

Shrink Rap Radio #6 September 5, 2005. Psychology and Politics

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

Introduction: We feature interviews with fascinating people in and around the world of psychology. Today’s guest is **Larry Robinson, M.A., MFT**. Speaking of fascinating, Larry is one of the most interesting and accomplished people I know. We’ve been in a small men’s group together for over 15 years. Larry is one of those people who seems to know quite a bit about nearly everything; and having been in this group together, I’ve watched him grow tremendously over the years. I’ve watched him move out of despair over environmental degradation into becoming a political activist.

Without further ado, let’s get into the interview.

Dr. Dave: OK Larry, I know that you have been, over the course of your life, a man of many different careers. When was it that you first knew that you wanted to be a therapist?

Robinson: I think I figured that out when I was an undergraduate, even though I was studying linguistics primarily; linguistics and psychology. Most of my psychology course work had to do with Freud and Jung; and I was fascinated with that and practiced unlicensed, amateur psychology on my friends.

(laughter)

But at the time, the only avenue to practicing psychology that I knew of was to go to medical school, do a psychiatric residency and psychoanalytic

Dr. Dave: A daunting path.

Robinson: Too daunting for me. So I took another route, and finally many years later, realised that I could do it through the Marriage and Family Therapist License.

Dr. Dave: Right, which probably didn’t really exist in that form when you were an undergraduate; that Masters level option only emerged many years later.

Robinson: That's true

Dr. Dave: But on the way to that, a couple of things I'm aware of: you were a head hunter for a while, and you had a video store.

Robinson: And a plant store; and for 4 years I was Executive Director of a non-profit community agency – Petaluma People's Services Center. Before that I had started and run a private alternative school for 4 years, and then taught in public schools for a couple of years.

Dr. Dave: Oh my goodness. If this isn't too personal a question – how old were you when you finally did become a psychotherapist?

Robinson: Well I was 30 years old when I went back to school to get my masters in Counseling. Then it was probably another 10 years before I got my license and started my private practice, because I got detoured into other pursuits.

Dr. Dave: What was the core of your desire to be a therapist?

Robinson: I think my original training as a psychotherapist was in my family; that was my role as a child.

Dr. Dave: Aha. As it was for so many of us.

Robinson: Exactly. And I sometimes wonder how much of it was my conditioning as a child that led me into the field, and how much was what James Hillman suggests in his "acorn theory": there was something in my soul that was destined to do this, and sought out circumstances and conditions that would shape that.

Dr. Dave: Right. Interestingly, you are a therapist who has gone into politics, which I think is fairly unusual; having now been twice the Mayor of Sebastopol, California. What caused you to move into local politics?

Robinson: Love of this place.

Dr. Dave: Love of Sebastopol?

Robinson: Yes; and wanting to protect it from the kind of destruction that I witnessed happening to so many other communities. But it was also I think an outgrowth of my passion for ecopsychology, which is an attempt

to re-imagine a psychology that is rooted in the basic understandings of a deep ecology. And that led me, as you know, under your aegis when you were Chairman of the Psychology Department teaching those two courses at Sonoma State in ecopsychology and psychotherapy. Part of what I was teaching to my students – was more preaching in a way – was as therapists, psychologists, we need to be much more involved in the greater healing than just focussing on those privileged few that can afford to pay private practitioner fees.

And at a certain point, I realised that I was not listening to my own advice; and that if I really was going to be consistent and true to my own ideals I needed to take more responsibility for my community than just working, as I said, with those privileged few.

Dr. Dave: Right. You used a term that not everyone may be familiar with: deep ecology. I wonder if you could briefly summarise what that term means?

Robinson: Deep ecology is a perspective on ecology, or living systems, that is not anthropocentric. That doesn't see humanity, people, as the centre of our ecosystem, but as one particular expression of the web of life, but not the focal point of it.

Dr. Dave: OK; and I'm wondering how your background in psychotherapy has affected the way that you see the political process, and how it has affected the way you behave as a politician. How do these two histories merge and cross pollinate one another?

Robinson: That's a fascinating question. I think a lot of the skills that I developed as a therapist are transferable. One certainly is the practice of paying attention and listening; and I know most politicians are much better at talking than they are at listening.

Dr. Dave: I've noticed that on TV (laughing)

Robinson: Yes we see a lot of that lately. But what I found in campaigning, is that people really need to know that there is someone paying attention to them. Even if we have partisan differences they are willing to vote for me; because they know that I can understand what they are saying, that I take them seriously, that I'm paying attention, that I am listening to them.

Dr. Dave: Yes; this community is small enough that you have actually done a lot of door to door campaigning, and had a lot of direct contact. How many souls live in Sebastopol?

Robinson: About eight thousand, and it's small enough – it's two square miles in area. And it's small enough that in a four or five month campaign season you can knock on every door; it's a lot of work but you can do it.

