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Shrink Rap Radio #354 -- What Aging Men Want

David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka "Dr. Dave" interviews Dr. John Robinson
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Marianna Vogt)

D.D. = Dr. Dave, J.R. = Dr. John C. Robinson

D.D (Introduction): My guest today is Dr. John C. Robinson and we'll be discussing his work on men's issues. John C. Robinson, PhD and DMin, is a clinical psychologist with a second doctorate in ministry, an ordained interfaith minister, the author of seven books on the interface of psychology and spirituality and last but not least an aging boomer with grown children and a gaggle of grandchildren.

His professional work specialized in midlife men's issues, the integration of psychotherapy and spirituality, the nature of first-hand mystical experience, the psychology and spirituality of aging, and the archetypal revelations of myth and fairytale. A full-time writer now, his recent works include a memoir/narrative on the transformation potential of aging, which is called *The Three Secrets of Aging*, a collection of fairytales titled *Bedtime Stories for Elders: What Fairytales Can Teach us About the New Aging*, and his latest, which is *A New Myth for Aging Men: What Aging Men Want: Homer's Odyssey as a Parable of Male Aging*.

Now here's the interview:

D.D.: Dr. John C. Robinson, welcome to Shrinkrap Radio.

J.R.: Hey thanks so much for having me. It's a great pleasure to be here.

D.D.: Well, it's a pleasure to have you on the show. I've really been enjoying your book *What Aging Men Want*, and to get into it, I notice that you're both a clinical psychologist and also have a degree in divinity. Which came first?

J.R.: The clinical psychologist came first. So I went to University of Oregon and got a PhD there in clinical, and spent you know over 30 years doing clinical things and then had an event happen, a health crisis happen, late in my career and I really just, after a year and a half of struggling on with it, decided I needed to quit my, to quit psychology and do something else, so I went back to school--when in doubt go back to school--

D.D: right--

J.R.: --and got a degree in, a doctorate of divinity and sort of interfaith spirituality. And then I went to an interfaith seminary and got a, was ordained as an interfaith chaplain, as a minister. And it kind of has fulfilled a life-long longing of mine to really integrate psychology and spirituality... In my view they both hold pieces of the whole, but not the whole.

D.D: Yeah, yeah. I can definitely understand that. So you did a chaplaincy. I take it you never had a congregation per se?

J.R.: No, no. I think my ministry is much more about writing, an a continuation of my deep longing to understand the nature of human experience.

D.D.: Yeah, I missed a word there. You said your ministry is mostly about what?

J.R.: Authoring. Writing books.

D.D.: Oh, writing, writing! I'm sorry. I'm a bit hearing challenged, so between the phone, and the earbuds and my hearing I can sometimes miss a word. We are talking about aging men, so these kinds of issues come up.

J.R.: You know, absolutely. We're all getting old, and I can feel it happening in my body. I can feel the transformation of age change in me from this high-energy, middle-aged professional, you know working away in the world to, well to who knows what, we're changing and it's a metamorphosis with an unknown ending, but it's a profound process. And that's why I got so interested in it because I wrote my first book about midlife, and that was about men struggling with, in many ways, the same issues, of being kind of crushed by a numbing model of masculinity. But then I wondered, well what happened to all these Iron Johns who now are reaching our age, into the 60s and 70s, and how are they dealing with this. And suddenly it dawned on me that's what I wanted to do next. I wanted to write about that.

D.D.: Yeah, and I gather you also went around and interviewed a lot of men about those issues for your most recent book. Is that right?

J.R.: That's right. One of the wonderful being a therapist in the community for decades is that you get to know an awful lot of people. So we put on men's gatherings in Sacramento where I work for, you know, for eight or ten years. Really rich experiences, and I also had a men's group and community of men and community of therapists. So we all got to this age, and I just started asking them all if they would tell me what their experience of aging was. And what I like about this is that they're all guys who really worked on themselves to some degree, so they're much more in the inner world, is much more accessible to them. I don't think they do anything different than other guys, they just have more language for describing it. (*Unintelligible, perhaps: So I went about*) creating some men's groups, some older men's groups and worked on the idea of mentoring men's groups, and just had a wonderful time.

D.D.: Well, you've been involved with men's issues for many years. How did that come about?

J.R.: I was fascinated by James Hillman, and Robert Bly and Michael Mead and these men's gatherings that happened. And my midlife I was getting burned out on this sort of crank-it-out version of masculinity, where it's always about competition and success and doing more and so on, and what Bly and Mead and Hillman offered us was a language of soul. So all these collections of midlife guys were coming to the Mendocino Redwoods for a week and sit around and listen to Michael Mead tell drumming stories from great mythology or from fairytales or so forth and the whole group would interpret them as, in terms of their wisdom about men. And as you recall Iron John was all about really finding the wild man within. The one that hasn't been crushed by culture and society but still has that life, that yearning to express, and dance, and live and love. And so I just, I fell in love with that whole movement and left the medical/legal world that I was in and writing complex worker's compensation evaluations and got pretty much into long-term psychotherapy with people, with men's groups and men's issues. It was a real turning point in my life.

