

Shrink Rap Radio #57, October 29, 2006. The Healing Power of Forgiveness with Fred Luskin

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Dr. Frederic Luskin
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Jo Kelly)

Excerpt: *“What a lot of people’s questions are, are statements designed to get me to agree with them that their particular wound is not one that should be easily given up. So I often go to people, and they ask me, well what do you do about Hitler? And the implication of that is, since the world has Hitlers in it, you shouldn’t push me too hard to not hate my mother-in-law.”*

Introduction: That was the voice of **Dr. Frederic Luskin Ph.D.**, whose forgiveness training methodology has been validated through six successful research studies conducted through the Stanford Forgiveness Projects. He is also the author of two books: *Forgive for Good* and *Stress Free for Good* (with co-author, Dr. Kenneth Pelletier).

Prior to the current surge of research interest, the importance of practicing forgiveness was extolled in both religious and psychological traditions. Recently, Dr. Luskin’s and other’s research has confirmed its virtues in the promotion of psychological, relationship and physical health. Forgiveness has been shown to reduce anger, hurt, depression and stress and to lead to greater feelings of optimism, hope, compassion and self confidence.

Dr. Luskin holds a Ph.D. in Counseling and Health Psychology from Stanford University. He is the Co-Director of the Stanford-Northern Ireland HOPE Project, an ongoing series of workshops and research projects that investigate the effectiveness of his forgiveness methods on the victims of political violence. He served as the Director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, the largest research project to date on the training and measurement of a forgiveness intervention. He currently works as a Senior Fellow at the Stanford Center on Conflict and Negotiation and is also on the faculty at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California. Dr. Luskin presents lectures, workshops, seminars and trainings throughout the United States on the importance, health benefits and training of forgiveness.

To forgive may be divine, according to Alexander Pope, but it’s hardly easy. How do you forgive a hit and run driver, a boss who makes life unbearable, or a cheating spouse? Luskin says not only can you forgive such people, but that for your own mental and physical health you must. He’s careful to make the distinction between forgiveness and condoning actions, forgetting

them, or reconciling them with the offender; all or some of which may not be possible.

His website www.learningtoforgive.com has more information, including the 9 Steps of forgiveness, and links to his books.

Dr. Dave: Dr. Fred Luskin; thanks so much for agreeing to be my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio. Let's start out with your Stanford affiliation; what's your role there, past and present?

Luskin: Years ago I was a full time researcher in the medical school, and now I still am doing a little bit of research with them, and I teach forgiveness classes to their Continuing Studies Department, and for the Stanford Hospital.

Dr. Dave: OK; and you also did your Doctoral work there, right?

Luskin: I did, I got a Ph.D. there.

Dr. Dave: Great, and now I think you are also working at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto?

Luskin: I teach clinical assessment. I teach therapists how to do projective and cognitive kind of assessments.

Dr. Dave: OK; I remember when I used to go through that kind of training myself, it's been a long time (laughing).

Luskin: Way back when, right? (laughing)

Dr. Dave: Right; exactly. So you have done some fascinating research on the healing power of forgiveness.

Luskin: That's true.

Dr. Dave: And a quality such as forgiveness seems like such a soft and intangible thing. How did you go about researching it?

Luskin: When I started, it was simply to make one of the virtues, or one of the positive qualities, just to offer a little bit of proof that it was true. That it was true not just on a kind of faith based, or intangible level but a pragmatic level as well. And I wanted to show that it was not that complicated to show

that if you taught people one of these – like forgiveness, or hope, or charity or whatever – that you could show improvements in psychological, and physical, and even relationship health.

Dr. Dave: OK; so how did you go about researching something like forgiveness? Maybe you can describe the setup a little bit.

Luskin: I didn't research forgiveness so much. I took people who were hurt, and developed a forgiveness training that I gave to them, and then measured the change. So when I was going through this, and my dissertation adviser told me that 80% of all psychological research doesn't do anything to anybody, it just correlates one set of variables with another, I found that really kind of pathetic.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Luskin: If that was really 80% of what the research was, you know, this person's 6 feet tall, and he has 12 ribbits of this; and this person's 5 foot 6 and they have 12 ribbits of that; then what is the relationship? And that just seemed like a total waste.

