

Shrink Rap Radio #8, October 10, 2005. Depth Psychology with Stuart Kohler – attorney, private eye, and grad student

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

Introduction: Stuart Kohler, M.A. As you may know by now, our show revolves around interesting personalities in and around the world of psychology, and I really think you are going to enjoy today’s interview. How often do you encounter someone who is an attorney, a private investigator and a depth psychologist? I only know one. I don’t know if it’s his law training or what but I found him to be an incredibly articulate speaker when it comes to abstract topics such as archetypes.

In the course of the interview, we mention two books you might be interested in, *Hero with A Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell, and *Man and His Symbols* by C.G. Jung et al.

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So here’s the interview with Stuart Kohler.

Dr. Dave: My guest today is Stuart Kohler, who among other things has recently been a graduate student in depth psychology.

Stuart, I’m always interested in how people find their way into psychology, and it seems to me that your path has been fairly unusual. I know you’ve been a lawyer and a private investigator; maybe you could tell us a little bit about that background and how it got you into psychology.

Kohler: Well actually David, my interest in psychology developed well before I had the notion to go to law school and life made me a private investigator. Interestingly enough, when I was a senior in high school I was cutting class with my best friend for no doubt some unsavoury purpose.

Dr. Dave: (laughter) No doubt.

Kohler: And I found two paperback books in the hallway of my school which really informed my entire adult intellectual life. One of them was a book on existentialism and the other one was *The Portable Jung*, edited by Joseph Campbell.

Dr. Dave: And you were how old at that point?

Kohler: I was either 17 or 18.

Dr. Dave: Wow.

Kohler: So when I found this book on Jung, I had heard the name in generalised conversation, usually coupled with Freud and I started to read this stuff. And some of it was over my head at the time, but other parts of the volume spoke so incredibly directly to me; I remember having the thought at the time, “Wow, this guy thinks just like me, except he’s a lot smarter and he’s done a lot more thinking about these kinds of things”.

Dr. Dave: Yes, somehow though you ended up going into law. What drew you into law?

Kohler: Well after my illustrious five to six year undergraduate college career

Dr. Dave: In which you majored in what?

Kohler: Well I think I ended up having a psychology major but at some point I spent three and a half years in the physics department and I studied a lot of philosophy. I actually started as a philosophy student and then I felt in order to have a reasonable philosophical perspective in modern times one needs to be familiar with physics.

Dr. Dave: Interesting, yes.

Kohler: So I started to study physics and I got what I wanted out of it, which was primarily conceptual insight. I found that I really wasn’t interested, and possibly didn’t have the aptitude to be a working physicist, but it was very enriching to what I would now call a depth psychological approach to thinking.

Dr. Dave: OK, then somehow from there you gravitate towards law school.

Kohler: Well it’s interesting, this notion of accident. I was visiting a friend who had taken the law school admissions test, and I had mistimed my visit so he actually had to work when I arrived. So I sat down in his apartment and I noticed the law school admissions test. And I took it, and I

scored myself, and I thought hey, I can do this! And I had been politically active before then, and I decided I would go to law school to try and become a tenants' only lawyer. I was a housing activist, organising indigent tenants in New York City, so that they could vindicate their own legal rights.

Dr. Dave: OK and then how did this lead into what I gather is your current professional way of making your way in the world, which is being a private investigator?

Kohler: Yes that's right. Well in law school I was directed to a criminal law clinic, which I had mixed feelings about, because of my own feelings about crime in our society. And that clinic that I was accepted into was taught by the now famous Barry Scheck. This was prior to the Innocence Project. And when I graduated from law school I got a job investigating fraud and corruption, and then the Better Business Bureau, and after about five years of living in New York I decided to move to the west coast.

I took the first year off then I applied for a bunch of jobs, thinking that in four months I was going to quit anyway and take The Bar. And I got hired as a supervisor in an investigator firm and after a couple of months I realised that perhaps that was a more suitable profession for me, especially in terms of my temperament. And that was in 1989.

Dr. Dave: OK as I'm looking at you now, you're in a t-shirt and shorts, you don't look as though you're packing a gun ... I gather it's not that kind of TV image of the private investigator.