D.D.: Yeah. Now you wrote an earlier book called The Three Secrets of Aging. What can you tell us about that book. What are the three secrets? Can you tip your hand and tell us?

J.R.: Ha--I'd have to shoot ya. No, of course I can. This book arose from my own experience of retirement and aging. I was cooking along, probably working, still working too hard. And I had this heart issue come off. And it was a really traumatizing heart issue which I write about in the book. The long and short of it is I really came to the conclusion that I needed to stop practicing and spend more time working through this heart crisis. What I wasn't expecting was that slightly early retirement is a profound challenge for people, and I think especially for men. So, you know, it took Odysseus in the Odyssey ten years to come home from the Trojan war. Well it took me about ten years to come to terms with retirement and aging. And so in the process of that, you know, the book The Three Secrets of Aging is half of a memoir, basically what happened to me in this time, and then what I learned from it, which I came to terms with, are the three secrets. Do you want to talk about the three secrets, or?

D.D.: Yeah, if you can tip your hand a little bit. Not so much that people wouldn't want to read the book. But just enough to whet our appetite.

J.R.: I love this stuff. The three secrets are initiation, transformation and revelation. And initiation means that aging is an initiation into a new and different and extraordinary stage of life, so that all these events and processes that happen at this time, you know changing bodies, fading identities, losses of all shapes and sizes actually represent an initiation into an entirely new dimension of human life, which was surprising to me and amazing to me is that through all of recorded history only one out of ten guys could expect to get to 65. And now 8 out of 10 people are going to reach 65, and if you reach 65 you probably have, by statistics, another 15-17 years, so we have created with science and nutrition and so forth and medicine an entirely new developmental stage in the human life cycle. And I find that astounding. So the first secret for me is that these events bump you from this middle age warrior kind of working family man engaged in the world to a new stage of life that none of us really know a lot what do with. The psychologically... identity, spirituality. The reality of death moves into the foreground. A lot of stuff gets your attention and if you wrestle with it it's transformative. So that's the next secret, that aging is enlightenment in slow motion.

D.D.: Alright. I like that phrase: enlightenment in slow motion.

J.R.: Yeah, because it does happen fast and if you don't look for it you might miss it. All the stuff that you lose in aging--your identity, the story of your life, you know, your credentials, your community, your kids grow up, your role as a family member --this stuff begins to fall away and so you're left--it's like a cleansing of consciousness--so you're left with a more empty consciousness now. You have to greet that stuff. But what's amazing is that you become more and more aware of consciousness itself. And these subtle changes in your own awareness begin to be little cracks opening into the possibility of a more profound enlightening in this period. So anyway with the dissolution of identity, time and story and beliefs--none of us have to hold on to the same belief structures, most of us don't, as we age--consciousness just becomes more spacious and open, and we discover amazingly that we are not what we think, we are not who we think we are, and in fact we are this consciousness that is not in us, we are in it. And there's a number of discoveries we make that are absolutely transformational in this time. If we pay attention to them. If we don't they'll go by. It's sort of like when you're sitting and you've got your feet on your desk and you're looking out the window and the sun's shining through lighting up the dust motes, and your mind stops and

you become aware, just aware of how incredibly amazing life is. That's one of those little openings to an enlightenment possibility. Now if you say "I'm wasting my time, I've got to get back to mowing the lawn," then you miss it. But if you stay with it for a few moments without thinking, just open to it, this thing begins to change in you and that's what this whole transformation process is about. And plus the fact that in this stage of life the Self, the one you were born to be, the true Self gets to--a whole new blossom--of potential in the world, because you know a lot of schedules and duties and rules and stuff--You can do all sorts of really cool new things that are gifts, gifts of who you really are. And the final secret is revelation. And it's really this mystical process and that only really happens if you have engaged secret number two, but the mystics from all the traditions say that when you wake up you discover that the world is already a sacred place. It's not somewhere else, it's here. And as we become more conscious of this divine world, it's like heaven on earth, we discover places infinitely beautiful, infinitely sacred and it just makes you so happy you almost want to do, you know, a happy dance all the time. So the three huge developmental changes that are available to us in aging I think can revolutionize the way we look at age. There's so much TO aging that, as you know, in the past has been grim. You know, you get to 65, you quit, you get the watch, you die. That's just the way it used to be. It was worse than that in the middle ages, you know, and in 1900 the average age span was 45 and in the middle ages it was 25, so this new possibility is like we could change society with this, we can change the world with this if we can get enough of us elders to pay attention and to allow ourselves to be initiated into this new kind of consciousness.

