

Shrink Rap Radio #507
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“Imaginal Figures in Everyday Life”

Dr. David Van Nuys Ph.D., aka ‘Dr. Dave’ interviews Mary Harrell PhD
(Transcribed from <http://www.shrinkrapradio.com> by Gloria Oelman)

Introduction:

My guest today is author and Jungian oriented therapist Mary Harrell PhD and we’ll be discussing her book *Imaginal Figures in Everyday Life: Stories from the World Between Matter and Mind*. For more information about Mary Harrel please see our show notes on www.ShrinkRapRadio.com

Dr. Dave: Dr. Mary Harrel, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Mary Harrel: Well, thank you Dr. Dave, I’m so pleased to be here.

Dr. Dave: Well I'm really pleased to have this opportunity. Your publisher sent me a copy of your book and it really has created a wonderful sort of discovery for me because I wouldn't have known about you and your work without the book and I think it's really such a beautiful thing that you've created. So I'm really happy to have you here and having said that, what inspired you to write this book that we'll be getting into more about but tell us the background of how you came to write this book.

Mary Harrel: Okay, well there are really two things that led up to the writing of my book, which once I started writing it, it took fourteen years from beginning to end.

Dr. Dave: That's one of the things I was going to ask you, was how long it took because it looked like this was not something that was hashed out overnight by any means.

Mary Harrel: No, no. So what happened was – the history of the book is that when I was a thirteen year old girl, 1962, I was one of six children and my mother went to the hospital to have the seventh child. I never saw her again. She had our seventh child – her seventh child, my sister – and named the baby, held the baby and then suddenly died, through complications that nobody knew about. But the point is, she was the soul of our family and she was absolutely marvellous and to have her gone that quickly was just horrible for a thirteen year old girl, as well as my brothers and sisters. So two years after my mom died, I was still grieving and in a very dark and sad place and I had tremendous responsibility, more like those suited to a thirty five year old woman and one night a figure came to me. She came to my bedroom, I knew she was there, she had not manifested – I couldn't see her – and very slowly she started to manifest. I was horrified. To me this was a ghost and I didn't want to be dealing with a ghost, so I figured out a way to make her stop manifesting. She was trying to move toward me to give me a box and I felt if I took the box, something would be completed that I was frightened of. So I jumped out of bed, which I later learned was

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me altering my consciousness and I wrapped my arms around my older sister, which was me moving into the material world but I didn't know any of this, I just wanted that woman out of my life. So that ended that moment but for twenty two years that woman – who was very kind, I just didn't want any part of her – she kept trying to manifest, trying to come back and make this connection, then for no reason that I understood at the time, she stopped.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, wow, what a powerful experience and I'm realising that it might be good to give the title of the book and for anybody that's seeing this on video, this is in a nice paperback published by Chiron and the title is *Imaginal Figures in Everyday Life: Stories from the World Between Matter and Mind*. So is this an example of what you mean by an imaginal figure?

Mary Harrel: Absolutely. Do you want me to say what imaginal figures are – people listening might want to know?

Dr. Dave: Yes, I think so. I think that's important background because imaginal is a word that's kind of sprung up in the Jungian context and it's not the same as imaginary, which a lot of people might think, 'Oh, that means imaginary.'

Mary Harrel: Correct.

Dr. Dave: So give us your take on this idea of 'imaginal.'

Mary Harrel: Okay. Henry Corbin was a French philosopher and he studied Sufi mysticism and that would be around the 12th Century where his body of research occurred and he realised that there was this reality that people understood at that time – this was long before the Enlightenment age, 1719 was when that happened – and he wanted to find a word that would differentiate between imaginal, which means a being that's not fully physical but not something that the mind conceives alone. So it's somewhere between the physical, which is the world of matter and between the mind, which is the world of ideas.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I had no idea that that term went back so far, sorry to interrupt you but I thought it was kind of a new invention, so that's fascinating.

