember one time we went to hear somebody, was it The Birds? And some guy punched me in the ear.

**Trumbule:** Wow.

**Dr. Dave:** Just in the side of the head, you know. I wasn't doing anything, just walking in there, and some guy punches me in the ear.

**Trumbule:** People were always punching on you.

**Dr. Dave:** Does that ring a bell? (laughing)

**Trumbule:** Well I remember

**Dr. Dave:** It only happened when I was with you by the way (laughing) that anybody wanted to punch on me. You would antagonize them, and then they would see that I was the smaller of the two, and they would come after me. (laughing)

**Trumbule:** (laughing) You know there is something to that I think. Actually, the Paganos incident.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, I've told that story many and many a time.

**Trumbule:** Yes, that certainly was probably my fault.

**Dr. Dave:** (laughing) Yes it was, in my memory.

**Trumbule:** The obnoxious football guy was storming in, slamming his hand down on each table as he walked into the restaurant.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, slamming his hand squeezer; his hand builder-upper.

**Trumbule:** OK; I'd forgotten that detail. I don't think I knew that detail. And of course, we were looking at him because he was making this huge amount of noise, and he said, "What are you looking at?" And then I think it was I who said, "You."

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, the obligatory "you". What other response is there, you know? It's a perfect set up. (laughing)

**Trumbule:** Yes, what else, "I'm looking at that sign! Free pizza on Thursdays." Right?

**Dr. Dave:** I guess there was an alternative. The alternative answer is, "Nothing" or, "Nothing, Sir." (laughing) and turning around.

**Trumbule:** Yes, yes. I'm sure those – I don't know that that would have changed his attitude. It probably would have changed his attitude.

And then he came over to us, and I think it was just the two of us sitting opposite each other in a booth, and then for some reason he picked on you.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. Well probably because I am the smaller of the two, and also, maybe because you were sitting in a way that you had your back to where they were. You had to turn your head all the way around to look at them, whereas I was naturally facing towards them

**Trumbule:** Yes, I'm sure that's true.

**Dr. Dave:** So I guess as he is walking up to me we are having some degree of eye contact, walking up to the two of us maybe we were having eye contact and maybe he hones in on that. So he says, "Well you had better turn your nose to the wall." And I'm still looking at him, right? And he says, "I am going to count to three, and by the time I get to three you had better have your nose against that wall."

Well you know you don't want to back down in a situation like that. So he says, "One." And where I got the stupidity, or the gall, or the pride: I said "One." He said, "Two." I said, "*Two*." (laughing) still looking at him, right?

**Trumbule:** (laughing) Right.

**Dr. Dave:** He says, "Three." And he goes to poke his finger in my cheek to turn my head against the wall; and I went to knock his hand away but somehow I over extended and flapped him in the face. (laughing)

**Trumbule:** Yes, it was the weirdest move I had seen in a long time. As I recall I thought, what the hell is Dave doing here. And yet I don't know, you could have punched him in the balls – because that was right handy – or stomped on his foot. You were in such a position that you really couldn't get a fist on his face.

**Dr. Dave:** Right.

**Trumbule:** Maybe you could have done a right jab right into his nose, and shoved his nose up into his brain; but instead you delivered this panty-waste slap.

**Dr. Dave:** There was no intention to slap him; (laughing) it was an accident.

**Trumbule:** My explanation at the instant that you did it was that it was some involuntary reflex that triggered somehow, because clearly it wasn't designed to hurt the guy.

**Dr. Dave:** Right.

**Trumbule:** But at any rate, why don't you pick it up from there.

**Dr. Dave:** OK, I'll complete the story, and then I'll tell you the new take on this story.

**Trumbule:** OK.

**Dr. Dave:** Well what happened then was, after that he said, "OK that's it – come outside." And I said, we said, "No we just want to have our pizza. Look we don't want any problems, any trouble; I didn't mean to hit you, it

was just a reflex and we just want to have our pizza.” So he says, “Well we are going to be waiting for you.” He goes and rejoins his group.

We eat our pizza very, very slowly hoping that they will leave, and eventually they leave. We start to go outside after we think we have waited long enough that this thing will have blown over and somehow again in the process (laughing) – I was full of mistakes that day – and I think the door you were supposed to push, instead of pull. I remember we looked out the door and there was this crowd down on the corner, and I somehow made a noise by pushing the door the wrong way and it made this bump, and the heads turned up the street as one, and they said, “there he is – there’s going to be a fight – there he is!”

So we ducked back in, and then we are asking the waitresses, is there a back door, can you call the police? And there is no back door, there is no phone, and there is no help. Then one of his buddies comes in, and he says, “Look you slapped Tony Grecko who is like a tackle on the varsity football team, and you humiliated him in front of his friends. And yes I know he was drunk, and he was being an ass, but this has got to be resolved; and the best thing you can do, the only way out that I can see, is that you need to go out there and apologize.”