Kohler: No I'm often confronted with the B-novel and B-movie stereotype you might say. The type of stuff that I do is primarily in two areas. Workplace civil rights, where I work on behalf of plaintiffs only and I work primarily with nationally prominent civil rights attorney, Philip Kay in San Francisco. And historically I've done a great deal of criminal defence; in other words somebody gets arrested for a crime, they hire an attorney and the attorney hires me to either test the evidence of the prosecution for validity and firmness or to develop our own evidence. And those are the two areas that I work in.

So in some ways I'm a white collar worker: the part of my work that involves computers and databases and that sort of thing. And the other part, which corresponds of course to another part of my personality, is the person who goes out on the streets in all of society's poorest

neighbourhoods and digs up information about people with very unusual nicknames.

Dr. Dave: (laughter) OK, so then there must be another part that draws you into a graduate program in depth psychology. So tell us how did that evolve?

Kohler: Let's see, I'll try and pretend like I really understand this. I can tell you that after I graduated from college in 1983 I actually applied to the Jung Institute in New York for the Jung Institute training, and I was told I was an excellent candidate except that I had no personal analysis.

So I should say that the seed of this was planted, interestingly enough 20 years prior to my admission to Sonoma State. So then we would flash back about two and a half years: I received a letter in the mail telling me about a program at Sonoma State. It had been something that I was looking into for a while but I hadn't found the right fit. And I came up here and I heard Dr. Laurel McCabe make a presentation and I knew instantly: not just intellectually but somatically in my body that this was a program that was not simply academic, this was about inner work, essentially. I dropped everything, applied to the program and was accepted, and here we are.

Dr. Dave: OK. I know that part of the core of that program, and in your personal work a lot of it revolves around the writings of Karl Jung who you already alluded to. I wonder if you can put your finger on just what it is about Jung's work that speaks to you in particular?

Kohler: Well this harkens back to, if you recall, how I first encountered Jung. There was an immediate sense that this fellow organised his thoughts and his feelings and came to an understanding about those aspects of ourselves in the same way that I can relate to. Some of it is a vocabulary choice. You know it's interesting, in answering this question I have to look into the broader notion of what it is that moves any of us. Some of it may be contingent on work choice, the way of relating ideas. I think Jung tied things in for me in a way that nobody else has, and a very important aspect of that is relating the personal to the impersonal. Because anyone who has paid attention to this sort of thing and given it some thought is struck by the interesting relationship between the individual life, personal intent and determinism, and forces that are clearly bigger than individuals.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Are you talking specifically about synchronicity now; or transpersonal ideas?

Kohler: Yes I am and I think synchronicity is a really important area of, as you say, transpersonal ideas. Synchronicity is just one type: the mythological perspective. The idea that something which is so intimately personal to an individual: personal circumstance, work, romantic, self relation. These things are so intimately personal to each of us and yet there are historical precedents that deal with the same situations. And I emphasise situations, not the same particularities.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Kohler: And this is really an appropriate segway into what Jung talks about as archetypes or the archetypal world.

Dr. Dave: Yes I wanted to move into that because I know that in your graduate work you've been particularly interested in archetypes and the whole notion of the archetype can be a slippery concept for people to get their minds around. So how would you explain the idea of archetype to someone who is not steeped in Jungian psychology? I know that's a bit of a challenge but I'll put you on the spot.

Kohler: That's OK because Jung himself never really gave a great definition but I can say this much. Archetypes are structural forms of experience. They are not the experience themselves but they're the unseen part of experiences that inform those experiences.

Let me give a practical sort of analogy. One is out in a sailboat, and all of a sudden the sail starts to billow; in other words the sail is filled with wind. Now we don't see the wind but we know it's there because the sail is billowing. And at the same time we wouldn't say that the wind IS the sail. So bringing this back to the archetype here, the archetype would be the wind; the sail would be the particular experience.

Giving a concrete example: the first thing I can conjure up. Take a young boy or anybody really, on the African continent. They are experiencing some confusion in their life, let's say, or some uncertainty. They have a dream that they are in the middle of a wildebeest stampede. A person in our society may be experiencing the same emotions and may have a dream that they are in midtown Manhattan amidst a sea of screaming cars. Well it's the same underlying experience of personal disorganisation; but it's taken on a cultural form.