D.D.: Boy, you're a great salesman for this awareness. So you, it sounds like you really got it nailed in *The Three Secrets of Aging*. What is it that pushed you to go onto this next book, to talk about what aging men want?

J.R.: Well I wrote a book in between called *Bedtime Stories for Elders* because I wanted to take the same material, that I guess for some people might be just a little too heady or too spiritual or too, you know, woo-woo or something and I wanted to just present it in a much more fun, digestible way, so I took fairytales and myths from around the world and from my grandmother, and from different places, and I did the way that Michael Mead does, I told the myth, then I would break it down and talk about what it's trying to show us about the nature of aging and consciousness. So that was my second book on aging. And then I thought I was done, and then I don't what happened, you know perhaps because my first book it was about men and midlife and then my hearing an older man in a late life crisis--we have a midlife crisis and we really do have a late-life crisis, especially men--and I wanted to write a book for men, because I am a man and I know men deeply and I love men and I just so deeply connected to what their struggles are and so I was wondering well, how would I do that and it's just suddenly popped into my head as if I had Athena inside me that the *Odyssey* was it. Because I began rereading the *Odyssey* and I discovered that every adventure this guy has - you know The Trojan War, this awful ten-year war between the Greeks and the Trojans all bloody, gory, terrible, and it starts with the stupidest things, you know vanity and jealousy about whose the fairest of them all and somebody kidnaps somebody's wife and this is the reason for a ten year war?-- anyway, so when they finally come home from war Odysseus thinks he's just going to go right back to Ithica to reconcile with his wife and it takes him ten years and the reason is because every adventure he has is actually a symbolic description of a critically important growth experience. And so the first five of these adventures are big mistakes he makes, where he needs to kind of realize: whoa, I'm the problem here. The next five adventures he makes, he undertakes, are transformational experiences, you know like facing death and resisting illusions and stumbling on literally to a realm of divinity and then

he needs to come home, and so the next five adventures are about homecoming, but it's not so simple. He needs to take a lot of time, because he's been gone for twenty years and his wife hasn't seen him, no word from him, his son has grown up without him and what I find beautiful about this story is that all of us men really do kind of go off to the war of adult life and you know we compete through school and for jobs and careers and stuff, and then somewhere's late in life we just get tired of it, and Odysseus has such an anguished longing to come home. It's throughout the book. He misses his son, he deeply misses his wife. They miss him. Nobody knows what's going on, his wife has been taken over by a bunch of crazy suitors who have taken the castle, and so this urgency he feels to come home happens and this is what I think men feel: that they get in touch with their feelings, like: I'm tired of this war. I want to come home to love. But I don't know what exactly that means. And so a lot of us guys make the mistake of saying: Well I'll, this is great, I'll retire, I'll come home. And then they reorganize the household and they become this CEO and they start giving directions and their wife kicks them out, and it's doesn't work.

D.D.: You know what, well, we're going to drill down a little bit more deeply into the Odyssey here, if you don't mind. And you know I have to confess that somehow in my education I missed the Odyssey and my listeners attribute great knowledge and wisdom to me and assume that I know a whole lot because my guests do, and so there's a kind of halo effect, but I have to say I had not read the Odyssey, and so your book is a great remedial thing for folks like me who haven't read it and who maybe don't have the energy to power through the whole original story right now and be able to get it in chunks and the way that you present it.

J.R.: Homer's book is like 300 pages. My book is like 150 pages. Actually I reduce every story to about three paragraphs, so it's a comic book version but it really does boil it down to the critical elements.

D.D.: Yeah. I so appreciated that. The abbreviated fashion in which you step through the myth and the ten or fifteen challenges that you speak of in each of your chapters. So let's kind of step through it a little bit: For example, the first chapter is titled The War Years. Tell us a bit about that and then what the challenge was for Odysseus and then what the challenge might be for a man of our time.

J.R.: Yeah, when I talk about the war years I'm really talking about how all of us men grow up, you know, and when we're really young we just want to play, and live our lives and love and that increasingly we get caught in this sort of alpha male, pack animal mentality that's I think hard-wired into our system. So whether it's in grades or sports or competing for girlfriends or colleges or jobs or whatever it is, year by year we get caught up into this rat race of competition. And that's the war years. Now the Illiad and the Odyssey, they're very violent stories. So we might say, you know, what does that have to do with the way we grow up. But I think what happens is the same energies, the same feelings, the same forces are there we just sublimate them a little bit more. But we still do all the dirty things. I mean we compete for things, we win over other people, we defeat people. There are winners and losers all the way through. And I think in the beginning it's sort of exciting for men because you know the rattle of sabers, and they're rushing off to war, and the colour and the excitement of it. But after a number of years you really get what worn down. Your relationships get tired, you get some distance with your family because you just end up spending too much time away from home whether its at the other end of the country or just going to work. It's way too much time away from what matters.

D.D.: Yes.

