

Shrink Rap Radio #89 – May 12, 2007, The Secret Spiritual World of Children

David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Tobin Hart, Ph.D.

(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Jill Ebsworth)

Excerpt: *So, for me, looking at the lives of children, and listening to what they tell me and what my own experience is in their presence, begins to go around and around it a bit in a very powerful way, so I hear children sometimes ask the big questions: “What are we here for?”, “What’s life about?” Even a child five years old, I also hear them have, see them have moments of just blinding compassion, as early as two years old, this kind of thing, and both of these things and several others, I think, represent what we could generally think of as spirituality.*

Dr. Dave: That was the voice of my guest, Dr. Tobin Hart. [Tobin Hart, Ph.D.](#) is a father, university professor, author, psychologist, and consultant. He is founder and chair of the Board of Directors of [Child Spirit Institute](#), a non-profit educational and research hub dedicated to understanding and nurturing the spiritual world of children. He currently serves as associate professor of psychology at the State University of West Georgia. His teaching and research centers on the activity of knowing and examines consciousness, spirituality, psychotherapy, and education. He has served as a director of a school for gifted adolescents, a director of counseling, an academic dean, clinical supervisor, a therapist for families, adults, and children, and as a consultant for a variety of organizations. His latest two books are *The Secret Spiritual World of Children* and *From Information to Transformation: Education for the Evolution of Consciousness*. In today’s interview, we will be discussing his 2003 book, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*. Here’s the interview:

Dr. Dave: Dr. Tobin Hart, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Dr. Hart: Thank you—nice to be with you.

Dr. Dave: Well, I’m really glad to have you here—as I was saying just before the call, I’ve been reading in your book, and, uh, I find it to be very, very moving and very informative as well. Now the title of your book is *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, and, I have to say, I don’t think I’ve ever read or heard much about the spirituality of children, so, in that sense, it has been something of a secret. Why is that?

Dr. Hart: Well, it’s, um, it’s remarkable actually to me that we’ve missed this for so long, um, I was, uh, sort of turned on to this by my own—one of my daughters, when she was about six and a half years old, and, you know, I was a good psychologist and interested in research, and children, and spirituality, and I really (*laughing*) hadn’t found anything myself either, so I think we’ve got a very, um, a kind of an adult-centric bias in the way that we’ve taken up the world, and, uh, as Gordon Allport said, for example, once he said, “The religion of childhood is of a very special order”, and it’s different, you know, and if, uh, if we think of spirituality in terms of how children talk about God, or how they make conceptual meaning of things, or how they use their language, then, uh, they don’t measure up to the way that you and I might do it, or our listeners would, but that they’ve got their own spiritual world

nonetheless, so I think in that sense, we're, we've been a little narcissistic, a little adult-centric in our way of looking at kids.

Dr. Dave: Right—adult-centric. Now I think you've made a start on this, but “spirituality” is one of those words that can mean different things to different people, so, again, how do you define spirituality?

Dr. Hart: Well, uh, I remember reading somewhere, uh, you know—the, the Greek way of approaching a problem is to define it precisely and then move from there. The Hebraic way is to go around and around and around the thing, and so, I think that, (*laughs*) you know, to approach a word like spirituality we've got to do a little bit of both, and that is to, to go around it with our direct experience, to draw from our personal encounters, and on the other hand try to narrow it down a bit, so, for me, uh, one of the ways I play with it is, um, or, taking on those two approaches, uh—William James a hundred years ago talked about the difference between personal religion and institutional religion, and for James institutional religion is of course the doctrines and the practices and the, uh, rituals and so forth. What he called personal religion though, I think, comes closer to spirituality as I understand it and that is the very intimate and individualized kinds of experiences that one has that in somehow, uh, in some way, uh, open us or touch us in different ways, and that can range, um, of course from anything—so let me take the other way up, you know, the Hebraic way

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Dr. Hart: so for me, looking at the lives of children, and listening to what they tell me, and what my own experience in their presence begins to go around and around it a bit in a very powerful way, so I hear children sometimes ask the big questions: “What are we here for?”, “What's life about?” Even a child five years old, I also hear them have, uh, see them have moments of just, uh, blinding compassion, uh, as early as two years old, this kind of thing, and both of these things and several others, I think, represent, uh, what we could generally think of as spirituality.

Dr. Dave: Okay. Now, how did you get onto this track anyway?

Dr. Hart: Uh, as I intimated, my daughter one night—I had a developmental psychology book under my arm; I was, if I remember it right, you know, preparing for a class the next day, and it had a picture of a child on the cover of it, and I was tucking my, that six and a half year old daughter to bed, you know, to sleep (*laughs*) that night, and, um, as I was—gave her the requisite hug and kiss and she got under the covers, I turned and started to walk out the door and she said, “Dad, what are you reading a kids' book for?”, looking at this picture on the cover of this developmental psychology book, and I corrected her and said, “Well, it's not a kids' book, it's a book about kids, like the way that they think and things that they like”, and she said, without missing a beat, she said, uh, “You mean like seeing angels?” and I said, “Yeah, it could be about things like that”, and, of course, this was the last thing that this or any developmental psychology book, uh, was about, um, in fact, up until a couple of years ago, no mainstream developmental psychology book even had the word “spiritual” or “spirituality” in it, which was, is, kind of stunning.