Dr. Dave: Well were your findings different than that sort of research?

Luskin: Well I did outcome studies, that's all we've done is outcome studies. We have taken people in various levels of pain from different things, and taught them about forgiveness and shown that it makes them either have less blood pressure, or more energy, or things like that.

Dr. Dave: OK, yes take us through some of those findings, like blood pressure, that's a good one, energy.

Luskin: Blood pressure was one specific study done at the University of Florida Hospital; but another one was where we took Stanford students, the first one able to show that it reduced stress and anger. A further study that we did was with pre menopausal women and you could show that it reduced their stress. We did a few studies with men and women who had had family members murdered, and could show the effect of that. But what the purpose was, and the outcome is to me really a "duh" – that you're not so angry – and if you actually resolve the antagonism in a beneficent way – which is gee, this is not that complicated – then it's going to cause less stress to your body, and less negative impact in your life.

Dr. Dave: I think a lot of the findings of psychology come across to lay people as “duh – didn’t we know that already?” (laughing)

Luskin: I wish psychology did more practical things like that. I’m trying to remember: there was some analysis done of like all the psychological research, that they looked at all the journals and the psychologist and the psychiatrist things, and they showed that for every article on any kind of positive human quality there was 17 on a negative human quality. So for every article on love, or compassion, or mercy, or kindness there were the equivalent of 17 on hatred, or anger, or stress, or all those things. And I don’t know how hopeful that is to human beings.

Dr. Dave: Right. I don’t think it’s very hopeful at all, and of course it’s that kind of observation that gave rise both to humanistic and transpersonal psychology, and more recently positive psychology.

Luskin: Exactly, and the only thing that I did was just try to take some of this material that has been used forever and just show the very simple pre, post, follow up, and a useful control group, that these very simple practices that had been since time immemorial, you could show that they did have an effect. I found it very embarrassing that the field that I was in had waited until 2000 to even begin to show that.

Dr. Dave: So how did you come to this work in the first place? Was there something in your personal life that brought you to it?

Luskin: I came to the work because of two things. One, I had to come up with a dissertation – this was my Ph.D. dissertation at first.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Luskin: And two, I had had a very long standing spiritual practice and saw that the question was not how angry you are, but how kind you are – that was what measured you as a person. It was very different to say I’m angry, or less angry, than it is to say I’m a loving or kind person, and how much. They were not the same metric, and this field was missing discussion of the more positive metric.

It just was obsessed with people’s wounds, and people’s hurts, and their negativity, and all their grouchy, negative ways of dealing with it.

It seemed that we had caused ourselves to be, say, the high priests of dysfunction.

Dr. Dave: (laughing) That's not a role I would aspire to.

Luskin: The only thing I can say is that I had been hurt, and I had to figure how to get over somebody had hurt me, and I used some of that in the methodology, but it was more that honestly I benefitted from having an absolutely neglected area of human experience. So it's not that I did such great research, it's not that I was even so brilliant, it's just that nobody had gone there.

Dr. Dave: Is that incident where you were hurt, and you had to get through that, is that a story that you can share?

Luskin: Oh I've shared that a lot of times, and it's even in the book that I wrote. What happened to me? I had a very close friend who stopped being a friend of mine, and I had no understanding of why, and at that point no resources to absorb it.

Dr. Dave: Yes, that can be very hurtful. So how did you work with yourself on that?

Luskin: Well I did the steps that became the forgiveness project. It took me a long time to get there but I realized that A) this was my problem, and not his; and B) that it is an absolutely idiotic way to look at life. It did take me years as to what was wrong with my life rather than what was right with my life.

I brought my meditation practice into moment to moment stress management practice. It didn't mean that much to sit and meditate for half hour twice a day if it didn't have an impact on your minute to minute functioning, and I started to see that that was really missing in the therapeutic utilization of stress management. That what you really needed was say, a 15 second break from your own negativity through peacefulness and then your mind could reset and give you some choice.

Dr. Dave: OK. You mentioned meditation, are you in the Buddhist tradition or how would you describe it?

Luskin: Myself personally, I have followed self realization fellowship, which is teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda.

Dr. Dave: Oh yes, I'm familiar with that.

Luskin: The Buddhist theory is certainly as good as any, it's just the specific path I had followed was a more yoga based path.

