

Shrink Rap Radio #9, October 14, 2005, Interview with Dr. Susan Stewart on Positive Images of Aging

Dr. David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Dr. Susan Stewart

(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Kristi Sanchez)

Introduction: Hello everyone and welcome back to Shrink Rap Radio. This is David Van Nuys, aka Dr. Dave, and this is the psychology podcast in which I interview interesting, fascinating people from all around the world of psychology. Today’s interview is with Dr. Susan Stewart who has been a long time friend and who is working on a book having to do with positive images of aging. I think you’ll find this a fascinating interview - I know I did. So, without any further ado, let’s jump right into it.

Dr. Dave: Well, I wish you all could be where I am right now because I’m in Dr. Susan Stewart’s little cottage out at Dillon Beach and looking through the picture window here, we can see the sun sparkling on the ocean and in the distance we can hear the surf. So, let’s get right into our interview. Susan, welcome to the show.

Dr. Susan Stewart: Thank you David.

Dr. Dave: And, if I recall correctly, you originally trained to be a nurse. So how did you find your way into psychology?

Susan: Uh, okay, nursing - I was very young and I lost my dad and my two best friends in my second year of training and also lost my faith in medicine. . .

Dr. Dave: Mmm.

Susan: . . .and the part I most loved about nursing, anyway, was the people, contact, so that would seem like a natural place to go to study people.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, to study people. So in terms of your academic career, kind of what was the sequence?

Susan: The sequence was junior college, nurses training, Sonoma State in psychology, and I got my MA there as well, and then went to the California School of Professional Psychology in the East Bay, got my doctrine in clinical psych.

Dr. Dave: Okay, clinical psych. So, you practiced as a psychotherapist for a while but I know that you moved away from that.

Susan: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: What caused you to move away from psychotherapy?

Susan: Okay, um, well at that point in my life in my 30s, I was teaching and doing a therapy practice, and also working as a market researcher sometimes and raising two boys.

Dr. Dave: So you had your hands really full?

Susan: More than full.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Susan: And, um, I wanted one or - I really wanted one job. So, and I think I'm a better teacher than I was therapist.

Dr. Dave: Okay, that's fair.

Susan: So, I went. . .

Dr. Dave: That's honest.

Susan: Yeah. I went for where I felt the most - I was making the most difference in the world.

Dr. Dave: And, uh, I know you by reputation and experience as a teacher and I know that you are very strong in that area. How would you describe to people your particular brand of psychology? For example, which authors are theorists? Have had the biggest impact on you as a psychologist?

Susan: Mmm, I would say Carl Young, by far the most. Second would be Carl Rogers. I guess I like Carls. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Susan: So the whole depth psychology, the exploration of the unconscious, dreams, mythology, all of that has just spoken to me before I knew of Young. And Carl Rogers' ideas of people having their own answers inside, respect for human beings and their differences, and the kind of positive affirming spin he had on people I think have been very influential for me.

Dr. Dave: Right. And even as I look around your cottage here, I'm aware of various crafts and art objects, and I know that you've had a long involvement with making things with your hands, crafts kinds of activities.

Susan: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: What's your take on that, you know, as a psychologist?

Susan: Well, I think Young, at least for me, was the first person I saw talking about how what comes out of our hands is an expression of the unconscious. So, I've been involved with these kinds of things forever and teach them in as many of my classes as they fit. Um. . .so I see the body as a vehicle like dreams, or contacting what we don't quite know we know.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Susan: So, collage, very simple - you don't have to be an artist because I don't know how to draw myself - but, collage or piecework or p-i-e-c-e. . .

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Susan: Piecing together things.

Dr. Dave: Right. For example you've made quilts.

Susan: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: I know for years you were making quilts.

Susan: Yes. Right. That had symbols in them that represented themes in my life or images from dreams or those kinds of things.

Dr. Dave: Okay, um, I know that recently you've been focusing on the second half of life. What is it that's called you to do this?

Susan: I think the first impudence was someone called me a crone.