Dr. Dave: Yes

Dr. Hart: Well anyway, (*laughing*) she said, uh, being a good, you know, researcher, I said well, um, “Uh, yeah, it could be about things like angels”, and she said, “Well, I see my angel” and as a good researcher I said, “Do you see her now?” She said, “Just a minute”, and she lied [sic] back on this big bed surrounded by this forest of stuffed animals as a good six year old girl will have, and she started to move her spine very gently from side to side as if trying to get it in the right spot, and at the same time she was taking in these deep rhythmic breaths—now mind you, she’d never seen anybody do yoga, she didn’t see folks meditate, we weren’t a household where angels were common parlance, and at the time she was generally unchurched as they say—

Dr. Dave: and how old was she again?

Dr. Hart: About six and a half.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Dr. Hart: I had no idea what was going on as she was doing this so I just sort of stood there in a dumb way

Dr. Dave: *laughing*

Dr Hart: and, uh, waited.

Dr. Dave: Yeah

Dr. Hart: About four or five minutes later she said, “Okay, I can see her now.”, and, uh, I said, “Well, uh, what does she look like?”, and her eyes were still closed, she was in this dreamy voice, lying on the bed, and she said, “Well, she’s uh, it looks like she’s got glowy lipstick and make-up on, and she’s wearing a blue dress, but she doesn’t have make-up and lipstick on it’s just her.” I said, “Okay, well, um, you know, can I talk to your angel?”, and she said, “Why?”, and I said, “Well, I’m interested in things like this”, and she paused for a minute as if sort of listening internally, and she said, uh, she responded to me and she said, uh, “My angel said it’s okay”, she said, “My angel knows your angel—they’re old friends.”

Dr. Dave: *laughing*

Dr. Hart: and in that moment, from this little six and a half year old, I had this wave of, uh, come over me, over my body—my body went into chills actually, my, um, I felt my heart swell a little bit and I felt these tears come to my eyes. Now I had no idea what was happening—my mind really hadn’t caught up, and, of course, what we know, is that the body often registers information before the conceptual mind picks it up, and so my body knew something was happening—I didn’t know what. Well, to make this a shorter story, we proceeded to have a conversation, uh, over the next fifteen minutes, and she spoke with a kind of profundity that I

don't hear usually from the wisest adults I know—certainly not from psychologists—and, um, so that was a joke by the way

Dr. Dave: Yes—present company excepted

Dr. Hart: Thank you very

both laughing

Dr. Hart: um, and anyway, she spoke with this kind of profundity, and it wasn't profundity that was complex, it was instead a kind of, uh, wisdom that touched through the cloud of complexity—very simple, very to the point, but, uh, very profound, and, uh as if, uh, seeing things through a penetrating point of view, or seeing things from a greater height and in fact Aquinas defines wisdom as just those things—seeing from a greater height or seeing into the heart of something, and that's the kind of information she was offering. Um, at one point I said, “Well, what does your angel do for you?”, and she said, “Well, it helps me see better and it lets me know that I am loved”, and in many ways this describes a beautiful kind of, uh, naming of, uh, comfort and counsel. So I have no way of knowing whether she was really seeing an angel, I turned around and gave her a hug after a few more minutes and a bigger hug and quickly went out the door and mentioned this to my wife and then got a pad of paper and wrote down as much as I could verbatim, and, uh, and this really set me on a course asking the question, “What in the world just happened”, number one; two, “Is this kid unusual or is this quite common?”, and, uh, and so this really started a whole, uh, re-orientation of me, uh, for me in terms of the interest of this.

Dr. Dave: Yes, and, and your book is laced with similar stories to that, some in which, uh, kids evidently came up with factual sorts of information that seemingly they would have had no access to, and maybe we can get to some of those stories, uh, as we go along, but this led you to, uh, to actually a formal research project where you did a statistical survey of 450 young adults—uh, what were your findings from that study?

Dr. Hart: Well, what actually preceded that, and led up to that, was this question of what's, the first question, and that is, “What's really going on here?” and so through both serendipity and also a very concentrated qualitative research study in which I interviewed, uh, now it's, uh, hundreds and hundreds of kids and their families, and also looked at autobiographical accounts of historic figures, uh, we began to see some patterns that, uh, I thought, I certainly had missed before and some constellations of experience. That then led to this second question, and the second question was, “Well, gee, are these people unusual or is this something quite common?”, and so, based on those, that qualitative data, uh, we began to formulate some concepts, some experiences, some questions, and then, uh, again did this quite sophisticated, I think, survey to try to understand how common this was and, uh, how common some of these various experiences were—experiences from asking the big questions, as I mentioned before, what a good philosopher would do, “What am I here for?”, to experiences of, of something quite different, you know, this little girl seeing an angel, or at least having access to some wise part of herself, and what we discovered is that over all, somewhere between 80 and 90 percent of the folks that we interviewed, or rather surveyed,

mostly young adults, um, had experienced, uh, one or another kind of event or capacity, uh, in childhood—and that varied, for example, somewhere around the neighborhood of 50 percent asked—40 to 50 percent asked big questions, they said, on the other hand maybe 35 percent or so, uh, had profound experiences of empathy and compassion that they described, a particular way of knowing that was very intimate, so, so anyway it became fairly, uh, clear at that point that we're not talking about a handful of spiritually precocious young people, but instead that this may be the birthright of virtually all of us, and somehow we missed it.