Dr. Dave: Yes. You know since we are on the topic of spirituality, a couple of my guests have mentioned *A Course in Miracles* as having influenced them: for example, Norman Shealy who spoke on Longevity, and Gerald Jampolsky who spoke on Attitudinal Healing. Have you had any contact with the course in miracles?

Luskin: I mean I've seen it. When I looked at it, it looked way too cumbersome when I looked at it first. The books, say Gerald Jampolsky's book *Love is Letting Go of Fear*, was a useful book, and some of Marianne Williamson's stuff.

But the truthful thing is that when I was looking to teach this, I made it into a secular training

Dr. Dave: I think that's probably important.

Luskin: *A Course in Miracles* was based too strongly for me on kind of spiritual or even religious kind of values, and now when I teach I do have some Buddhist ideas in what I teach, and some Hindi based ideas, because they are not deity based.

Dr. Dave: I would think that would really be important to unhook ...

Luskin: If you want people to listen. The other thing you will probably find interesting, is when we first started we had some questions as to whether a religious based approach would be helpful, until we found just how deeply acrimonious religious people are. Many of them, not all, were so embedded in their own particular faith that they missed the purpose of what I saw as their faith. So I would go into places and I had people tell me, now this would be really good if you mentioned Jesus; and then I had somebody else tell me, this is good but Buddhist loving-kindness practice is better. It seemed at that point very prudent to just stay away from it entirely.

Dr. Dave: OK.

Now I've been on your website www.learningtoforgive.com and I see you do a lot of public speaking.

Luskin: I do a lot of public speaking; what I still do is a number of classes where I teach this to other people.

Dr. Dave: Right, that's what I saw were a lot of workshop trainings, which looked like they would be very good. What kinds of questions do you tend to hear from people most when you do that?

Luskin: What a lot of people's questions are, are statements designed to get me to agree with them that their particular wound is not one that should be easily given up. So I often go to people, and they ask me, well what do you do about Hitler? And the implication of that is, since the world has Hitlers in it, you shouldn't push me too hard to not hate my mother-in-law.

Dr. Dave: (laughing)

Luskin: People will say, well how could you possibly get over a betrayal by somebody really close to you like that? That has to push the envelope – and that will be because it was their husband who betrayed them.

Then somebody else will say to me, you know what is really hard, and I am wondering if you really believe it fully for this, is how do I get over somebody I don't know – I could understand if it was somebody who knew me, because at least I would have a relationship – but how do I possibly get over a hit and run driver who doesn't know me at all?

Most people's questions, and I think this is true of all the religious doubt we have, are based to some degree to find a loophole for what it is that we want to know is true but can't live.

Dr. Dave: I know you have worked with people who are struggling with really big issues that are hard to forgive, for example a loved one who has been murdered, or a cheating spouse, and yet you have had success.

Luskin: One of the first forgiveness projects we did a number of years ago was, we invited mothers from both sides of the conflict in Northern Ireland, who had had their sons shot, to come together to Stanford and learn to forgive. So we had catholic and protestant mothers in a room with us for a week, teaching them about forgiveness. Recently I did some work with family members whose loved ones were killed in the attacks at the World Trade Center.

Dr. Dave: That sounds courageous of you to take that on. How has that work gone?

Luskin: It's not courageous as much as it's painful for me to see all the ways that people maintain their hostility at life because of what life has done to them. I don't see it anymore, most of the time, as the seriousness of the provocation but as just this unbelievable need human beings have to strike back at each other. I have seen red faced hatred all over the San Francisco Bay area for people who don't like George Bush.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Luskin: They have the same self righteous high blood pressure hostility as somebody who tells me that their ex husband isn't paying child support. And I see the exact same consciousness and the exact same need to demonize somebody that they don't like what they are doing.

Dr. Dave: So what do you say? People get particularly self righteous around these political convictions – how do you deal with that? I know exactly what you are talking about.

Luskin: It sometimes when I say that I'm struck, because we live in such a left leaning area, and then I go to other parts of the country which are significantly more right leaning, and it just appears that people whose identification is hard towards one side, they maintain it by disliking the people who are hard towards the other side. That tension keeps them in a very narrow band, which may make them feel safer on this planet because they know who their enemies are, or at least they make believe they know who their enemies are, because they don't see the enemy within themselves which creates such hostility.