Dr. Dave: Wow; that sounds like a lot of work. Are there any other thoughts that come to mind about the way this background as a psychotherapist has informed the way you operate, or see the political world? You mentioned listening; I wondered if there were other things.

Robinson: The issues of transference and projection come up frequently. In my therapy practice, working with transference was a key piece of the process.

Dr. Dave: And just for our listeners, by that I take it you mean irrational ways that people see you because of their own deep issues; so they are likely to have either unrealistically positive, or unrealistically negative responses to you.

Robinson: Exactly.

Dr. Dave: And you see that happening in the political arena as well?

Robinson: Yes, in a much more exaggerated way than it happens in a therapist client relationship.

Dr. Dave: I was just going to say, I could see that there would be strong pull for whoever is in that position of leader – whether as mayor, governor or president – extremes of good father, bad father.

Robinson: Yes that is exactly the issue that I have to work with constantly. When people project the good father onto me – the hero, the saviour for them – there is a great temptation to take that on and be inflated by it, and think: oh yes I'm doing a great job. And then the next person comes up and condemns me for whatever.

The other projection is: if I believe the positive projection, then I am also inclined to believe the negative; and it puts me on an emotional roller coaster. So my experience as a therapist – in learning to identify the projection, the transference; and my own counter transference, my own

reaction to that – helps me keep a more even pace, and not identify with people’s pictures of me.

Dr. Dave: To bring in another thread here, as if it wasn’t complex enough already; I believe you are a Buddhist, so I would think maybe that practice would play a role in finding this centered place?

Robinson: Absolutely, that’s probably my 35 years experience of meditation has I think given me the tools that I need to survive in politics, and actually use the political experience as part of my spiritual practice. Again the art of paying attention, showing up emotionally, opening the heart of compassion, speaking the truth, and letting go of the outcome. Those are the four key practices that for me integrate the spiritual and the political.

Dr. Dave: I wish more of our politicians were trying to hold those four principles.

You’re also a member of the Green Party. Can you say a bit about that: what that party is about, and how you came to be affiliated with it?

Robinson: Well the Green Party is a response to what many of us see as the failure of the two party system. The two party system in America has really become two wings of one party. And granted, there are huge differences between those two wings, but they are both primarily representing the corporate interests over the interests of people, over the interests of the natural world. So the Green Party is committed to the principle of sustainability, which addresses everything from ecological responsibility and sustainability, to social sustainability, social responsibility and economic.

In Sebastopol we are trying to balance all of those. We are one of the few cities in this area that actually has a balanced budget; we are living within our means. We are also addressing social issues, like affordable housing; as well as protecting water sources, wetlands and critical habitat.

Dr. Dave: I know you are very actively protecting those sorts of interests and issues; for example I know you have called a community meeting about the issue of Peak Oil. You are also in the wake of the Hurricane Katrina there is going to be a community meeting about disaster preparedness, because earthquakes are a huge consideration here.

Robinson: One of the things that I am initiating is a series of town hall meetings. Based on the town hall meetings that have been held in small New England towns for centuries, that predate the establishment of the United States. And one of the impetuses for the meetings is to bring the different factions of the community together in one room, where we can hear each other, rather than

Dr. Dave: And there are factions here, right? It's not like everybody is Green Party.

Robinson: There certainly are factions. The Green Party members are a majority of the city council but there are only 300 registered Greens in the city, versus I believe 1,800 Democrats and 500 Republicans.

Dr. Dave: There must be a lot of independents, since that doesn't add up to 8,000.

Robinson: Well yes but not 8,000 are registered voters, there's a lot of children, and so on.

Dr. Dave: Are there other Green Party mayors in the country, do you know?

Robinson: My good friend Larry Barnett is Mayor of Sonoma, the other side of this county; he's a Green. Lew Tremaine is a Green, the Mayor of Fairfax in our neighbouring Marin County.

Dr. Dave: What about outside of California?

Robinson: New Paltz New York, Jason West is the Mayor there. I'm not sure of other cities outside of California. My good friend Mike Feinstein had been Mayor of Santa Monica; he's another Green.

Dr. Dave: OK well it's interesting.

I know that as a result of your political involvements you've had at least two international invitations that I'm aware of. Maybe you could talk a little bit about those two events.

Robinson: Well one was the World Mayors for Peace Conference, in Hiroshima, Japan in the year 2001.

Dr. Dave: I didn't even know about that one, that wasn't even one of the ones I was referring to; but go ahead.

Robinson: That was a gathering of, I believe there were 300 of us mayors, mayors and other elected representatives from 120 cities around the world: from China, India, Japan, Russia, France, Canada, Mexico, US, I met mayors of several Iranian cities and made wonderful connections with them. And this gathering was to address our shared concern about nuclear proliferation, given that most of our national governments are not doing enough, I believe, to address one of the biggest threats to global security, which is nuclear proliferation. And we figured that mayors can have some impact, and I think we are. We are working as a united voice. So that was one conference.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Robinson: In 2002 I was invited to give an address at the Praxis Peace Conference in Dubrovnik, Croatia. This was The Alchemy of Peacebuilding. My speech there was on Politics as Spiritual Practice.