J.R.: And so for me the story really begins with the Odyssey because the hero Odysseus needs to come home from the war years.

D.D.: Yeah. The next section is actually about the longing for home. So what can you tell us about that longing and what's the challenge that that presents to us moderns.

J.R.: Yeah. I think modern men have learned how to be good warriors pretty darn well. They've learned to, I guess conquer, women and love and stuff, but they haven't always learned how to be vulnerable and present and centered in the loving experience. And so for men to come home from war there's a lot of things they don't understand or haven't really worked through with themselves. So when they want to be closer to their children who are now saying, "Well, hey, Dad, where were you when I was growing up and by the way I've got things to do." or their wife who says, "I'm glad to see you want to be closer again. But you know we haven't been close for a long time." I mean these are exaggerations, but the struggle is how do we, as men, give up the fight and learn to love and open our hearts. I have a really good friend in his 80s and he told me some time ago that the most important thing now is to live from his heart. To live from love.

D.D.: Yeah. You know it's something that comes to mind and brings these issues under a more intense focus I guess: Men who are returning now from actual war and the difficulties that they face in the return home and reintegrating with family and particularly people who suffer from PTSD and so on. So that really puts a spotlight on a very pathological version of what you're talking about. But to some extent we all suffer from that a bit too.

J.R.: Yeah. The Odyssey has been used as a parable for men coming home from actual war. But I wanted to use it as--because Odysseus is in his mid-40s now and that's not the average time that a guy comes home from war. So he's coming home from a lifetime spent in war.

D.D.: Yeah.

J.R.: And so it is the challenge of an aging warrior to make peace with his life.

D.D.: Mm-hmm. And your next chapter talks about early mistakes. Give us a brief over-view of that stage of the journey. What are those early mistakes and how might that apply to men today?

J.R.: Sure. So Odysseus leaves with his crew of 12 ships and they land first on this island of the Cicones and immediately what they do is they go up and thrash the place, take slaves, take plunder, conquer it, beat up people, you know, murder people. And then these men hang around a little bit too long drinking and partying and then they Ciconians are given a chance to regroup and then they come pouring over the hill and they chase Odysseus off. And so the message here is that a lot of men just do the same thing they always do when they try to come home. An example might be golf. I know friends who come home, they retire, and they start playing golf like it was a war. Like furious and intense and competitive. So the thing is, that's the mistake we make. This is not the same world. We need to pass that over. That's not going to work. So he gets driven off. So the next island he goes to is the Land of the Lotus Eaters. And these are people who love these lotus blossom--they're sort of like heroin--and they eat

it. And when they share it with the men from Odysseus' ships the men completely lose all motivation. They even forget where they were going: "Where was I going? What do you mean going home?" And I took this as just a very powerful metaphor of another mistake that guys make, because they fall into mind-numbing activities, whether it's computer games or alcohol or drugs or just taking trips for the sake of taking trips. They busy themselves in ways that abort the journey. They're no longer staying in touch with themselves. They're just keeping busy and going numb. I know a guy that starts drinking every night by six o'clock and he falls asleep every night by ten or eleven and he's not going to learn a thing because you don't when you're making yourself unconscious.

D.D.: Yeah. Well, that kind of leads in to your next chapter which is about transformational experiences which you talked about earlier. So where do we see that in Odysseus and in ourselves?

J.R.: There's some amazing transformational experiences here having to do with facing the feminine, facing death, resisting illusions, steering through fear, depression and dealing with the divinity. So let's start with the first one: He lands on this island after he's been completely wiped out by his mistakes and Zeus is throwing a storm at him that's destroyed everything he's got, I mean he's just--just about everything he's got. So he washes up on shore, and this lovely Goddess Calypso, I mean--no I'm getting mixed up--this witch. No I'm sorry, I'm getting mixed up, let me go back. I was on Calypso for a second. This is about Circe the witch. So come to, he and his men come to this island where this witch is in control and she has this evil potion that turns all wild animals into pets. Basically civilizes tigers--you know they're wagging their tails and so forth. So he sends his scouting party out to look, to find her to see what's going on. They all go into look but one guy hangs back because he's not sure he trusts this happening. So she invites them in. There's lovely music, the lion is wagging his tail she gives them a nice drink: a secret potion that turns them into pigs. And so these guys are turned into pigs. And the one guy watching is terrified. He races back to Odysseus and says, "You've got to see this. It's terrible. But I'm not going back there." So Odysseus has to go there himself. And on the way he meets Hermes, a god from above who is disguised as a young man, who tells him about Circles, I have an antidote for you so you won't be taken over by this drug. So, what you need to do is take the antidote and when she finds out it doesn't work on you, what you have to do is take your sword out and rush at her as if you were going to kill her and then, but don't do, but just got that far, and then she'll settle down and you'll make friends and you'll make love and then you can ask her, you can really insist that she turn you men back from pigs into human beings again. And what touched me about this story was that, in terms again of symbolic metaphors, is that a lot of men view women and the feminine with a lot of confusing ideas and impressions and so forth. So you have to ask yourself: How is it that a woman can turn a man into a pig in real life? Well, get a guy drunk and get an attractive woman and men can act really stupid. You know, we all do, and women recognize this power in themselves sometimes. And so this is a story about if you're going to come home and really have an authentic relationship with your spouse, you need to work through some of this stuff about your expectations and beliefs and fears and angers and resentments about women. And so the whole story is about doing that. And he does. And what happens is that, after he rushes her with his sword and she drops to his knees and then they make friends and then they make love, and then she helps him in so many ways. She tells him what the next tasks are, she tells him what to watch out for on certain places on the way and lets him go. So what he's done is he's come to terms with the feminine introject that he grew up with from the culture, from his--whatever it is--the historical experiences with his mother. And he's sorted it out and he's no longer so taken over by his projections of women.