Dr. Dave: Yes. For me this resonates a lot with Jung's idea of the shadow, and the way that we project our own shadow on other people.

Luskin: Yes, so what do I say? Honestly, when I'm around here, I say that if we who live in the San Francisco Bay area who have every advantage known to humankind, can't be kind with people we disagree with then the world has very little hope. With all this education and all this luxury and all this affluence and all this beauty, if that's not enough to make us gracious then, first of all there is no *them* out there causing this world's pain, it's *us*, and I don't have that much hope at that level of consciousness.

That's how I see it, that all of us who live the way we live, probably if we were more attuned to the way things are would want to give more, rather than needing more to be our way before we are happy and kind.

Dr. Dave: OK. Have you had any experience taking this work to businesses?

Luskin: Yes, we have. In fact we have been doing a long running, quite successful research project at American Express, where we have taught financial service advisers about forgiveness. That and stress management have been the cornerstones of emotional competence. We teach them how to do this, we do some follow up coaching on phones, and we have been able to show significant increases in sales and significant decreases in stress over a year of working with these people, and we are on our sixth year of this now.

Dr. Dave: I can see where stress reduction fits into that, but what about forgiveness? What is there to forgive in the world of business?

Luskin: This started honestly after the stock market crash of 2000, that's where this began. We were invited in to one of the market groups of American Express to do some forgiveness work, with advisers who had just lost money and whose clients hated them.

Dr. Dave: Wow, yes.

Luskin: But now forgiveness – it's just so obvious to me – that there is so much to forgive in this life, it's almost unimaginable. We don't even notice all the ways that we are triggered. In a business sense, if your computer breaks that's a forgiveness moment; if your secretary loses something that's a forgiveness moment; if you fail to do something properly that's a forgiveness moment – and they are omnipresent.

The more grace one can bring to all of those moments, the more productive one will be.

Dr. Dave: And do you find people in the world of business being receptive to this message?

Luskin: I wouldn't say globally, but we have made a niche now in American Express, because we are on our seventh project, or eighth project, and it is starting to spread; so it is starting to spread within that company.

Often when I go talk about this, even the stress management piece has many business people's eyes glaze over, and the idea of emotional competence being helpful – they just don't resonate to that. I see a lot of business people

are not that concerned with the emotional well being of their staff, they just want them to be productive.

Dr. Dave: That is certainly the stereotype that many people have about business.

Luskin: I don't think that is untrue. If you look at the condition of the world, the brutality that people do to other people to extract more money from them is staggering.

Dr. Dave: I hear two things then. I hear in fact that you see that, and that it's upsetting, and at the same time I hear you saying that you are working at forgiveness.

Luskin: Yes, the whole thing.

Dr. Dave: It's a bit paradoxical, right?

Luskin: Well, the forgiveness is our attitude. It doesn't mean that we stop pushing whatever it is that your own peculiar agenda is, you just have to do it with a little more lightness, and maybe less demonization, but we are all gifted with something to make our world better in an omnipresent way. This is the history, and the constant status of our planet, and it never changes and each of us is challenged within that to see it, not become bitter, not try to make that the way one's self operates, and see what one can do to help.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Luskin: Does that make sense?

Dr. Dave: Yes, it does, it definitely makes sense to me.

Luskin: I mean every generation, every country, every inch of this planet is filled with relentless suffering and unkindness.

Dr. Dave: Yes. In terms of your own professional work, your interests, your research, where is your growing edge right now?

Luskin: I have two edges. One is, I am just starting to teach people to teach this, so I am developing a handful of people who can also teach what I teach; and for the first time I am really getting an opportunity to work with a lot of therapists. For a number of years therapists were a little intimidated by the idea of forgiveness, and then the positive psychology movement came

in and changed the whole face of everything, and now I am getting invited to do trainings all over the place for therapists.

Dr. Dave: That's an interesting development.

Luskin: Yes because I used to get a lot of harsh response from therapists, but not anymore.

Dr. Dave: I think for a long time the dominant view in therapy – probably coming out of a Freudian history – was sort of what has been called the ventilationist approach, where you kind of get your anger out, and you express a lot of anger, and I think sometimes people kind of got stuck in that mode.