Dr. Dave: Yes that's one of the ones I was thinking of; I thought that sounded like a really exciting opportunity there, the one in Croatia.

Robinson: It was.

Dr. Dave: Yes and then more recently, you got invited to go to China.

Robinson: I spent two weeks in China in this past June and July; meeting with various mayors, and council members, and Communist Party officials, and business leaders, in Beijing and Shenzhen and Dalian, Jinan, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and one other city, I can't remember.

Dr. Dave: Did you form any impressions, either about China, or what it's like to be a mayor in China, versus a mayor in Sebastopol, California?

Robinson: It was pretty clear that in China the local party chairman far outranks the mayor. But as a mayor, I was treated with a great deal more respect over there than I am here. I mean, I don't expect to be treated like anybody special here. I expect when I walk down the street to be accosted and asked what's happening about traffic, or this sidewalk issue, or somebody's complaint, or something like that.

Dr. Dave: "how come you haven't fixed the pot-holes"

Robinson: Exactly. But visiting in China, I was treated like a very important person; it's a rare experience in my life. (laughing)

Dr. Dave: Don't forget your Buddhist practice now (laughing), not getting inflated, don't get attached.

You know, as many people look at the country, and even the world, many people and especially young people are turned off by politics, and kind of losing heart. What would be your message for them?

Robinson: I can certainly understand why they would be discouraged, why they would become cynical. I think that there are forces in our culture that profit from people's disengagement and cynicism, and that would just as soon more people not get involved in politics.

Dr. Dave: So where does the hope lie?

Robinson: The hope lies in people, and in young people, but really in all of us.

You know in ancient Greece they talked about two kinds of people: the civic minded people, politicians in other words, those who were engaged in the life of the polis, the life of the community; and idiots.

Dr. Dave: (laughing)

Robinson: In ancient Greece the idiot literally was the private person. Now it didn't refer to someone's IQ; it just referred to someone who was not engaged in the life of the community.

Dr. Dave: Interesting, I've never heard that.

Robinson: And I think we have far too many idiots.

We are conditioned to think of ourselves as consumers, rather than citizens, right? The archetype of the citizen has gone into decline, and the archetype of consumer is the one that is really informing most of our lives in this country; and I think that we need to reinvest in the archetype of the citizen.

Dr. Dave: And I guess one of the key differences between those two archetypes is the archetype of the citizen would be active, it's about active participation; and the archetype of the consumer is about passive.

Robinson: Passive consumption. The image that comes to mind is the goose who is force fed food down a tube, to swell the liver that becomes the pate de foie, that gourmets seek out. In a way our livers are being swollen by, well again in Greece: the disease that Socrates referred to as Pleonexia, the disease of having too much. We have too much materially, and that leaves us spiritually impoverished.

Dr. Dave: I know that you have talked to young people, that you were recently at a retreat of some sort where there were a lot of underprivileged young people. What kind of message do you give them, when they are coming from a place of despair and discouragement?

Robinson: Well here's a poem that may address this:

Ecclesiastes says "for everything there is a season."
You say "It's tax season;
it's allergy season; it's baseball season;
I've got to season the steak on the barbie;
and besides, I don't have time to change the world."

Goethe tells us of the genius, the power, and the magic and boldness.
You say "What difference can I make anyway?
The foxes are guarding the henhouse;
the juggernaut is out of control;
we're all just snowflakes in the wind."

The mountain asks "Which snowflake, falling,
will be the one to send down the avalanche
changing this entire landscape?"

Dr. Dave: Beautiful, beautiful. And who is that by?

Robinson: That's mine.

Dr. Dave: That's yours? You wrote that? Oh my goodness. You sort of stole my thunder here, because I was going to say: and Larry Robinson is also a poet (laughing) and has been known to actually recite poetry at city council meetings.

Now I suspect that while there may be other Green Party mayors around, I doubt there's anybody else that recites poetry at city council meetings, or am I wrong? Do you know of someone else?

Robinson: I don't know of any yet, but I'm hoping it becomes a trend; because we need more poetry in our lives.

Dr. Dave: Is there another poem that you would like to take us out with? I've put you on the spot; there may or may not be.

Robinson: Yes; this is one by Gary Snyder, called "For the Children".

He says:

The rising hills, the slopes,
of statistics
lie before us.
the steep climb
of everything, going up,
up, as we all
go down.

In the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.

To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:

*stay together
learn the flowers
go light*

Dr. Dave: Mayor and poet Larry Robinson: thank you so much.

Robinson: Thank you David.