Dr. Dave: Wow! Yeah. You also, in the book, you mentioned a, uh, a survey, of a—you mentioned that there are a number of other polls of adults that had been done and you mentioned one in England where 4,000 people wrote about spiritual experiences and I think you said 15 percent involved recollections of childhood spiritual experiences. Do you know what sorts of things they were recalling?

Dr. Hart: Uh, yes, uh, similar in many ways to what we had discovered, and this, this particular survey, when you use the number 15 percent that's right, uh, but, interesting, in this survey, uh, 25 years ago or so, uh, it was, uh, people were asked or invited to, to simply, uh, write down a spiritual experience, and without any prompting about childhood, 15 percent, uh, wrote about childhood experiences, so just to, that was without asking about it

Dr. Dave: Yeah

Dr. Hart: Many of these experiences were, uh, what I would call moments of wonder, so, uh, William James again talked about, uh, these experiences of, uh, as oceanic, for example, when we lose a sense that we, on the one hand, and the world, on the other, are separate, so that there's this collapse of subject and object, for example, and so many of the folks described these, these profound peak experiences, as Maslow would have named them,

Dr. Dave: Yes

Dr. Hart: uh, in which we have, um, uh, this sense of unity or oceanic sense, uh, many of those were of that nature.

Dr. Dave: You know, I tried hard to remember any such experience from my own childhood, but, sadly, (*laughs*) I came up with nothing. Of course, I suppose it's possible that some such experiences might have occurred that I have forgotten since I seem to have forgotten so much else about my

Dr. Hart: *laughing*

Dr. Dave: childhood—does that seem plausible?

Dr. Hart: Well, I think that the, uh, I think about these things in a couple ways—one are experiences, um, and another are capacities, and so, well, it's nice, in my mind, uh, you know, it's really nice to get a very concrete experience, hey, I had an, I saw an angel or I had a moment of, of revelation, or whatever it was, uh, sometimes the things that are a little more

subtle and enduring are particular capacities, so for example, one's capacities for, um, being in awe or wonder as a child, on the one hand, or the capacity for, uh, really, uh, feeling empathic towards another, um, and that empathy, uh, literally that word from, from German means "feeling into", and sometimes, uh, young people become, are, you know, empaths—they have this incredible capacity to go into another's capacity rather than an experience might be one asking big questions, you know, "What is this about?", you know, "How do you know what's true?", and those things are of course, the big questions of philosophy—epistemology, "How do we know what's true?", cosmology—"What does the world about, what does the world consist of?", and so those things, rather than, you know, these, these profound sort of mystical revelations, which are really, you know, cool (*laughs*)

Dr. Dave: Yeah

Dr. Hart: and make for good stories, um, one of the things that I really want to emphasize is that it's not—those aren't any more important and more subtle or enduring capacities, for example, and of course, what all the mystics and sages tell us, or the great ones, I think, is that, you know, it doesn't matter what your experience is, it matters what you do with it, how you integrate it in your life, how you live with more love and wisdom, for example. Some people have, uh, "peakers" as Maslow would say, and some people are "non-peakers"—and both may be very, very profound, very self-actualizing. Also I think it's—for example I didn't remember any of my experiences until it was my daughters that began to trigger this for me and the further I got into this and talking to other kids, the more I would have this sense of resonance and begin to sort of unpeel parts of my childhood that I had, uh, really entirely—I don't want to say repressed, but had pushed away at least, and I began to think about, uh, some of my capacities, as those of everybody, as being of a spiritual ilk—um, so, yeah—we can also forget things.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. That's interesting, uh, there's an author whose name I'm blocking on right now, a fellow who's written a lot in parapsychology, and he talked about the concept of "repression of the sublime"

Dr. Hart: Yes

Dr. Dave: and, uh, that's kind of what you were just describing, I think; as you said, you began to peel back some of your, some recollections of your own childhood spirituality, uh, is there anything that you could share with us that kind of came, that you began to remember?

Dr. Hart: Well, ah, two that come—two general capacities that come first to mind, I think, is, um, for me, was that I was one of these kids who were, that, who was asking questions. I re-, I have a distinct recollection, um, and I had had it before but I had (*laughs*) you know sort of just pushed it away because it was too painful, I think, and the recollection is very simple, and that is, I had a question at five years old, and the question was, "What am I here for?" And I was, you know, and, the other part of that was, "What's life about?" and I didn't get anybody to take my questions very seriously and I remember distinctly feeling, "I wonder if I'm going to remember the freshness"—I didn't use those terms—but the "freshness of this question next year when I'm six?", and sure enough, I did.

Dr. Dave: Wow.