Luskin: That would be something I would say. Tomorrow I am flying to Santa Fe to do a training for fifty therapists, I just came back from a therapist training, and I just did one in Marin a few weeks ago. Just for the first time there is an openness that is really, to me profound, because it shows me that Martin Seligman's work with positive psychology may be a seminal opening in this field.

Dr. Dave: Yes, and I think that those of us in the humanistic transpersonal camp need to look at it that way. I have some friends in that camp who were very angry at first, when he came out, because he wasn't giving any acknowledgement to that history. But hey, however it comes across, whatever it does to help keep people focussed on these positive possibilities, then I say that's a good thing.

Luskin: Don't you think we each have to realize that we have invented nothing?

Dr. Dave: (laughing)

Luskin: I mean seriously, don't we all have to understand that this isn't our planet, that we are guests here, that we have a very short lease, and we have invented nothing? That's it's all been there, and it's all been done before, and each generation picks it up and gets its chance to say it in its own way, and that's what we get.

Dr. Dave: That's very well put. I think anytime we go back and we read ancient writings, we certainly are stuck with that. I think there is this natural tendency to think that people who lived a long time ago, and wrote a long time ago, that they didn't know as much as we know today. But then when

you go back and actually read somebody from a long time ago, whether it's the Greeks, or the Romans.

Luskin: I think in some things we know more, and in some things we know less. Like we couldn't live off the land the way some people did.

Dr. Dave: (laughing) Yes.

Luskin: Forgiveness, what does that mean? Jesus said to forgive when he was being crucified, and that was what 2,000 years ago? It's been in every religion, and transpersonal psychology developed nothing, they just took some qualities that had always been and tried to own them for psychology. I'm not putting it down, but none of this was new.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Well it must be really gratifying to you to have these opportunities opening up to introduce these ideas into the field of psychotherapy.

Luskin: Gratifying is half of it. This has been for ten years I have had opportunities that I don't think anybody else has had with forgiveness because my work came out of Stanford. Because I had the imprimatur of that enormous, powerful university I got heard in a way that other people haven't been heard. I would be the first person on The Today Show, and the first person interviewed by The New York Times, and all those kind of things.

So it has been gratifying, but the other part of it has been sobering in the sense that I have really had to sit with how much unkindness, harshness and horror there is on this planet. That if I am honest, which when you see one person after another, and everywhere you go, there is loss, and change and pain – a lot of it from simple human unkindness – it is a big challenge to hold that and see that clearly, and still understand that each of us needs to choose to love within that.

Most of us try to love, and make believe that doesn't exist, and we try to live in a kind of fantasy, but the deeper difficulty, and I believe the true spiritual path is to look it in the eye and still choose to do kindness and whatever. It's not a weak thing, it's a thing of great substance.

Dr. Dave: I really like the way you put all that.

Do you have any tips for any listeners who might be struggling with forgiveness?

Luskin: If you go on my website www.learningtoforgive.com my nine steps of forgiveness are just listed there.

Dr. Dave: I usually do a little post commentary after the interview, and I was thinking of actually going over those in my post interview commentary, so people will get that exposure.

Luskin: And the book I wrote called, *Forgive For Good*, that is by far and away the biggest selling forgiveness book like that, so that book has helped tens of thousands of people.

Dr. Dave: OK I will put a link to that in our show notes.

As we wrap things up here, is there anything else that you would like to say?

Luskin: I was given media training maybe five years ago – I always laugh at that – because I had to go on some TV show and they didn't trust me, and I didn't know what I was doing, and I remember thinking, the person asked me to summarize what we had done – and it still holds true – that the news that we bring, is that you can teach people to forgive but it's a learned skill.

It's not esoteric, and it doesn't have to be religious, it's simply a latent aspect of each human being, and that you can learn to uncover it and use it. I think that is a very powerful message.

Dr. Dave: Indeed, and I think one of the points that we didn't get to here, but that I believe is embedded in your work, is that in fact it does us harm, it's poisonous to us to carry resentment and lack of forgiveness.

Luskin: That's the truth.

Dr. Dave: OK. So Dr. Fred Luskin, thanks so much for sharing with us here on Shrink Rap Radio, and I wish you God's speed in this work.

Luskin: Thank you very much.