Mary Harrel: Well, it's new because people are talking about it now and studying and making that differentiation between imaginal, which is the real, which is the reality but not something supported necessarily by science, or reason and imaginary which is a flight of fantasy. Like sometimes we daydream and we're really not daydreaming about anything, we're just kind of escaping a boring lecture, or something like that and so that would be a daydream and that is most often a fantasy.

Dr. Dave: I guess one of the distinguishing characteristics of these imaginal figures is that they have a certain amount of autonomy. They seem to have an independent existence beyond your own thoughts or ideas. I'm thinking here of Jung's *Red Book* in which he's got this figure of Philemon that he dialogues with.

Mary Harrel: I love that you're saying this because there are all kinds of imaginal figures and certainly we all know about dream figures. We don't invite them – we

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don't say I want this nice figure, this pleasant fellow, we get who we get. That's their autonomy, correct?

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I've tried. Let me have that good dream figure again, that one, this really beautiful girl, bring her back.

Mary Harrel: That's right, it doesn't work and if you could do that the dream figure wouldn't have an autonomy of its own but it comes when it wants to come. So Jung, when he did those figures in *The Red Book*, he was really creating the images of these imaginal beings and Philemon, which is very interesting, is not just an imaginal figure but we know from the way Jung spoke about him, he was a psychoid being – meaning, this is a very new concept even in Jungian psychology – Philemon was not symbolic of a part of Jung's personality but a figure outside of Jung's personality. So he was separate, he wasn't a complex, he wasn't symbolic of a problem, he wasn't a personality aspect that hadn't been figured out yet by Jung, lived out by Jung, he was actually more of a guide or an ally. So my ghost – which later on I came to see as an angel, meaning from the Greek, messenger – my ghost also was a psychoid figure.

Dr. Dave: Okay the psychoid figure, it's a little bit hard to grasp with my rational mind but you do say it's from the world between matter and mind. So there's an in between place there where there's stuff going on that we can't really subject to rational science, I guess.

Mary Harrel: Correct, correct. If you studying the unconscious – think of the unconscious it's a place of irrationality, darkness, chaos, it's always unreasonable and it's infinite. So how are you going to study it objectively? You really can't. The only way you get at the imaginal realm is through experience. If I can say that what Jung taught us was this notion of staying with the image until, as he says, his phrase for it is, stay with the image until you come to terms with the unconscious and he says that might take a moment and it might take years. How he did it, how he stumbled upon this – this is what we call active imagination – so Jung says as you stay with the image maintain a self-reflective ego attitude. That's the key. So you're not really asleep because when you're asleep your ego disappears.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Mary Harrel: So he called that process, that method, 'active imagination' and how he got to it was he was going through a very difficult time around, I think it was 1912-13-14 right after he broke with Freud and he – because he was highly intuitive – he started playing with stones like he had as a young boy. As he played with these stones, thoughts came to him, images came to him, ideas, problems, fantasies, started coming to him and he realised that if he stayed with these images that were coming as he played – he did that as an expressive activity – he realised that he was coming to terms with the unconscious. So you know how so many therapists today will have expressive therapies – art, dance, sculpting – that is what Jung taught us because all of those things let us access the unconscious.

Dr. Dave: Yes, now you point out that even despite the autonomy that's in that image and some of the others that you're going to be sharing with us, that imaginal figure, that it is related and anchored in some ways to your life very explicitly, that these

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arose during times of real crisis and it was shaped by the fact that your mother had died, so that you were, in a sense, orphaned. And you talk about the archetypal impact on your life where, I think you mentioned three primary archetypes, if I remember correctly, it was the abandoned orphan child, the great mother and death. Do I remember that?

Mary Harrel: Boy, you're good, you got them, they're the three big archetypes, that were swimming around in all of this.

Dr. Dave: Thank you. Yeah, so there's that whole archetypal superstructure or undergirding, whatever that is, moving in your life and very, very influential and amidst everything that's going on in your very packed life, you're also at some point you're in a Jungian oriented graduate program, which is stirring the pot, you're in Jungian therapy, also stirring the pot.