Dr. Dave: OK and I know there are a number of recognised, well known archetypes in the literature such as the trickster archetype; the great mother;

the hero; and there are a number of others that have been articulated and one that I know you have devoted some study to is the archetypal image of Hermes. Maybe you can give us some background on that.

Kohler: Yes that's correct; I've been totally smitten by Hermes. Like many people who are familiar with mythology I had always known Hermes as being the messenger god. Hermes makes appearances in the Iliad and the Odyssey and various other Greek writings, again as the messenger between Olympus and the Underworld; the winged god, and that sort of thing. About two, two and a half years ago I began reading more about Hermes and I was just, in the vernacular, blown away.

Hermes historically is a figure that goes back thousands of years before the Greeks. The now deceased archaeologist or I think she was an anthropologist, Maria Gambutas talks about images of Hermes going back four or five millennium B.C. So this figure of Hermes started out as a phallic statue, or an agrarian god and over history evolved in a way that Jung might refer to as individuation; and that is the actualisation of one's full potential. So the historical trajectory of Hermes is one that goes from being a stone statue, or stones as boundary markers in agricultural real estate, to the Greek Hermes who now is an anthropomorphic form that sort of tricks his way into being the twelfth god on Mount Olympus; because Hermes was not originally one of the Olympians.

Then if we follow Hermes up through the middle ages into modern times Hermes becomes a figure in alchemy that is the consummate figure. Hermes is both the process of individuation of self actualisation and also the goal of self actualisation. So taken across the broad sweep of history Hermes is an incredible role model for individuation. This figure that starts out being a chunk of rock, and ends up being the goal of self actualisation.

And there are many other aspects of Hermes the messenger. The metaphor of Hermes being the messenger between the gods and the Underworld is a metaphor for us who are interested in depth psychology and inner work, for entering into healthy relations between the conscious and the unconscious; I could go on and on.

Dr. Dave: Yes I'm glad you went there specifically because that was a question I wanted to ask you, what is that a metaphor for: shuttling between the Olympian gods and the Underworld. And you're saying that's a metaphor for some psychic process within ourselves?

Kohler: Yes certainly that's the way I embrace the idea. We've all experienced the boundary between our own consciousness and our own unconscious is a fluid boundary: things we are aware of today we are not aware of tomorrow and vice versa; and we may become re-aware of them the next day. So there is a fluidity involved and the ability of Hermes to go from the above-world to the Underworld to me is an example of that fluidity.

From the mythological Hermes we know that Hermes has remarkable speed; and to me that captures how the unconscious or the conscious can present itself in a moment: in a quick moment.

And there are other aspects of Hermes, and this is intimately related to the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. By being a boundary marker way back when, Hermes, without a boundary you don't have separate domains. And without separate domains there is no communication. So that old expression, "good fences make good neighbours" has a deeper truth: and that is fences make neighbours.

From the psychological perspective Hermes creates boundaries only to transgress them. So Hermes both defines the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious, and then also in the same breath creates a conduit between the two.

Dr. Dave: OK now this image of Hermes, I mean trying to get hold of this. Somehow the image of Hermes; the metaphor of Hermes; this archetype becomes an organising principle in your own life as you study the history of the archetype and so on? Is that the case?

Kohler: It is certainly the case, and because of the nature of depth work it is sometimes hard for me to even verbalise this because it's connected so much with my own inner processes which are sometimes elusive.

But in Hermes, see it's interesting the evolution of my understanding of Hermes in relation to myself of course mirrors my own ability to delve into and constructively engage my own unconscious. So when I first started to work with Hermes I was taken in by what I could call Hermes descriptive powers in relation to my life.

For example as a private investigator I am acting as a messenger between two worlds: I am going out into the field and I'm getting information oftentimes from people that are at the very underbelly of our society; so I'm going into the Underworld you might say. And certainly my work in the

criminal field, as well as the civil field, has been from one perspective an adventure into the shadow world of our society. And what I'm doing is I'm going into that Underworld and then I'm bringing that back to some nice attorney, in a suit and tie, in a middle or upper middle class environment with an entirely different sort of education and background; and so that's a Hermetic aspect.