Dr. Hart: and I remember at six asking that same question, well I remember this because while I was really interested in my Legos and I really liked football, and, you know, life was kind of interesting in some ways, these were the most profound questions, the most important questions of meaning, and, uh, you know, Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning, and it's "childrens' search for meaning" too, and for some of us, that provided the backdrop for everything that happened in my life and until I could find some answers to that I felt like I was just inching along—and not even answers so much but, um, but a way to, a space to hold those questions earnestly and seriously, and of course, uh, my family and my teachers didn't do it because that's not what we talked about in school or at home. So that's one dimension—uh, maybe that's enough—another was that I was one of these kids that was very empathically sensitive and so picked up a lot of the vibes if you will, and of course, became a therapist much much later because that was, seemed like a natural

Dr. Dave: *laughing*

Dr. Hart: a natural way to use that particular way of knowing and in fact I've written, um, quite a bit about, um, what I call "deep empathy" or, uh, you know, different epistemic style, one which is, uh, very intimate, one which is a kind of, uh, more intimate empiricism, for example, in which we may move into a kind of, oh let's call it a, uh, a resonance, with the thing that is before us. And of course many folks have talked about this—Martin Buber talked about the "I and the Thou", when we move from, uh, observing or being with something as an "I" and an "it" to a real intimate participation with the other, uh, interestingly this one capacity, um, is the source of a great deal of pathology among young people, for example, if somebody is an empath, let's call him, let's label them that, or has a very very kind of permeable sense of boundaries, then they may pick up all kinds of things from other people and not be able to either discharge it or distinguish what's theirs and what's not theirs, and so when we work with, uh, for example, teens and older folks who have, uh, drug problems, alcohol problems, that are, who are alienated in some ways, who may be depressed and isolated, then, in an enormous number of cases from my experience, and those I've worked with, uh, that these folks—those may be the symptoms, and they're genuine concerns, but in fact what's underneath that, the deep structure of the pathology, is actually that they're empaths—they're very sensitive and they haven't been able to regulate boundaries in a particular way, and therefore this compensatory act of drinking and drugs for example to try to numb out that sensitivity, or on the other hand developing a very hostile personality, or, uh, a very isolated personality, are all ways of trying to cope with, uh, a very acute kind of sensitivity.

Dr. Dave: Well, that's a very interesting perspective, you know, I can see, definitely see how your capacity for empathy and rapport led into your becoming a psychologist and a psychotherapist, but even more so the other experience that you described of questioning, "Why am I here?", really seems to have set your course very early on in terms of your interest in spirituality.

Dr. Hart: It--right you are, right you are—

Dr. Dave: and that made me also—it brought to mind while you were speaking—Carl Jung, and didn't he describe having some fairly profound experiences at a pretty young age, wasn't he pretty young when he was sitting on that rock asking himself, uh, "Am I the person sitting on the rock or am I the rock that's being?"—(*laughs*) it was something like that

Dr. Hart: Yeah, absolutely, exactly, actually, and, uh, and again it's this—children are natural—many children have this capacity to be really natural philosophers and of course the heart of, of original philosophy was, "What are we here for? What's life about?]"

Dr. Dave: Yeah

Dr. Hart: and just those kinds of questions that Jung said, you know, how do I really, basically understand and deconstruct, uh, you know, my life, my thinking and everything else. And of course for the ancients, like Plato, um, these are always spiritual pursuits—asking these big questions are always spiritual pursuits.

Dr. Dave: Well, as I hear you talk about this, I feel a little better about my childhood self because (*both laugh*) I'm remembering now that, um, that I was a defender of the underdog, on an, and in at least two occasions I actually, uh, physically fought to defend

Dr. Hart: mmhm

Dr. Dave: uh, underdogs in, you know, school yard situations,

Dr. Hart: mmhm

Dr. Dave: and uh, so maybe that was, maybe there was a certain spiritual impulse in that—the other thing that I remember is as a young teen, lying in bed and—I wish I had thought of something so noble as "Why am I here?", but instead I would meditate on death and on the, um, the finality of it—I would try to imagine myself not being here, no observing ego, and it was like climbing up a, the ice mountain, it was so hard to stay with that thought, and stay with it, but I would work at it and work at it till I would kind of get it and it would scare the heck out of me (*both laugh*) and bring me out of it and yet I, somehow I felt that that was a very important experience and one that most people didn't cultivate.

Dr. Hart: Yes, oh, oh good, you found it—you've found those (*laughs*) those touchstones, you know, and the first about injustice and that sense of, uh, of defending justice really, it sounds like the underdog, and the other is, and the next part of that, compassion and empathy I think, and the other of course is that profound, uh, sense that, you know, that the existentialists pick up so well, right, and you know, about, um, you know, let's really figure out what life is about by confronting, you know, the terminus,

Dr. Dave: yes

Dr. Hart: the end, and boy, nothing rivets our attention, uh, spiritually more than death, I think—so yeah, you found it—congratulations!

Dr. Dave: Well, thank you (*laughs*)—with your help. Now, you know,

Dr. Hart: *laughs*

Dr. Dave: even though I have difficulty pulling stuff from my own childhood, as you experienced with your children, one of my children in particular, blew me away on several occasions, saying things that absolutely blew my mind with their

Dr. Hart: uhuh

Dr. Dave: spiritual depth. In your book you tell the story of a two year old girl named Allesa, or Alissa, and her imaginary dolphin,

Dr. Hart: *laughs*

Dr. Dave: and, uh, maybe I'll tell you a story, uh, that, that triggered for me of—do you recall that story, or, um

Dr. Hart: Yes, yes

Dr. Dave: okay, good, why don't you run it by us.