Mary Harrel: That's right.

Dr. Dave: You've got divorces and marriages, stirring the pot.

Mary Harrel: Right, second abandonment issue pops up, that's right. All of that was going on when this research was being done.

Dr. Dave: Yes and so this book is structured around seven pivotal life stories or crises and you write about them so beautifully that I thought a good way for us to structure this interview would be for you to choose a passage to read so that my listeners can hear the beauty of your writing. So you would read a passage from the introduction and the four successive chapters – one each and then maybe we could use that as a springboard to get into whatever comes up, whatever feels it's important for us to do. So with that, why don't you launch us with whatever passage you've chosen from the introduction.

Mary Harrel: Okay. Now this first one is kind of getting my reader focussed on what the questions are that will be answered as I look at these seven stories. And these are questions that are fairly new to the field. So here I'll give this piece of reading. The reading is in two parts, the second part as I started writing the book, a figure came in a dream and I also felt that she was a very special figure, so I talk about how I wonder about her and how I work with her image, 'cause that's what we want to do, when we're looking at the imaginal.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Mary Harrel: So, here we go.

I am often asked, 'To what end do you pursue your many questions about the mundus imaginalis?' These questions include: In what ways might the imaginal realm manifest? Can one cause it to appear? Does a world as vast as the imaginal possess common threads, perhaps common intention, or a common source? How might one relate to a subtle presence? (That would be my angel.) My answer is always the same, I ask these questions for the sake of soul in the world.' My ultimate aim is to provide avenues of entry to the imaginal domain for many thoughtful readers who are not

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Jungians but which to understand the mysteries of the unconscious within the context of their own life.

I open this introduction section by sharing the ways in which I came to explore imagination and her images. Simply put, I had the idea to write this book and I talk about my mother's dying but there was a second piece. The second piece was when I entered my scholarly work to become a Jungian psychotherapist, I discovered a lens with which I could look at the imaginal realm. So now I'm going to stop there and talk about, kind of share the reading where the reader and I kind of get to see me working with this Japanese dancer who was in this dream that came at the beginning of the book.

Dr. Dave: Hm, hmm. Okay.

Mary Harrel: This is how I knew –when this dream came – this is how I knew this is the work I was supposed to do. In a sentence or two, the dream opens and I'm in a beautiful garden but it's very neglected. It's clear that some loving gardener has been here, structured it and designed it but the gardener's no longer working. I'm on a porch and next to me is my family. I see this extraordinary Japanese dancer. My family doesn't see her and I'm thinking 'Why do I see her and they don't?' So I talk about this in this little piece where I'm really wondering about the Japanese dancer. This is how we would wonder about an imaginal figure.

I see a young girl dressed in Japanese classical garments. What's most striking is that the numinous quality of the girl's movements – her grace, her blending of music, form, body, soul and spirit – are not of this world. In the dream I struggle to find some way to organise this otherworldly experience. I'm frustrated because I try to experience it with my senses and my knowledge of the world – in other words, with matter and mind – and I find that those capacities are inadequate. My frustration though, is nothing in light of the wonder and beauty of her dance.

I knew as I watched that her dance transcended that which my material senses perceived, In the dream it was the bodily gestures within the dance that deepened the experience of the imaginal world; the gesture linking affect and image brought a sense of awe. As I witnessed her, I remember knowing that I was in the presence of a figure unlike any other I had encountered before. I could, at least within the dream experience her, feel the otherworldly marvel of her dance, her soulful aliveness, her elegant innocence and her unmolested beauty. This dancer seemed to be a figure, a guide, from outside of my own psyche. I awoke knowing that such a dance could not come from me alone, as my mind and body are bounded by my own human nature. She, with her extraordinary presence, was a figure more fantastic than any human figure could be.