Dr. Dave: Yes, that's a great example of shuttling between two worlds. And Hermes has a trickster element too, right? And I think you have a bit of that?

Kohler: Yes, so I'm told! (laughter) Now I mentioned to you earlier that there is an evolution in my understanding of Hermes. Now initially when I encountered the trickster element I thought oh, isn't this terrific, this is me, aren't I slick. And it's nice to have those abilities, I'm not going to be self denigrating, it's nice to have those. But the deeper I came to understand Hermes internally, I saw well I'm not only a trickster in the world but sometimes internally in dealing with myself I'm a trickster. And that becomes much more problematic; that's nothing to brag about. It means that I'm capable of kidding myself about things: self deception.

The difficulty of nailing down, for example what the right thing for me to do or what the right aspect of my personality is to bring to bear in this particular instance. It's wonderful that the trickster can generate all of these possibilities; but what's right in the situation?

Dr. Dave: Right.

Kohler: And there are many, many other aspects of Hermes that I've seen. I do a lot of travelling internationally and in this country; and Hermes, we learn in the Odyssey is the protector of travellers.

And something I didn't mention earlier: but up until the time I entered law school in the mid-80s I hitch hiked about 35,000 miles in this country and Canada. And not only did I have Hermes protection, I never had a bad experience, but hitchhiking bears a great similarity and was sort of a foundational activity for me for investigation.

There's this term that we speak of in depth psychology: liminality. The liminal phase is the stage, sometimes it's called the betwixt and between; the neither here nor there; it's a stage in external events or internal events that's in between two solid states.

Dr. Dave: When you're crossing that boundary between two places.

Kohler: Yes. Middle age has been described as a liminal state because you're not young: there are certain things you can't do that you used to do; but you're also not old: there are a lot of things you can do.

So my hitchhiking: standing on the side of the road is a perfect liminal activity; as is standing at the door of an apartment in a housing project where you've gone unannounced.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Kohler: There's this uncertainty that you're faced with and you're neither here, nor there.

Dr. Dave: Hitchhiking, it seems to me, is also a very archetypal image or experience of being "on the road". You know we've got the Jack Kerouac novel of *On The Road*; and Joseph Campbell of course in *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, really lays out a whole system of mythological references to this idea of being "on the road".

Kohler: Yes I agree it's an incredibly rich metaphor and it's a rich actuality. Again I'm going to tie this back to liminality because it's really so much about who I believe I am.

Liminality, because all of the solid states, the states that we are in between have essentially liquefied, can be a time of great uncertainty; but because of that it's also a time of great potentiality. That's one of the areas that I identify with Hermes.

From a Jungian typological perspective I'm an Intuitive: so an Intuitive when they look at a situation or a circumstance, it's not so much interested in what it is, as in what it could be. What are the possibilities of this?

Dr. Dave: What are some of the tools that you've used to explore this Hermes concept within yourself? You've talked about the need to go down deep within, and the danger of tricking yourself, and so on. But I wonder if there are specific tools, such as writing or other imaginative type exercises that have worked for you as you've explored this in your own life?

Kohler: That's a great question; I wish I had a greater success to relate to you. I can tell you that I've started to do some art work: which sometimes does, and sometimes doesn't relate to Hermetic qualities. But I mention it

because the Hermes energy can be incredibly cerebral, and that legendary speed of Hermes as it's depicted in the myth on the internal side is itself the trickery.

So at times I've tried to work with Hermes physically because I've always been very physical and very athletic. I recall humorously one time, trying to do some sort of inner meditation on Hermes while I was running, and I nearly tripped several times. And then I thought (laughter) this guy Hermes is too fast for me! So what I've tried to do is essentially trick myself into an awareness of the trickster, which is to calm myself down first in some sort of meditative practice, whether it be artwork or sitting. Then to try and ground some of the qualities of Hermes and myself; and by that I mean to get beyond the understanding of Hermes that corresponds to my persona.

Sure I like to think of myself as a person who can do certain things in the world and that have certain qualities and that have good fortune to be protected when travelling and on the road. But again there are these internal aspects of Hermes. What are the boundaries inside that need to be transgressed, vis a vie becoming more aware of things. So that's been my approach.