Dr. Hart: She, uh, let's see how well I recall it, right, so, and she and she's a bit older now, we've uh—by the way, virtually all of the accounts in here, and there's lots of them, are ones that I, uh, have followed up with personally so that I, uh, because this territory is kind of tricky, you know, you want to make sure that things are authentic,

Dr. Dave: Yeah

Dr. Hart: and, so, anyway, I've kept in touch with most of these folks one way or another. Lissa was just a little tiny tyke, and she was at a, uh, a workshop basically, and her mom was sort of doing what moms or dads do during times when adults are talking and that is try to take, you know, trying for her not to be disturbing, and walking around, and she suddenly said, "I need to tell that lady a message", or something to that effect, and, uh, her mom said, "Well, listen, you know, she's talking, and you can't talk to her now" and she said "I have to tell her something, I have something to tell her", and finally she convinced Alissa that, uh, you know, when she was done they would go up, and so anyway, she walked up to her and she said, um, she, she began—you'll forgive me for not getting all the details right but, um, basically what she said was that she needed to talk, uh, to her father, and, um, and to basically forgive him and to reconnect with him in some way, and, uh, it was a kind of a sweet way of saying it, um, and the woman said—the woman came to tears very quickly—this very tough sort of fifty year old good workshop leader, and she said, "I know this doesn't make any sense whatsoever to you, being the mom, but", she said, "she just solved something I've been working on for years", and that is this incredible estrangement from her father and, um, some long-term resentment and, uh, lack of forgiveness and, um, anyway, so her mom said, anyway, "So, how did you know that, or how did you know to say that?", and

she said, “Well, when, um, when I need to know something, um, Kiwa comes”, and her mom said, “Who?”, “Kiwa—it’s my dolphin, and when she comes to, uh, when she needs to tell me something or when I need to hear something, she meets me in the dolphin area and she takes me for a swim, and then I know what’s going on”, so (*laughs*), so, um, you know, from the mouth of babes, so, and in this case and many others, not just in Alissa’s situation but in others this kind of, mm, connection with a source of wisdom, just as Haley did with her angel or whatever, is often, uh, is often very colorful, uh, you know, it has a self-authenticating quality and that the information is so profound—who knows what the source is—we don’t have to decide that, but we do know that they’re tapping something, they’re accessing something, and that was Alissa’s way

Dr. Dave: Yes, and you, in the book, you explore the fact that animals often can be a touchstone for children, uh, like maybe a kind of gateway I suppose—either real animals I suppose or imaginary animal figures,

Dr. Hart: Yes

Dr. Dave: or so-called imaginary, and that dolphin story triggered a memory having to do with uh, with one of my sons—we have, uh, four kids, and, uh, the latter half were, uh, twins that we had,

Dr. Hart: mmm

Dr. Dave: and one of them, Matthew, is just, uh—I’ve a lot of stories about him, and, uh, he’s twenty-six now, but when he was, I would say he was probably about five or six when we took the twins to the aquarium at San Francisco, and we took them up to this, uh, dolphin area where you can see, where you’re sort of underground so you can—there’s a big pane that lets you see under water and dolphins swimming around

Dr. Hart: mmm

Dr. Dave: Well, the room was mobbed with little children, you know, who were all, have their faces up plastered against the glass and they’re yelling and screaming and so on and there’s a place where parents are sitting in the background, and my son Matthew went up to, to the window and this dolphin came up to him, and Matthew would walk back and forth the length of the window, and wherever Matthew went this dolphin would follow him and it was the most amazing thing—I didn’t see, I didn’t see that dolphin or any other dolphin behaving in that way toward any other child,

Dr. Hart: mmm

Dr. Dave: and in fact, Matthew had a sort of charisma then that he has still today (*laughs*)—I could take up the rest of the session telling my Matthew stories

Dr. Hart: *laughs*

Dr. Dave: but I won't do that, but, uh, to me that was a powerful—it was like your—that early experience with your daughter, you know, where, wow—this kind of grabs your attention, and you say something's going on here

Dr. Hart: mmmm. Yeah, it's amazing, isn't it, that there are these moments of something, you know—Shakespeare said “more things in heaven and earth than we've dreamt of” and, uh, and boy, that sure is, well, what we're discovering, you know, our, our very limited sense of psychology, even spirituality is, uh, really, for me, it's really been blown away, uh, by these, the kind of purity of these accounts of, of and around young people and they're pure in the sense that they haven't been particularly enculturated, and, um, motivations and manipulation isn't, well of course kids can have all sorts of motivations and manipulations, but these things often do have this, as I say, self-authenticating quality like this with your son—very, very profound.