So that's what I'm talking about. And then he goes and she tells him, then next thing she does, she tell him, "You have to go to Hades. You have to visit Hades." Which is, you know, the underworld, death and a hellish experience. They're all terrified, but he has the courage to respect what she says, to believe her, so he goes to Hades and opens this hole in the ground and all these fevers, demons, demonic-like spirits are pouring out and pouring blood and it's a very gory, powerful, symbolic thing. But the essence of it is he meets his dead mother. And his dead mother basically says, "I died of heartbreak because you were gone so long. And by the way your wife and your son are pining for you. They're in terrible shape. You need to be home." And so he gets in touch with loss in a most profound way. He gets in touch with the reality of death. He meets some aging warriors like Achilles and Agamemnon and these great heroes of the Trojan War and they're down there saying: "This didn't work out so well for me. I wish I hadn't gotten killed." One guy gets killed by his own wife after a secret tryst with a lover. And then he meets all these other folks from the Greek myths and I think it's a way of his looking at all the archetypes of humanity and saying, "Wow, that's all down there. How do I really want to live my life? I only have so many years." As you can see each of these stories opens another challenge for a man to explore himself and what I do with each chapter is I ask, I describe how I see men dealing with this, how I personally dealt with that struggle and then I ask questions, you know, self-inquiry questions that you can pose to your own self and say, you know well, how does that work for me? This allows us to work through the story as if it was a kind of personal growth workbook.

D.D.: Yes, and I'm certainly recognizing myself in all the chapters that we've gone through here so far. All the episodes and issues. We noted before that you're not only a clinical psychologist and a psychotherapist but also have this degree in divinity. So we shouldn't be surprised that you have a chapter on spiritual realizations, and you maybe already telegraphed some of that when you were talking about your other book. But tell us a little bit about that in terms of Odysseus and what you're getting at here.

J.R.: Well there's several things. What's so interesting is that when Circes sends Odysseus to Hades she says, "One of the things you've got to do there is meet with this blind seer who's got a prophesy for you. And the prophesy is basically that when you get home safely, which you will, you need to do this one more journey, this second journey. And the instructions are you need to take an oar from a boat, you need to walk inland so far, to so many cities and places and people, that you reach a place that nobody knows what this is and nobody knows anything about the ocean or sailing and they don't use salt on their food. When you've found this you need to put a stake in the ground, a man will come to you and call it a winnowing fan and then you need to sacrifice a bull and a ram..." and there's a number of other things he's supposed to do. But the point is that he's told that as an old man now when he reaches old age, he needs to take this inner journey, going inwards, taking this symbol of masculine strength--the oar--to a place that is no longer about masculine strength. In fact he has to sacrifice the symbols of masculine strength--you know an oar and a bull and these ruddy, powerful animals--in order to talk to this man about this winnowing fan. And a winnowing fan is a thing in middle-ages agriculture that would swing across the wheat and separate the seeds from the husk. So kind of like, it's a symbol of discrimination, of separating what's important from what's not important. And so it's a teaching of him to begin to do this deep inner discrimination about a number of important things. The last thing he's supposed to do is make all these sacrifices to the gods, which have to do with not placating them anymore but to really have union with them, really have a connection with them that is so deep that anything you meditate you become. He really begins to divinize himself and humanity in this process of coming close to the Gods, to divinity. And through that process we begin to learn

to see the world as a divine place. And the other spiritual theme that follows through all this is the Athena herself, Zeus' daughter. She helps Odysseus every step of the way. She is the divine feminine inside. The whole story is about the restoring of the masculine and the feminine. The Illiad starts with a wedding where this big fight breaks out, and it ends with Odysseus coming back to his wife Penelope and their making up in a truly loving and authentic way. And the feminine has been guiding this, because the great task of humanity on some level is to reconcile masculine and feminine, sky and earth, god and man, you know, all the dualities, sacred and profane--so that we can have an entirely new kind of life and world.