And I'll stop there but one thing I say later on that I'll just make a sentence about, is that I figured out that the reason my family couldn't see her, is that my family, in the dream, represented the larger social order that we all live in – the modern society that really can't see a lot of the enchantment and the imaginal in their daily life because they're not open to this realm. They dismiss it.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. So I imagine what you did with this image was to dialogue with her a lot and use the kind of techniques that have evolved in dreamwork of keeping a journal and maybe drawing in it and dialoguing and kind of holding that figure.

Mary Harrel: That's right.

Dr. Dave: And as you were reading I was thinking of some of the other elements that we may not get to in this conversation here which were so interesting to me as the life that you were leading, where you, for part of it, you were living in a very desolate place in Northern California, somewhere around Mt. Shasta.

Mary Harrel: North of Mt. Shasta.

Dr. Dave: And you've got a wolf.

Mary Harrel: I have a Mexican Red Wolf, yes.

Dr. Dave: I've never heard of a Mexican Red Wolf but this is an actual wolf that you have, like a dog but it's a wolf?

Mary Harrel: Right. Well he was 85% Mexican Red Wolf, 15% German Shepherd.

Dr. Dave: Sounds like a lovely combination.

Mary Harrel: Yeah, it was Kara, a girl – she wolf – and yes we had her since she was a little baby and we lived in an area called the High Desert of Northern California, so you could really get away with things like that there.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. So there were a variety of wild experiences that were happening for you. The wolf herself seems like a kind of numinous figure even though she's of flesh and blood in this real world and you were having encounters with nature in that Northern California locale because there weren't people around and you were living with this wolf.

Mary Harrel: Right, right.

Dr. Dave: You probably look different than you look now. I'm imagining you were a pretty young woman....

Mary Harrel: I was, I was, I was in my thirties when I got Kara.

Dr. Dave: ...and a little bit of a wild woman is the sense I get, so I'm wondering how you with all these very powerful conflicts that were in your life – these things tend to constellate around wounds in our lives.

Mary Harrel: Yes, they do.

Dr. Dave: And you certainly had some wounds in your life, starting with the loss of your mother and then having to be the adult taking care of the other siblings and all.

At what point did you discover Jungian psychology and get a sense that ‘Oh, this is going to be a fit for me.’ When did that happen?

Mary Harrel: When I was in Northern California I was a teacher. I taught for thirty years in the K-12 setting and then for ten years at the college level and there were these two individuals that I met. One was a psychologist who came to work in our schools with his comprehensive program we had and the second was a school nurse and they were to me extraordinary people. I asked both of them ‘Tell me a little about yourself, you just seem unusual.’ Both of them said ‘Blab, blab, blab, blab, blab and I went to Pacifica Graduate Institute’ which I’d never heard of. So, okay, flash forward to this moment in my life where my husband literally disappeared, he went into the desert of Arizona and he wouldn’t tell me for three years where he was. I thought he was having a breakdown but really what happened was our marriage was over and that’s the bizarre way he dealt with it. But he would let me call him if I had like a tax question but he wouldn’t really talk to me and he literally said ‘Family is a burden that I don’t want right now.’ So there I was, this is the life in shipwreck, thank goodness, professionally... I worked all my life, so I’m still teaching and one day I sat – because I’m a very intuitive person – I sat at the base of these big stairs in this home I lived in in California and I said to myself... my daughter had left at this time to go to Fordham University in Manhattan. She always wanted to study drama and they had a performance program at a Manhattan campus, so she was gone, my husband had disappeared and I’m waiting for him thinking... I didn’t figure out for a while he left. I just thought he was having a nervous breakdown or something and so I sat at the base of my steps in my home and I just said to myself, ‘If you had no family obligations’ – which actually I didn’t for the first time in my life – ‘and if money were no object,’ this is my question, I said, ‘what would you want to do?’ I asked that of myself and boom! like a flash of lightning, here’s the answer, ‘Go to Pacifica Graduate Institute.’

Dr. Dave: Wow!

Mary Harrel: I called them up and I said ‘Is it too late to apply and when does class start?’ and I got in.

Dr. Dave: Had you had no therapy up to that point?