Dr. Dave: Uh-oh. Is that a bad word? (laughs)

Susan: A very bad word. (laughs) It was meant as a compliment but I didn't really know what a crone was. I just knew it sounded old and I was like 52 at the time and I really didn't like it. And then I had a couple other experiences of people telling me I was about to become one

because I was about to be 56 and that was in the Celtic tradition, which I'm very - I love a lot - and finally I read a fairy tale, an obscure one, about a triple-headed serpent and a male hero lopping off the third head of the snake and the author was talking about the serpent often representing the goddess and the third head being the crone head, or the old woman in the trinity of the goddess. I'd never been very interested in the goddess, but I'm really into underdogs and when it talked about that getting lopped off - so I had those three experiences within a short period of time and started doing some reading - so obviously I was becoming an older woman. But, those three events really. . . And then I've had some dreams since that have really given me a sense that this is something that I need to be looking into. . .

Dr. Dave: Hmm.

Susan: . . .for myself and for other people because I think even though our attitudes toward aging have changed and gotten more positive, there's still a lot of negative imagery around about that and most women and men that I know are not looking forward to getting older.

Dr. Dave: Right. So there's still a lot of work to do in that area and I know that when you first heard that work "crone" it had a negative impact on you.

Susan: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: You've been working to change that - the spin that's on "crone" - and you've been doing reading and research, um, that suggests perhaps a different spin. What can you tell us about that?

Susan: Yeah, well I found some other authors at this point who have been also looking at this: For example, Jean Bolen who wrote *Goddesses in Older Women*, talks about that and then Marion Woodman, who is also a Jungian. She and Patricia Monahan, who is a feminist scholar, are both looking at the meaning of "crone". So, early when someone had called me one, I looked it up in the dictionary - Oh my God. . .

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Susan: . . .um, a withered, witchlike, old woman. And I thought, no wonder we don't like this. And the origin was claimed to be French for carrion or rotting flesh.

Dr. Dave: Oh, great.

Susan: Wonderful, huh? But then, uh, Monahan and Woodman both are challenging that and they're saying that "crone" comes from the Latin "coronae," which means crown, and that becoming a "crone" is about finally wearing the crown of sovereignty in one's own life. And

it's, to me, those two visions of, you know, rotting flesh and she who wears the crown - I think are both out there in terms of what it means to be an older woman.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Great. And I know that in the process you've been studying myths from around the world, fairy tales, you've been collecting pictures. . .

Susan: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: . . .What is it that the myths and the fairy tales tell us about the crone and this second part of life?

Susan: She is a wonderful character in stories. Things you might expect, like uh, wise. She's also in many stories quite ageless, sometimes sexually active. Actually described as beautiful in a few tales - the lines in her face, um - she's the necessary fierceness, that witchlike aspect I think more of as the fierceness that is sometimes needed in a situation. So the crone is sometimes that. She's also very compassionate and loving and selfless and I don't mean co-dependent selfless giving to get, I mean able to put her own agenda and ego aside and do what is needed by the bigger picture. So the picture that came through these stories of the old woman is she is a creature of incredible paradox; fierce one moment, compassionate the other; solitary one moment, embedded in righting a situation in the next; she has a fabulous sense of humor. . .

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Susan: . . .and one of the really exciting things that I've stumbled onto lately in the course of writing an academic paper on this, that a lot of the current research and gerontology, psychology development, medicine, etc. is emphasizing positive possibilities as we age. So the qualities that I was finding the myths and folktales are the same characteristics that the literature is writing about; like the capacity for self-transcendence and what the psychologists call emotional mastery, which is the tendency to no longer project and blame others - be able to find contentment regardless of the circumstance, be more comfortable in your own skin - those are part of what research is now also saying is characteristic of the old woman. So, I just love when things come together, especially really old stories and very contemporary research. You know, art and science, and story, and. . . anyway.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, that's really fascinating that these different threads are coming together.

Susan: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: And I have to say my own experience confirms what you are saying in a sort of prosaic way, that I find that the women I know - the mature women - as a male, I can't get away with the stuff that I could get away with when they were younger. (laughs)

Susan: (laughs) It's true.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, the don't - they can't pull the wool over their eyes any more.

Susan: No, we're too wily. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Okay. Um, now I know you're working on a book about this too.

Susan: Mm-hmm. I am.

Dr. Dave: And um, uh, what's the title? Do you know the title yet and can you tell us something about the book?