So it seemed like that was the only way to go, so we went out but it was clearly between me and him. You were involved, you were there with me and you walked down there with me.

**Trumbule:** By that time I was merely serving as your second; I was merely holding the towel.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes (laughing) right. The crowd parted, and there was Tony Grecko, or whatever his name was. He said, “You’ve got to apologize.” And I said, “Yes.” Then he said, “You’ve gotta get down and kiss my shoe.” And I said, “There is no way I am going to kiss your shoe.” And WHAM, I didn’t have a chance to duck or anything, he slapped me really hard – it came really fast and hard – but somehow it didn’t knock me off my feet. And the only thing I could think of to do (laughing) in this humiliating situation, drawing on my good Christian upbringing was to turn my cheek and say, “Here’s my other cheek, do you want it too?” Which really had a great effect, it kind of humiliated him and it defused the whole situation.

And then of course I was adrenalized for the rest of the night. We were walking around, and thinking of alternative scenarios – I should have kicked

him in the balls, or clawed his eyes out, or turned around and ran, or something.

**Trumbule:** Yes, that's pretty much the way I remember it.

**Dr. Dave:** We were fantasizing about figuring out where he lived, and we were going to trash his dorm room or his frat house or something like that. I seem to recall that either he, or one of his emissaries, came and apologized to me some days later. Does that ring a bell?

**Trumbule:** Yes, that's what you said. I wasn't there but that's what you told me.

**Dr. Dave:** But you do remember me reporting that?

**Trumbule:** Yes, that he came.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes well that's good.

**Trumbule:** I wasn't there but that's what you told me at the time. I never doubted it for a minute. The guy was obviously drunk, and stupid, then with you turning the other cheek. The next day I'm sure his friends told him, if he was too stupefied to remember. But it seemed to me by the time that he hit you, he wasn't really drunk any more, because by the time we went out, an hour or two hours had passed; a lengthy amount of time, not a few minutes. The sun had moved quite a distance in the sky by the time we went out there. You took it like a man, and you came out on top. The rest of the world that was standing around watching probably didn't know about the apology part – but you know – and I know, I was there.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, I have a witness.

So years ago, maybe 20 years ago or so, I'm sure you have heard of EST, Werner Erhard and EST, right?

**Trumbule:** Yes, sure.

**Dr. Dave:** And there was a spinoff of EST called Lifespring. Some of my friends got involved with Lifespring, and in fact my office mate at school became the psychologist for Lifespring. Another friend actually became a trainer for Lifespring and travelled to Japan, and all over the place, and did these incredible trainings. I looked somewhat askance at all of this, and was kind of sceptical about it, so as an inducement to get me to do it, he said,

“I’ll tell you what, you can do it for free if you write a report. I will hire you as a consultant and you go through the basic training, then you submit some kind of a report.” Which is what I did; and the report that I wrote actually likened it to brainwashing in Korea, by the Chinese in North Korea.

**Trumbule:** That was helpful.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, (laughing) I’m sure nobody liked that at Lifespring. But at the same time I had to concede they really had mastered social control and social manipulation. You can see how cults work when you are in it there: when you are food deprived, somewhat sleep deprived, and you have got this sort of powerful charismatic leader who has control of the microphone, and control of the space, and who is saying, “The only way you are going to get this is if you are ready to go for it. Are you ready to go for it, are you ready to drop all your bullshit excuses and go for it.” And meanwhile the crowd around you is yelling, “Yes! I’m ready to go for it!” and they are passing the microphone around to people who are saying, “I’m so stoked. I just want to go for it. I’m going to change my life and I’m going for it. Nothing is holding me back!”

They did a few exercises that in fact were very positive and were very powerful, and they were all potentially positive; and they were things that were not unknown to me, but they were just amped up by the setting and the setup; just amped up super.

There was this very powerful exercise in which they turned down the lights, you paired up with a partner, and they said, “We want you to locate your favorite victim story, the place where you were just so victimized, and you’ve told that story over and over again to the point where it is like a smooth polished stone.”

So right away it’s the story in Paganos that comes to mind for me, right?

**Trumbule:** Yes.

**Dr. Dave:** So I tell that story in all of its loving detail and glory, because I just love that story, and I’m really attached to that story, it’s one of the defining stories of my life. I was just a freshman, for god’s sake, I thought I was going to an Ivy League school and getting away from all that high school crap, like fights and confrontations and so on.