Mary Harrel: I really had because my life was so full of these tragedies – the loss of my mother and other things – I had a little boy who died right after birth. I had a total of five pregnancies and I only had one baby that grew up, my daughter Lauren – so there’s a lot of sadness there.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Mary Harrel: So I’ve had off and on – I hate to give it a number but I’m going try – I bet I was in therapy with some very fine therapists probably, I’m almost seventy now, so I think I was in therapy for about thirty seven years, off and on.

Dr. Dave: Off and on.

Mary Harrel: Thank goodness, yeah. They helped me develop my strong ego, which is what allows me to do this imaginal work without becoming psychotic. I'm just so grateful for them and one therapist in particular, I told him about that angel who visited for so many years. I had had a wonderful aunt, who was very good to me but she was a psychiatric nurse and she said, 'Mary, do not tell anybody about that angel.' I said, 'Why not?' She said 'Because they'll think you're psychotic.' So I didn't ever tell anybody and then I was working with a therapist and I told him about the angel and I said 'Do you think she was real?' He wasn't a Jungian or anything like that and he looked me right in the eye and he said 'I don't know.' That was the most beautiful thing anybody said to me because I could continue kind of holding in consciousness that I did have this figure visiting me and I was functioning beautifully in every other way, so I don't think I was ever psychotic but my therapists were beautiful guides to me.

Dr. Dave: Boy, we never know what it is that we say that will touch someone.

Mary Harrel: That's right. I'm just so grateful to all these therapists I had. I moved a lot because of my husband's work, he was a school superintendent and their tenure in office is like two to three years. It's a real stressful job and so I would get a new therapist when I moved. I just consider them to be my guides – my material guides in the material world. I suspect – remember I said the angel stopped coming when I was thirty seven?

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Mary Harrel: Yeah, I was thirty seven when the angel stopped coming and I suspect she stopped because this beautiful work with these therapists had really done for me the guiding work that my mother would have done had she not died. Then the angel stopped coming.

Dr. Dave: Hmm. That angel was trying to give you a box and at some point you, I think, said that you got an intimation of what that gift was that she was trying to give you that you were pushing away.

Mary Harrel: Yes. I talk about that in Part 1 of the book, I think. Yes, it's a section called *Images in Reverie* and I say that what that was about, I figured out – by studying, looking deeply and asking the kinds of questions that we're talking about – I figured out that she was what we call 'the spirit end of the archetype of death' and she was the spirit end of the mother archetype. I was the orphan end of that same archetype and so she wasn't my mother but she was a nurturing, guiding, mother figure and what the box symbolised was that if I had not been so afraid of her and we could have dialogued, she would have taught me the many beautiful things in life that my own mother might have taught me had she not died.

Dr. Dave: Hm, hmm.

Mary Harrel: And I think of symbolically, the box, it looked like the small box a boy gives you at your first prom and in the box is the corsage and when you put that corsage on, this is symbolic of you entering the world of the young woman. It's a very formalised way that our culture has to take women – and young men – into their

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courting days and into their adulthood really. So that's what I associate with that box and that's what she wanted to bring me but I just, I was... my ego was not strong enough to really handle that. Another girl, another fifteen year old girl, might have done okay with that but I just had too much trauma in my life. I couldn't manage it.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah, that's interesting that at that point you couldn't manage it but as you matured and as you dealt with your issues in therapy and within yourself, it resolved.

Mary Harrel: Yes, it did and that's why she stopped coming – she didn't need to come anymore.

Dr. Dave: Yeah and that's when she stopped coming. Now there's so much in your book and I'm probably going to end up violating the structure I laid out in the beginning because we're going to run out of time here. So I'm going to leap way ahead towards a much further point in the book. A person having listened to what we've been saying so far would not guess that you would engage large social issues with this approach but you write about school shootings and violence, so tell us about that and how that articulates with this imaginal world. Just take us through that.