Dr. Dave: Yes. In your last chapter you describe how children, by their very nature, have a transforming effect on adults, you know, adults can be very stiff and into their whole adult world, and a child comes into the room and, and suddenly things are transformed—I was in line in Costco, a big discount chain, a couple days ago, and the lady in front of me had a little baby, and the cashier was just (*laughs*) just rubbed whatever, you know, adult pretenses she may have had (*both laugh*) and she was going gaga, you know, with this baby

Dr. Hart: *laughs*

Dr. Dave: just totally coming down to, uh, to join with that baby

Dr. Hart: yeah, yeah

Dr. Dave: in the most remarkable way and, uh, I'd actually like to read several paragraphs from the opening of that last chapter, and then maybe chat with you and tell you about an experience with my eighteen month old granddaughter, so this is reading from your book a bit here, do you mind?

Dr. Hart: not at all (*laughs*)

Dr. Dave: (*laughs*) Okay, I should have given you a heads up and then you could have read, uh, I don't know if you have a copy close at hand or not,

Dr. Hart: I do, but, uh, but, you know, you've got a good voice (*laughter*) so I'm happy to hear it

Dr. Dave: Okay, thank you—so you write “Children can be our spiritual teachers—they lead us to love, sacrifice, responsibility and all sorts of things of which we hardly knew we were capable”, and I have to really echo that, “As adults we often think of our relationships with children as involving our helping them to develop, but they help us grow as well—development is mutual. There's something quite remarkable about the presence of a child that serves to activate our spiritual nature, our capacity for wonder, compassion, communion, and hope. I'm still amazed to watch what happens to busy and serious adults when a child

unexpectedly crosses their path—our attention shifts when a child enters our busy workplace—our heart reaches out when we see a child in pain or danger. We soften, even melt, as a child stares innocently at us or looks for a lap or a hug. We stoop down, become silly, want to draw in close, and suddenly lighten, as if gravity no longer has the same pull, when we are in their presence. These are signs that something deeply special and deeply spiritual is happening.”

Uh, boy, that really nails it, I think, that was just—and it’s, was eye opening for me because I just never had looked at it that way, (*laughs*) but, you know, that passage really revealed something to me

Dr. Hart: mmm

Dr. Dave: and, uh, just to share something, uh, personal again, uh, my oldest son recently had to go through, uh, chemotherapy

Dr. Hart: hmm

Dr. Dave: and we have a, a new child in the family, my granddaughter, and, uh, boy, she brought such joy and energy to him when he was going through that chemotherapy, I mean, it was a really rugged course of therapy that he had to go through, but the thing—but it would just totally lighten him when he could be in the presence of, of this toddler

Dr. Hart: yes, yeah

Dr. Dave: and it was very healing for him, I would say, it really helped pull him through.

Dr. Hart: yeah, yeah—I love, um—yeah, good luck with your oldest son, um, I really love the, the idea (*laughing*) that, and I love the line that, uh, Black Elk, the great Native American elder who, um, had his greatest spiritual revelations at, at four or five and again at nine, and he said, um, something to the effect—I’ll butcher the quote, but, uh, something to the effect that, uh, grown men may learn from even the littlest child because they, uh, the small—the hearts, (*laughs*) the heart of a small child is still open and therefore the Great Spirit may show to them many things, and there is something about this kind of, uh, Zen would call it “beginner’s mind”, uh, a kind of purity, a kind of closeness to essence, very interesting for example, for Zen Beginner’s Mind and in the book of Matthew, um, the words are “turn and become like a little child—only then shall ye enter the kingdom”. In, uh, Taoism, you know, Lao Tzu, the alleged progenitor of Taoism, his name Lao Tzu means “old child”,

Dr. Dave: Ha! I didn’t know that

Dr. Hart: so there is some kind of (*laughs*) recognition, you know, and particularly a kind of resonance that happens that you just described so well, um, and it is in of itself transformative—of course, none of this means that kids are, are no longer considered to be, you know, selfish, or, um, cruel, or (*laughs*) a lot of work, or a pain in the butt sometimes, I mean that they’re all that too but that the thing that we’ve missed, I think, is this profound,

uh, uh, spiritual capacity co-exists with the, uh, sort of normal psychological developmental capacities, and that, uh, for us to be able to draw out and refine both of those things I think is part of the work of, uh, of our guiding kids, and of course, as you said, said it earlier, the work is reciprocal and mutual, you know, we hear the stories about a, you know, a young teenage parent, for example, who has a new child and they'll often say, "Oh well, we grew up together" and quite literally, but for anyone who has or is, uh, in service of a child, you know, a teacher, a grandparent, a friend, a neighbor, uh, that our development is mutual and reciprocal, you know, we, we teach them how to tie their (*laughs*) shoes and they teach us about patience, and we teach them how to brush their teeth correctly and they teach us about love that we thought was absolutely unfathomable. In fact, in my sunnier days, I wondered who's really teaching whom, you know, and how has this really been set up? (*laughs*)

Dr. Dave: Yes, yes really. Now, speaking of teaching and guiding, you do have a chapter called "Spiritual Parenting", so let's hear a little bit about that. [42:27](#)