**Trumbule:** Yes.

**Dr. Dave:** So I tell my story, with lights low and some kind of music and so on. Then after I've told the story the leader breaks in and he says, "I want you to take responsibility for what happened, to assume that you caused whatever happened in this situation where you defined yourself as a victim, and to look at it from the standpoint of taking responsibility for it."

So my first line of reaction was, gee this wasn't my fault, how could I take responsibility for that? But I wanted to go for it, so I thought, I'm going to try this out, I'm going to try it on. And immediately I began to see how, yes, in some ways I did create this: first of all, I hung around with you (laughing) – and I liked to hang around with you because there was generally some excitement, and something was going on and something was going to happen; and you are kind of an edgy character, and it helped to bring out my edgy character. And the other thing I had to own, is I carry myself with some kind of swagger or cockiness or something, but there is something there. The other thing is, I didn't back down. I could have backed down – early on I could have pleaded, or whimpered, or something. But no, I have to take responsibility for the fact that when he said, "One" I said "One" which was a provocative thing to do; so I had to own my provocativeness in the situation.

So that was a really interesting exercise for me, because it gave me a totally different slant on it, and it helped me to see that I am responsible for a lot of what goes on in my life.

I think you can take that thing too far, to me it doesn't mean that there are no victims; certainly there was a strong element of victimization in that situation. But at the same time it helps to be able to own my piece of it.

**Trumbule:** Well owning it is good, but I don't think that describing it as somehow maybe not the right response – I mean I can imagine a set of responses ranging from total wimp, to being a total asshole. Right?

**Dr. Dave:** Right.

**Trumbule:** And you came in at a reasonable "5". You weren't trying to be some smart ass, but you weren't just melting into the corner there. You came in at about a "5" and that's how you played it, and that was you basically – you refused to kiss his shoe – and so I think owning it is fine, but I think all of your behavior was appropriate, and represented a guy who was just sort of a normal, non aggressive, but non wimpy guy, who you could only push him so far.



**Dr. Dave:** But the part that I'm owning is getting into that into that situation in the first place.

**Trumbule:** Wrong, wrong.

**Dr. Dave:** (laughing)

**Trumbule:** You were sitting in the restaurant, minding your own business, with your mild mannered sidekick, on a Sunday afternoon, and we were not looking for trouble.

**Dr. Dave:** That's true.

**Trumbule:** When some drunk locomotive comes barrelling through our space, and we look up – I don't think we owned any of that. That was some asshole coming from somewhere else, and that's the way life is.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Trumbule:** Do you cause the weather? If you told the story about being a victim because you got struck by lightning, would this guy say, "Well if you hadn't been standing on that hill, you wouldn't have been struck – you caused yourself to be struck by lightning." You wouldn't say that.

**Dr. Dave:** Well I wouldn't go that far. But I do own the fact that, we own – that you said, "You" when he said what are you looking at. And I own (laughing)

**Trumbule:** Of course I acknowledge the behavior, but the ownership, I don't get the ownership part. To own up to something, the way you are using it, seems to be to admit that it was mistaken or bad or something.

**Dr. Dave:** No, to take some responsibility for choice in the situation, that it wasn't a situation of total victimhood.

**Trumbule:** Oh, so it has to be 100% the other person; in other words you fall down on the ground and hide under the table, saying yes sir, yes sir, and then he starts kicking you.

**Dr. Dave:** (laughing)

**Trumbule:** And because you don't move your face fast enough and put it back in the corner you get kicked in the face, and so you've got to own that; right?

**Dr. Dave:** No, I hear what you're saying.

**Post-interview Comments:**

**Dr. Dave:** OK, that's the story. Jerry makes a convincing case, but because it's my podcast I get the last word.

The point I was trying to make, is that if we see ourselves as a victim of life's circumstances, we are disempowered. If we see ourselves not as a victim, but take some responsibility for events, we realize we make choices and therefore are empowered. Regardless of the circumstances that befall us, we can make choices about how we will interpret those circumstances.

The existential psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl made this point very forcefully in his classic book, *Man's Search For Meaning*. He himself survived imprisonment and starvation in a Nazi concentration camp. He noted that even in that extreme situation there was still room to make choices, even though they might have been very tiny choices. According to Frankl, the people who survived were the ones who continued to exercise choice; those who gave in to victimhood died.

I agree with my friend Jerry that this stance can be taken to ridiculous extremes. At the same time it was very useful for me to try on the notion that I had some responsibility for that fight incident. As a result of that exercise I hold that experience in a different way now, feeling less victimized and more empowered. And I have been able to carry this learning into other critical junctures in my life, and it has made a real difference in certain situations.

So what do you think?

I'd love to hear your responses. You can send email or leave audio clips for me – just send them to shrink “at” shrinkrapradio.com