Mary Harrel: Okay. First of all I'm so grateful you've asked this question because when people say to me what was the biggest surprise for you – for me – in writing the book, the answer is that section on the school shootings. That was not my intention to go there, really

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I know, it's surprising.

Mary Harrel: So the thing is, one of the scholars that has deeply influenced my life, is James Hillman and he's the father of archetypal psychology. So he and people who follow in his footsteps and scholarships, like Robert Romanyshyn, they were telling us, if the individual is an ensouled being – so if we have an unconscious – so too does the culture and I see it in the school settings all the time. So in our modern western culture we're very puritanical about our moves regarding sexuality, so there was a goddess Baubo – pre-Greek – who was very lusty and we still see her in some European cathedrals and she's like a frog with her legs spread out and she's all about sexuality and fecundity and all.

Dr. Dave: What's her name again?

Mary Harrel: Baubo.

Dr. Dave: B-a-l-b-o?

Mary Harrel: (Conversation ensued regarding spelling of name) She's in the glossary of *Imaginal Figures*... In our schools for instance – so talking about schools have a soul and school cultures have a shadow and a conscious part – if a girl gets into over-sexualised behaviour in the schools, that's a shadow aspect of our culture and so she gets pushed down. In other words, socially, she's not acceptable. We have all kinds of names for girls like that and really if we allowed people to be more open about their sexuality, we wouldn't have to have it so much in darkness. So for

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instance, if parents are not embarrassed when they talk to their children you're less likely to have a girl acting out the Baubo figure for the whole school culture. And then we have the hero athletes – which that's the conscious part of the school culture – and the heroes we love, so they have rallies and they get adulation and they are like the young gods of the school setting. So I learned from Hillman and Romanynshyn and others that we don't want to ignore what's happening in the culture because it also has symbolism and it also has figures that we want to look at. Well because I'm a teacher – I've been a teacher for forty years – my heart – and I'm not alone in this regard – my heart breaks daily every time, well, weekly now, there's a school shooting.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Mary Harrel: And you have these young men, they leave their home, often they shoot their parents, they come into the school setting, they shoot the classmates and sometimes teachers and then the media narrows it down to two issues. The media says they're evil-doers – no thought about any suffering on their part or their own pathology or what caused this – and then the media tells us, 'This is a gun issue.' And certainly it is a gun issue but it doesn't stop there and it doesn't start there. So what I did, as an archetypal scholar, was I said 'Alright, I'm going to tell the story of what it was like for me as a teacher, experiencing this larger cultural phenomenon,' which was the school shootings. And then I analysed this phenomenon like you would analyse a cultural dream. So I said 'Well, what are the images that come up for me when I think about this?' I think I see guns, I see boy shooters, I see Eric and Harris from the Columbine shootings, I see a picture in my head of this painting I saw as a young girl. It was Picasso's Guernica – and that's a painting of Spain during the Civil War. So he brought us the grotesque image of war – the unconscious part of war – before we had television. So that image comes up. So I just allowed myself to be open to what images populated this cultural dream and then I paid attention to the associations. You know, 'What do I know about guns?' Well, they're metal weaponry. We know if there's metal weaponry, or any metal in a dream psyche is saying this is something psyche cannot digest. So in a dream you don't want a metal tree growing out of the ground. That's not a good sign. You want a trunk of a tree – a normal, natural trunk of a tree growing out of the ground. So I looked at all this and what I came up with was that psyche actually said 'This is what's wrong. This is what's constellating all together to end up in this insane series of school shootings.' It's as if, you know as a psychologist yourself, you know that if a client comes in and they cannot tell the difference between a dream symbol and a concrete being – so in a dream there's a lady with her head on fire and he's sitting with you and he says to you 'She's in this room and her head is on fire.' And he means that in a concrete way, he's not talking about a dream image, you start suspecting that he may be psychotic, right?

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Mary Harrel: So I was looking at these dream figures as figures that have become concretised in the culture and they are very concrete deaths of course. So I said 'You know what, this is a pathology and something in the culture is psychotic. What is it?' What I came up with is the shadow of our culture has a violent component that is so massive that we can't look at it and these young boys happen to be at the cusp of manhood. So whenever we're at the cusp of some great change we are more vulnerable to an archetype - national violence – coming into us and possessing us.