D.D.: Yeah, yeah. Well, it's beautiful the way you're taking us through the book there and giving us a really good sense of what's to be discovered there. Now you and I have both been involved for a number of years with men's groups. What do you see as the value of participating in a men's group?

J.R.: Oh Gosh, I see so many values. And I think it depends on the age of man too. I think for older men, there's a way in which they can--men often,-- before they've been in a men's group the go, "I wouldn't want to go to a men's group. All that competition. I wouldn't want to be all bare my soul,"-- and then what really happens is when men start talking to each other they are so grateful to have a community of close friends that they can talk about, whether it's problems or joys or grandkids or whatever. But I think that what happens with aging men is that we don't know what to do with ourselves after we leave the war. And you can do volunteer work, you can do a bunch of stuff. But that may not be the kind of deep work you want to do, or a reinvention of yourself that you feel your soul is calling for but we don't know how to do that. So in a male mentoring group, if we begin to understand what the tasks of aging are, we can really help each other do that. And we can really help each other bare the losses of aging. I mean, there's a lot of really painful things you lose in aging, and they're not inherently evil or bad, they're just a natural process. But if we can to them with guys who care about us and whom we care for, you know, we bear it, we learn from it and we continue to dance.

D.D.: You know, you kind of allude to a developmental process and that makes me reflect on the men's group that I've been in for--I've lost track of time, but 20 plus years, I know it's some long period of time--and in the early years we were sort of, it was more of a quote therapy group, where we were sort of challenging each other to dig down and dig deeper and we would get frustrated you know well are we really doing the work, and so on. So in a way it had some of the characteristics of the younger male as you've described it, of sort of going out and bashing things, if you will. And there's a way in which maybe we were bashing each other. And now, as time has moved on, we've gotten a lot gentler with each other and with ourselves, I think, and its more of a sharing of what's going on, a kind of a sharing and a supporting and a celebrating, I would say.

J.R.: Absolutely! And men are comfortable using the word "we love each other."

D.D.: Yes.

J.R.: I mean there's a way in which guys just... It's not sexual, it's not even weird, it's just you just really, really, love the guys you're with and that fills a hole inside that when you come back from a men's group you love every--you love the family you're with--there's such an opening to each other that is really very beautiful. And I think also we can help each other find a new path in the world, because God knows the world needs wisdom and an aging

perspective, men who are no longer so caught up with testosterone and adrenalin and ego, men who can step in the world and say, "Wait a minute, I have seen all this before. This is not going to work. How can we do things differently?"

D.D.: Right. What would be your suggestion for men listeners out there who might wish to be in a men's group?

J.R.: In the back of the book I actually have a bunch of ideas or directions about how to form a men's group and how to do it for yourself. You know the thing is you want to find a handful of guys, five, six guys who you know and you just talk to them about this kind of thing, about how you want to get together and just have coffee. I love when I'm driving around to see how many men's groups meet in the morning outside of Starbuck's or Cutter's or all these places. And I don't know how deep they go but you can just tell they love, they just love being there. They do it every day or every week. But anyway so you get this group and then you begin to start talking about issues that you're facing. Issues of retirement, issues of the failing, the diminishing, of your energies and your forces, I mean your senses decline and your energy declines, all of us are on prescription medication, all of us have chronic conditions. So there's a sense of sharing this stage of life with each other.

D.D.: Speaking of the sharing of the ailments, somebody recently referred to that as an "organ recital."

J.R.: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, and it can be.

D.D.: Yeah. Speaking of Starbucks too, that rings a bell too. I've found it more and more difficult to go out at night, to go out somewhere. And we've always met at night. And there's a bit of a drive to the guys house where we're meeting--Larry Robinson, who you know--

J.R.: --Yeah, I've met him.

D.D.: Yeah. So I said, let's meet for breakfast. So we've kind of come to a compromise where every other meeting is a breakfast meeting over a meal. So--

J.R. --I'm with you Dave. I like the morning a lot better than the evening. I'm worn out. I got much more juices in the morning.

D.D.: Yeah. So we've been talking a lot about men. What is it that women need to understand about the aging man in their life? And perhaps it's foolhardy to talk about what women need to understand.