Dr. Dave: So I gather you've not on a trajectory to become a professional psychologist per se, so I'm wondering how will this work in depth psychology, your work with Hermes, how do you see it informing your future?

Kohler: Well some of this is going to be a purely personal matter in terms of what I've gotten out of the program; what I've gotten out of my own work. It's just something that I bring to everyday life now. To understand that it's nice to have an operable intellect, but that real understanding has to be grounded so I'm trying to do that.

In a more public way of answering this, or as my education is going to bear on my life in public, I am working on an article that I hope to get published; I'm working on a thesis. What I hope to do to maintain my connection to the world of ideas and people connected to depth psychology is to muster up the organisation and courage to present at one or two conferences each year, and to publish a little bit.

Dr. Dave: I can definitely see you doing that, having heard you speak. To wrap things up, are there any readings that you would recommend for someone who wants to find out more about the sorts of things we've just been talking about?

Kohler: Well you know I would recommend sort of a two pronged approach for people. I think that reading mythology is incredibly enjoyable. It's very manageable for many people's lives because you can sit down and read a ten page myth, or you can read something like the Odyssey and spend a week or two reading some really nice literature.

And to bring something else to that I would think maybe one of Jung's writings. He has a book that he put out in 1959 called *Man and His Symbols*, which has some writing by Jungians. Some people find the Jungians, people like Marie-Louise von Franz, Joseph Henderson, Edward Edinger, and these folks to actually be more lucid. Jung has a very circumlocutory way of writing that some people find to be a put off.

So I would suggest reading *Man and His Symbols*, or reading Marie-Louise von Franz; and then maybe trying to apply that to a situation in your life. Trying to look at what are some impersonal elements in one's own circumstances. I know that might be a little daunting for people, but once you pick up something, and read something, it will speak to you or it won't. It's not for everybody.

Dr. Dave: Yes and when you recommend that people read mythology, I mean when I was exposed to mythology as a kid, those were just quaint old stories from the past. I gather you are advocating a different attitude in the reading of a myth.

Kohler: Yes, thank you for asking that question because as I answered it before I realised that I left something out.

The thing about myths is that they tap into something that's universal. There's a reason why we're still telling and repeating and reconfiguring myths that have been around for thousands of years. It's not an accident; it's not just because that's all academia wants to do.

There are certain universal themes: you mentioned some of them before. The mother; you mentioned it as the mother archetype. We all have an idea about a mother that transcends our actual mother. We all have this idea that a mother should be nurturing; should be supportive; should be someone that's wise that we can consult in difficult times.

We have other archetypes corresponding with puberty, marriage, death. These are all transition stages in life; this what mythology presents to us.

One of the interesting things about mythology is that it doesn't present it as an abstraction; it presents it as it bears upon individual lives. And something that I think is important for all of us to understand and come to terms with, is that we can be as abstract as we want with considering mythological and archetypal themes but it's important to recognise that life occurs in individual forms. So this material all needs to be wrestled down into individual lives, and that's why I suggest mythology.

Dr. Dave: OK so when I read a myth, I'm reading a story about specific individuals but then I need to bring that back somehow, to how does this maybe represent a pattern in my own life?

Kohler: Yes that's right. The way that one does that is to recognise and tap into the broader themes.

Many of these myths talk about people; like the hero myth that you alluded to before. They talk about people leaving their home, leaving their society; going out and having a great adventure and bringing it back.

Well we've all had to do that in some fashion. Maybe not as dramatic as Odysseus who was wandering for ten years and came back to find a bunch of men trying to marry his wife. Maybe we've had to leave a community; maybe we've had to leave a lifestyle; maybe we've had to leave a person, a circumstance and go out and try something new. And then eventually integrate that back into our lives. That's the sort of thing that one who's had a basic familiarity with depth psychology ideas, and then who reads a myth, you can see those patterns and then you can say: OK well I didn't sail the Mediterranean for ten years, but I moved out west from New York. And when I moved out here I didn't have a career and now I do. And how does that relate to this person that I've been all along.

Dr. Dave: OK Stuart Kohler, thank you very much for this interview. That's a great place for us to wrap it up.

Kohler: OK thank you for having me David, it's been a real pleasure and it's a great program you have; I've listened to many of them.

Dr. Dave: Great, thank you.