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That's why they're young boys and that's why they're boy shooters because boys have this testosterone going on and they're trying to figure it out and they're very vulnerable about their identity and all of that. Now, if you get to be the hero, you get to live the hero archetype in your high school, you're not that vulnerable because you have this sense of identity which will broaden as you mature but these boy shooters don't have that.

Dr. Dave: There's kind of anti-hero opportunity for them, right? An anti-hero can also be powerful and strike awe in people, right?

Mary Harrel: Right and come out of the shadows.

Dr. Dave: So that's a kind of opportunity to get back, to show them, you know.

Mary Harrel: That's right but the dream was also suggesting... the question was 'What part does the culture play in this?' So I started looking at other cultures that don't have this phenomena and you see places like Papua New Guinea, which even today they'll have a group of men who initiate the young boys. It's not like a warped, sick initiation like we see in gang warfare and gang membership but it's the true elders of the tribe and these boys go into these huts away from the mothers, away from the girls and they go only when they're ready, when they want to go, so they're different ages and they literally get scarred by these men and they have on their backs these alligator scars. Now to our culture that seems like 'What's that about? Who wants to suffer that way?' but it's a symbolic initiation and the old men who are there with them and tend them and support them know that these young men when they come out of this initiation, a week or so, I forget how long it takes, they're going to go back to their tribe and no matter whatever happens to them in their life they're going to remember that they were held and supported and most importantly, that they survived and then when they come back to the tribe they're seen as heroes. So our young men in our culture don't really have this – being held by the elders. The only place I could find it where it was very visible, was when people go to AA meetings. My husband – I'm happy to say my current husband – this year he will mark twenty nine years of sobriety, so he goes to AA meetings on a regular basis and he has described how people treat each other at these meetings and I think that's the closest thing I can come to where more vulnerable people in the group are held by those elders. They're suffering but they reach a point where they say 'I've done this, I'm a different man.' My husband is a transformed man, he'll tell you that.

Dr. Dave: Fascinating. You know I'm aware of the clock and we could just go on and on and on and so I want to invite you to share another one of the readings that you have thought about and it doesn't have to be sequential. So why don't you go to one that feels really compelling to you at this moment?

Mary Harrel: Okay, thank you. I'm going to read one and you could let me know at any time if this is going on too long but this is another dimension of the imaginal realm that I wanted to bring out and it's not about suffering. It's about how one can experience the natural world after one is transformed. I easily move in and out of this kind of place now, I can almost say 'Well I don't have to prepare for a presentation or I don't have to clean my house so I'm just going to go out in nature and enjoy the vivid life that's there.' So, I'm going to read a piece where I was doing that.

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Dr. Dave: Yeah, good. I think I might remember that section and it was very beautiful.

Mary Harrel: And I'm not going to read the whole thing – it should flow together but it's kind of shorter.

Mary Harrel: Sinking into a green Adirondack chair near my upstate New York garden, my coffee hour begins. Perhaps more accurately this is my sacred time, having returned from the gym I'm pleased to be done with my duty to good health. Almost before the cup reaches my lips, just as a light breeze tickles the curve of my cheek, a grand exhale erupts from within, a signal that some enchantment is about to unfold as it often does when I agree to allow a true exchange a true exchange between the natural world and myself. As if directed by some playful imp, my attention darts to the space between the ground and the sky where a riotous dance ensues. The trees around me – Cherry, Silver Maple, Alberta Spruce – are awash with life, singing in fabulous frenzy. Brilliantly orchestrated, a rhythm begins, a first whisper builds with the speed of an approaching train, until the dance between the leaves and the wind bursts into a loud chorus, each belonging to a prescient multivocal community.