J.R.: You're swimming in dangerous waters there. Which is why I wanted to write a book about men. Because I didn't really, I've never felt like I have the authority really to write a book about women. But I write a book about men that's open, that's available to women because I want them to see the struggles that their guys are having, coming home. Women, who are much more comfortable with multi-tasking and multiple identities and changing jobs and so forth--at least of our generation--you know, don't have as much trouble with retirement as men do, who are so much more linear, and goal-oriented and identity-driven. And so, when that ends, and we lose our community, and our goals, and who we think we are, and our activity structure all day, a lot of guys say, "I'm happy, I've been busy, I'm doing what I always wanted to do." And you ask their wife, and they say, "You know, he's

not doing well. He's really not doing well at all, you know, he's sharp, he's irritable, he's moody, he sits in his room all the time." I think the thing is, that what we can tell women, is that this is a chance for the to appreciate the inner struggle of guys who are not quite as able to be verbal as women are, are going through. And that they need other men to help them, to help verbalize these struggles. And I think women are going through a similar developmental change, which is I think profoundly important: They are finding their voices. I'm friends with a woman who recently came out with a book Fierce with Age. They're out there tired of being in second class positions and speaking up for what they want, who they are and how they are. So they're becoming a bit more warriors while men are becoming a bit more lovers. And this is what Jung predicted years ago anyway. That paths cross. That we integrate the anima, they integrate the animus and we have a different life and we share with each other because it's so interesting.

D.D.: Boy, that really fits with my experience, my observation of the changes that the women around me seem to be going through and yeah, they're kind of going one way and we're going the other way, and as you say, that paths kind of cross.

J.R.: We can't impose our way on the other. I have a friend who's seeing a woman, he's out dating, he sees this woman, and the woman says, "Oh, what'd you do this weekend?" And he says, "I was reading a book, and I was kind of thinking of..." And she says, "What, you weren't out in the garden? How come you don't you things constructively around the house? What are you doing with your time?" And it's sort of like, he is going down and deep and she is coming up and out and there just different places to go.

D.D.: Yes. Yes. So you know there's a chance that I might incorporate this interview into a continuing education course, grouping it with others, and for that to happen it's got to be useful for psychotherapists, so what are the implications for psychotherapists who work with older men.

J.R.: Well, I think the implications are, if you were to read my books, they would see that the tasks, the developmental tasks of aging, that apply specifically to men. As we were saying, understanding women, and giving up the war. You know, it's so hard for guys to give an ambitious thing. They go back, and the next thing they're going to do is they're gonna start a new business, or they're going to write a new book, or they're going to do a new thing. And it's always avoiding the real task of coming down into themselves. Anyway, all these challenges I think are places that men can learn about themselves that a therapist can help them walk through.

D.D.: Yeah, I think your book provides a great template for issues for a therapist to explore with an older man.

J.R.: Yeah, tons of issues.

D.D.: Yeah. Where are you with this? And: Where are you with that? You have all these questions that the reader can ask himself or questions that easily could be addressed by a psychotherapist to a client.

J.R.: Yeah.

D.D.: Yeah, so I could see it as very useful.

J.R.: I would also encourage them to start older men's groups. Because I think older men and post-midlife men really have a different set of issues. And the older men are dealing with the reality of aging, the reality of death. These are scary, powerful, profound subjects that men earlier just don't pay attention to. So create a group for older men to let them really talk about what's real for them.

D.D.: Yeah, that raises the question of facilitated vs non-facilitated groups. Do you have any thoughts about that?

J.R.: I think in the beginning, facilitated groups are really helpful. It is helpful to have a guy to make sure that people are participating equally, that people are staying in their feelings not in their heads, you know basic things that groups need. But then I think that groups can go off on their own and be fine. And not all men's groups need that. But I think that a lot of guys, especially in the first few months of a group, could really use that kind of facilitation.

D.D.: Yeah.

J.R.: And they're not time-limited. I mean you've been in a group for over 20 years, I've been in a group for over 20 years. I started a group, a men's group, from my client base, and these guys are still going on. I mean--over 25 years--I just love that. Once they get started they're never going to give each other up. And their wives are happy about that incidentally, it's not a competitive thing. The wives are so happy that he's dealing with this stuff and he comes back a happier guy.

D.D.: Yeah, my wife made an observation. I hadn't been in the men's group very long, and I wasn't aware of a change in me, but she observed something.

J.R.: It seems like the wives send their guys to men's gatherings in their old age for that reason exactly.

D.D.: Yeah. You know, I wonder, sometimes it's hard to self-assess, and so your book causes me to reflect on where am I in this process that you're talking about and so I think about podcasting and I'm doing an interview like this at the rate of one a week and I feel very energized by conversations such as I'm having with you now, and at the same time sometimes it feels like, boy this is really quite a pace, I've got to get through a book in a short period of time, I've got to set it up and schedule it and then edit it and figure out some comments about it and so on, so--

J.R.: --I know the feeling--

D.D.: --yeah, so I kind of wonder well is this the old driven, competitive--maybe not, I don't know how much competitiveness comes into it here--but sort of that old mode of placing a lot of emphasis on accomplishment.

J.R.: Yeah, I know what you mean. Yeah, I do the same thing. The compulsiveness, the doing over being piece, the needing to have the next thing that you're going to do. I just think that's part of the work, is to have in the back an awareness that, "Oh, wait a minute, am I really, is this working for me?"