Dr. Hart: Well, uh, again, just sort of, uh, taking off on this notion of first who is a parent, and, uh, and again, it doesn't have to be biological or even legal parents—it could be anybody—it's that coach, for example, who may not have his own children or may, or hers, but who, uh, says, "Look, um, you're capable of a lot better than you showed me today. I want to see more tomorrow"; that may be an act of profound love, or, um, someone else, a teacher, who doesn't have her own children, or his, or does, and uh, says, "You know, I really liked how you asked that question today", or "how you wrote that" or "drew that", and so we're surprised sometimes at the, you know, the neighbor with a soft cookie and a softer ear is, uh, as much involved in parenting as anybody else, so that's the first thing, is that we're all really, uh, involved in this if we, if we're interested in it. The second thing is I think, um, well I think about it maybe most fundamentally I think about the job of parenting as twofold—one is to hold and the other is to behold, and holding means appropriately setting limits, it means, uh, as we would for a newborn, really, to hold and protect them, to care for them, to nourish them both emotionally and psychologically—we know from both developmental theory and from neurobiology that early attachment is absolutely fundamental to, uh, healthy development, so that's about really holding, that's about really making the world safe for this child to be in, um, so that they can trust it and therefore have the courage to go out and meet it, um, but the other side, and this is the side (*laughs*) that's trickier I think, and really may be the main point of this whole book is about beholding, and that is to expand our awareness, to really get, to really, uh, see who this person, this soul, is in front of us, uh, beyond our expectation and beyond the developmental text, uh, beyond them not taking their plate back into the kitchen once again, you know, this kind—and so, uh, it's beholding in the spirit that you might see a great painting, you know, or a spectacular sunset—can we see the person in front of us in the same light. When we do, uh, our actions toward them are very very different often, like "Wow, you're, you're a being already, you're not incomplete being, you're already a being, yeah, yeah, yeah, you've got places to go, you've got things to learn—I don't want to abdicate my responsibility for guiding you and providing you what I can, but let me see if I can help understand, or let's see if I can understand who you are and therefore what your calling may be in the world, what your talents may be, what your learning struggles may be, and be of, uh, be in awe and wonder as, uh, we help draw those capacities out."

Dr. Dave: Uh, what a great attitude to project, uh, rather than having a program that the parent's trying to impose on the child, what you're advocating is really being, being open to their spirit, and nurturing it and drawing it out. That's wonderful.

Dr. Hart: Yeah

Dr. Dave: Now as we begin to wind down here, uh, you're the founder and board chair of something called "The Child Spirit Institute", so why don't you tell us a bit about the work of the institute.

Dr Hart: Sure, uh, based on, on this and after realiz—based on this work with children and then realizing that (*laughs*) this is, uh, these children represent a lot of us in the world—we feel like we need a, the benefit, uh, the help of a non-profit institute, and the Child Spirit Institute is a 501C3 educational and research organization that's dedicated to understanding and nurturing the spiritual life of children and also those of us who were once children, and so the institute does indeed, uh, conduct, uh, research—it consults often pro bono with both other researchers and families as well, uh, it sponsors a number of, uh, kinds of events—we just helped to co-sponsor a summit on education and spirituality, uh, we have an upcoming, a big upcoming conference—it's The North American Conference on the Spirituality of Children and Youth, which is a collaboration between several, several, uh, organizations, but spearheaded by the Child Spirit Institute, and that will be in November, and, uh, it's, uh, it's just outside of Atlanta in a wonderful small city—Chattanooga, Tennessee, uh, our last one was in California, we wanted to move it back to the, uh, the West Coast, so this is a place, this is an unusual gathering, and this is part of the nature of the institute, is that we try to bring together people that wouldn't ordinarily sit at the table together and yet have a common interest and influence in the lives of children, so in this, this gathering, there'll be scholars and researchers to be sure, there'll be pediatricians and psychotherapists, but there'll also be, uh, religious, uh, innovative religious folks from across the traditions—every tradition, virtually. Uh, there'll be parents, there'll be some youth there, there'll be public and private school educators and so, uh, because, you know, we know that there isn't one prong in, uh, and that the field is so new, essentially, uh, although growing very quickly, um, so new that we really want to see what's out there and, and really benefit from this cross pollination that, uh, you know, a public school educator and a religious leader and a parent and a child might, uh, might be able to, to uh, engender in one another.

Dr. Dave: It sounds like you've got some wonderful programs—listeners might want to be able to find out more. Can you tell us the URL for the Child Spirit Institute?

Dr. Hart: childspirit—one word—childspirit dot org or dot net [childspirit.org or childspirit.net]

Dr. Dave: Great—you've got both possibilities covered

Dr. Hart: Right

Dr. Dave: Well, Dr Tobin Hart—thanks so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio

Dr. Hart: You're welcome, David—thank you.

Comments

I hope you enjoyed the interview with Dr Tobin Hart as much as I did—I had a real feeling of rapport with him, you know, uh, I've never met him personally and I don't always get the same feeling of connection with each person that I interview, but, uh, I felt a very strong connection with Tobin and would love to meet him sometime—probably part of the reason why, maybe started off predisposed to feel really good about each other is that he's been teaching at West Georgia State and, and I taught for so long at Sonoma State University, and these were almost like two sister institutions, even though they're probably twenty-five hundred miles apart. Both were influenced, I would say, strongly by the humanistic tradition, and in fact the department at Georgia—I mean, Georgia, of all places, in, you know, in the deep south, you wouldn't expect to find that, but it turns out that one of, um, Abraham Maslow's chief graduate students went down there on Maslow's, uh, recommendation and, uh, got hired as department chair, and so he set the tone for that department, and they've had a humanistic, uh, orientation just as Sonoma State has, and there's been some, uh, communication between the departments over the years and various faculty had visited one another and so on, so there is a nice history between our two departments, both being state schools, both being small psychology—relatively small psychology departments and both sharing this sort of allegiance, so even though Tobin and I had never met we had this sort of shared heritage.