With each repetition – a first whisper of a breeze, an insistent stirring, the crescendoed whoosh ending with leaves whipping through the air – a vivid anticipation of life is both born and realised, not in the grand gesture of the Rocky Mountains but in the beauty of a refined dance step, each building upon the one before, each creating its own hunger for the next. How does this gorgeous enchantment become itself? As the dancer needs the music, so too does the leaf need the wind. As the dancer needs the troupe, so too does the leaf need a thousand sister leaves.

Being here this morning in the role of audience extraordinaire, thoughts intrude like uninvited guests – here comes the mind wanting to have its questions asked and answered. 'Who makes this moment thus?' Who creates this spirited dance? What exquisite divine allows such beauty to present herself to me – a simple coffee drinker in an Adirondack chair? An answer comes as I gaze up, almost blinded by a shock of sun bouncing behind high branches, 'Simply accept this gift. Listen as the song of each rustling branch fills you. Hear an army of field grasshoppers scratching rasped legs against tiny wings and birds too many to count announce from the woods beyond that they're here too. Experience all of this even as the leaves, first low, then insistent, then wildly alive, repeat their song. Don't miss any of it.'

And then the last piece I'll read from this is:

I have become a participant in an animated, sensate world. Though I sit stationery in my chair I amazingly find myself rustling loudly through a thousand maple branches. I experience whispers of light caught in the mitts of dancing grasses, each blade an outfielder catching a ball in the curve of a gloved hand at once surrendering to the moment of contact and also holding the ball in the mitt's center, firm and sure.

And then it comes to an end.

Dr. Dave: I'm so glad that you chose that little piece to read because it's so evocative. It put me there when I read it and you paid such exquisite attention to each little detail to kind of paint this very lovely powerful transcendent moment. So it's good for our listeners to know that while there's much of your pain in this book, there are also these moments of real beauty of, I guess the pay off, of all this therapy and all this inner work that you've done.

Mary Harrel: Yeah, that's my big message. Don't give up on life. We all suffer. You know I'm really not special. I've worked now for eight years with my own psychotherapy patients – I know that people suffer horribly and if we can stay conscious instead of moving to drugs, or alcohol, or running away with activity, we are transformed and that pain becomes compassion. That's the beauty.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah. That would be a nice place to wrap it up but we've got a little bit more time here, so you're talking about being a Jungian oriented therapist who's gone through all of this and what I got from a little bit of your discussion about that and the book was you're ability to hold a lot of pain when somebody's in a very painful place and because you've been there and you've learned not to push the river but that you have to sit with it, with them – yeah, maybe say more about that. That's what struck me.

Mary Harrel: It's my belief that all psychotherapy is grief work.

Dr. Dave: Hmm. Say a little bit more about that. How so?

Mary Harrel: Yeah, well people usually come to us because they're in pain and they stay with us because they believe that something is... that either they're being held as they're in that pain and then hopefully if they stay for a time, that pain starts to resolve, to transform and become something else. And so my goal, when I work with my clients, is to not try to do the thing that I tend to do as a nurturing person and as a psychotherapist – I want to heal them and fix them – and what I try to do is resist that and instead walk with them in their pain. I know that I have been to hell many times and hell means you're in a place where the pain is so massive, your normal skills and your psychological structures and your way of handling the world, they don't work for you. So you have nothing but to be in that pain. In my case, I was in hell seeking my mother for many years. I just wanted her back and I've worked with mothers whose sons have committed suicide and they just want their boys back. So when you're that way and you haven't yet adapted to a new life without this thing you wanted so bad you thought you would die, it's so helpful to have somebody walking in hell with you and that's what I find that I do best as a therapist. Wherever they go I go with them and I try to give the message 'I know hell. I'm not afraid of it. I will walk to any part of hell with you and we will both come out together.

Dr. Dave: I think that's a beautiful place for us to wrap it up. That's a great statement. So Dr. Mary Harrel, I want to thank you for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Mary Harrel: Dr. Dave you've been marvellous. I'm so pleased that you asked me to do this interview. It's been a joy for me, thank you so much.