D.D.: Yeah, to have that question and kind of holding that question and maybe fine-tuning the way that we do it.

J.R.: Exactly. Yeah. Yeah! And sharing it in the men's group, you know, because I bet other guys are doing the same thing in one form or another.

D.D.: Yeah. They seem to be better at well, I'm thinking of--we're a small group and some of them are better maybe at just--I'm thinking of one of the guys who really is content to just look at the dust motes, as you suggested earlier. And boy, it just doesn't seem to be in my nature to be still.

J.R.: Yeah, me too.

D.D.: To be still for any length of time.

J.R.: Yeah, you and I are like that. There sort of like a little bit of agitation in there: What's next?

D.D.: It might be genetic, because it feels like it's very deep and basic.

J.R.: Yeah, and you know one of the things people say about aging is that there's more diversity in the aging population than at any other time in the human life cycle. And so diversity is wonderful. There's a huge range of ways to be. Be the one you are.

D.D.: Mmm-hmmm. Yeah, maybe that's go something to do with why it's difficult for older people to re-pair with a new mate, because we've become so individuated or individualized in our tastes, you now, we know what we like and what we don't like, and we've got our preferences, and so maybe that speaks to the diversity you were just talking about.

J.R.: You know Erikson said it beautifully in the last book he wrote. The title of the book was Vital Involvement in Old Age. I think that sums it up. You don't retire from life. You retire from the activities that you maybe are finished with. But then something new needs to grow. You need to tend a new garden of some sort.

D.D.: Yeah, yes. Very much so. You know, I wondered about retirement, when I was on the brink of retirement, and would I miss what I had been doing? Would I regret retiring early? I could have stayed longer. I haven't regretted it all. I haven't looked back a moment.

J.R.: Yeah.

D.D.: So that's been interesting to me. I was teaching at a university, and sometime prior to retiring I had this moment one evening when I came to the campus and it was at night and I had to go to get something from my office or something like that, and I had this kind of almost like epiphany feeling of, "Wow! This is my university." I mean, I really felt proprietary about it: "I have keys. I can go into all these buildings. This is my university." And so it's interesting to me how quickly I went to, you know once I made that decision to retire and actually did it, to not feeling like it was my university and not caring about it in that way. It was just done. Just done.

J.R.: Yeah, you reach that point when it's over.

D.D.: Yeah.

J.R.: When the magic has left and it's time to leave.

D.D.: Yeah. I've had that experience with a few things. I was intensely involved with the hobby of amateur radio which I had been into that as a teenager and then I came back to it as an older adult with some money to buy the equipment that I always had wanted, and so on. And raced through all the different licensing levels and really applied myself to it and talked to people in like 130 countries. And then suddenly I was bored with it. I realized that those conversations tended not to have any depth and I just got bored with it.

J.R.: Well you do what you needed to do, and then it was done.

D.D.: Yeah, yeah.

J.R.: Amazing, amazing. And what people don't get is that retirement and this next phase is a challenge. It's not just that you're going to sit down and ease into it. It's going to ask of you that you do a whole bunch of sorting things out for yourself, you know deal with your feelings and creating a new life. And not to be freaked out by that, that it's all normal, and just to engage it.

D.D.: Yes. So we come to the question that the book asks, and I think you've answered it, but let's encapsulate it, because your book says What Aging Men Want. Which begs the question: What do aging men want?

J.R.: You know, I wrap it up in the last chapter, it just seemed to me what it was all about. Page 142. I will share what I came up with.

D.D.: Yeah, good. That would be good to have you read a little from the book so that people will get more feeling for it.

J.R.: I'll just read the headings and then people can read what's underneath each headings because it kind of spells it out. But here's the things that I think we need, that men want:

- We want to leave the war.
- We want to come home to love.
- We want to help.
- We want to share our lives with others.
- We want forgiveness.
- We want to matter.
- We want to stay involved.
- We want passion-filled and meaningful work
- We want to have fun.
- We want to be seen as unique individuals.
- We want to keep learning.
- We want to find meaning.
- We want physical connection and experiences.
- We want to stay as independent as reasonable.
- We want to prepare for death.
- We want to awaken a spiritual comprehension of life.

-We want our culture to wake up from the incessant drumbeat of fear, competition and war.

D.D.: Wow. That really is a beautiful list. I actually felt very touched and moved as you began to read that list. So, beautiful job here that you've done with this book. And I'm sure listeners are going to want to grab it. So I think this is a good place here for us to wrap it up, and that's a perfect close, so Dr. John C. Robinson, I want to thank you for being my guest on shrinkrap radio.

J.R.: Can I make a plug for my website?

D.D.: Yeah, I'll put a link to it.

Ok. Anyway, please come visit me. You'll learn more about the books and all this from johnrobinson.org. I'd love to hear from you. Thank you so much David, this has been wonderful! I've been looking forward to this for weeks, and I really appreciate the time with you.