His work and his book touch me deeply, and particularly because of the impact of the birth of my twin boys—they had an enormous impact on my life and on my heart—at the time that these twins came along, I think I was, you know, I was, uh, pushing forty—we already had two kids—we thought we were done with having kids, and these—and then we had a surprise pregnancy, and, and then, it turned out, you know, and I was still young enough to be insecure about my livelihood and so on, a little worried about the impact on our economic situation and on, uh, on kind of my freedom, just as we were kind of getting free to go out to movies and out to dinner and not have to worry about baby-sitting, and so on, uh, then suddenly here comes this pregnancy out of the blue, and I was not happy about it, I have to say—and that's a whole nother story, there's a whole long story I could tell you about the transformation that happened around that—maybe I already have in another episode, I'm not sure, but a big part of the turn-around was who these little twin beings turned out to be, and one of the moments that's particularly engraved in my mind was, uh, when I was, shortly after they were born, I remember sitting in the rocking chair and I was holding one up on each of my, you know, on my chest, (*laughs*) I'd say each breast except I wasn't nursing them, but they kind of had their head on my shoulders and I was rocking them, and, uh, and they—I was rocking them to sleep and they got sleepy, and I got sleepier and sleepier, and it was like their little consciousnesses were tugging on my consciousness and pulling me, (*laughs*) pulling me down with them, and there was this powerful feeling of bonding, and I have to say that during this period of, of infancy, when they were in our home and they were really small and really young and, and they weren't even—they weren't even able to talk or, or give much feedback at this point, but somehow I found myself really energized and filled with a certain kind of joy, and I would, when I went to bed at night, I would

just feel all of this love in my heart for them and the love that I was, that I felt I was receiving from them, and, even before they talk, they could talk I felt that they taught me a meditation, to tell you the truth, was I was feeling my heart flooded with so much love that I then had the notion as I was laying in bed—I remember, I was laying in bed and I was feeling this love and I had this imagination or this visualization of “What if the love was a knob like a radio dial and I could turn up the volume?”, and so I went to that place in my heart and I just focussed on opening up my heart more and more and letting more and more of that love in, and I just turned that knob up until I couldn’t stand it anymore—my heart felt so open and so much love—and I’ve kind of taken that as a, as a kind of mediation—I’ve tried to teach it to other people—I think really it’s a learnable skill—I think that I got taught something—and that if you go to this place in your heart and you imagine a volume control and you just connect with that place of love and joy in your own heart, and you imagine turning up the volume and just feeling that increase and well up inside you, I think you might experience the same thing that I did—I’ve tried to pass it on to other people—and now I’m passing it on to you.

Now there are a couple of stories I’m just going to have to share with you because they fit so well with the themes that Tobin was talking about, and so first, let me tell you about little (?) Christopher—I have to tell you that these guys are now young adults, ok, but uh, here’s Christopher when he was, when he was just a baby, before he could even really talk, he, uh, one day I’m, he’s on the changing table and I’m changing his diaper and he just, he starts making faces at me—he pulls the funniest faces, and just cracked me up, just cracked me up, and it cracked him up, and so he became this, this really funny little clown who would pull faces at the most unexpected time, just to get that reaction (*laughs*), and it was so wonderful to watch and also that very special moment when uh, little Christopher and little Matthew were side by side in these little um—sort of like car seats that you sit on a table to feed them, and that moment when they first became aware of one another, and I think again it was that Christopher did something funny—he noticed his brother, that there was another out there, and he did something funny that got them both laughing and so that was a very special moment, and that’s part of Christopher’s great gift that he has even to this day, of having a wonderful sense of humor that can lighten a situation up and lighten people up. And I already told you one story in the interview—you heard the story about Matthew and the dolphins, and there’s another very special story that I have to share with you; at this point Matthew is old enough to be verbal but still in a crib and still in those jammies, you know, that one-piece jammies that have feet in them? and, uh, I’m lifting him up out of the crib to, uh, change him or something, but I remember he’s in his jammies, I’m lifting him up out of the crib, and as I’m holding him up in the air kind of at my eye level, he’s looking at me right in the eyes, and he says, “Daddy, I wish you were my age.”—and I look at him, and I say, “Oh”, you know, “why is that?”, and he said, “Because then we’d both be Matthew”, and that just cut through to the center of me because what I heard in that was so much love and the desire that we could just be one, and I looked back at him in his little eyes and I said, “Matthew, we’re already both Matthew”, and I’ll never forget that moment. In that moment I felt like I had met the Buddha, and sometimes I say that, you know, I was a tough case and I needed to be smacked upside the head by, with a two-by-four of love.