Susan: Sure. The title has changed a couple of times. The current title is *Aging with Grace and Zest*.

Dr. Dave: I like that.

Susan: Thank you. And the subtitle is *Inspiring Stories of the Grandmother Crone* and the title - if it remains this way - I really love all the paradoxes that the crone holds and I think the main message I've gotten about aging as I've been writing and dreaming and reading about this is that aging is on the one hand, an experience of coming more into who we really are, which implies a lot of zest; retaining passion and energy. But the other thing, I think, is learning how to die; and I don't mean necessarily DEATH, but little ways in which our earlier version of who we thought we were undergoes a lot of revision if we let it.

Dr. Dave: This reminds me of the Buddhist idea of letting go.

Susan: Yes and also Young's idea of needing, starting at midlife, particularly to really confront what he called "the shadow", or the other side of the self. So you were mentioning the women who used to be more sweet and now don't let you get away with things.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Right.

Susan: So, Young talked a lot about whatever it is we've been, if we listen to our dreams and we look at our life and we listen to other people, we start to see that we are not only, say, selfless and giving, but we're also strong and assertive. . .

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Susan: . . .and so whatever the imbalances have been or the attachments have been, it's a time I think to look at and incorporate the other side, which I think is why the crone has so many facets - because she's been doing this homework. Maybe not consciously, but. . .

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Yeah.

Susan: . . .that idea of allowing all that we are to be developed, and therefore at our disposal to use as needed.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. I guess another way of saying what I was trying to say before is, I really see women coming into their power.

Susan: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: I know that's a widely used phrase, but it really makes sense.

Susan: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: I see women coming into their power as they age. Contrasting that with my experience, my reading in the men's movement and so on - too often men seem to collapse, maybe having experienced their power earlier in their lives, but often they collapse into depression and um. . .

Susan: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: . . .a sense of disempowerment.

Susan: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: Do you have anything to say about that?

Susan: Yeah, a couple things. Yeah, um, one of the things that researchers have found - this is sort of a worldwide phenomenon - is that starting as the raising of children [ebs 14:44.0](#) out of our lives, men tend to become more emotionally oriented, more relational. . .

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Susan: . . .they become kind of like sweet grandpas.

Dr. Dave: Uh-huh.

Susan: Where as women, particularly if they've played that nurturing role, maybe to the detriment of their autonomy, start to come into their own power. So, that's a fairly common observation worldwide and I don't see what happens to men as collapsing.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Susan: I see it as they are incorporating another side that is less valued by the culture.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Susan: Which is the emotional and the relational, and if you've been a top dog and if you've bought the idea that you are what you earn. . .

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Susan: . . .and you're not supposed to show weakness. . .

Dr. Dave: Right.

Susan: . . .which means emotion. . .

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Susan: . . .then I think it can be a rough transition just as a lot of women struggle with losing "our looks," . . .

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Susan: . . .no longer being able to get through life on being cute and attracting supporters. . .

Dr. Dave: Right.

Susan: . . .basically. I think the transition can be hard for either gender, but I think it's worth going through the depth - whatever the little depths are.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. What I like about you is your always equal gender. (laughs)

Susan: Yes.

Dr. Dave: You're very understanding of both genders. . .

Susan: (laughs)

Dr. Dave: . . .and you stand for that and I really like that.

Susan: Thank you. I think it's from a story I was read as a kid. . .

Dr. Dave: Really?

Susan: . . .by my parents. Um, it was about a couple that were bickering with each other constantly about who was working harder and so one day they switched lives and she got to see how hard he worked in the field. . .

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Susan: . . .and how he sweated for the family and she got to see how infinitely patient she was with their children and how the jobs were never done that she had to do. I also grew up without a brother, which I think helped because I didn't have that comparison in my own family.

Dr. Dave: Uh-huh.

Susan: And my parents were remarkably - even though my mother grumbled about men sometimes - I think they were remarkably respectful of each other and my mother and grandmother, like, loved housework, which I do too.

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Interesting.

Susan: It's kind of hard to admit. . .

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Susan: . . .so, I have never really felt identified with being a woman as against being a man.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Susan: I feel like that's a war we don't need. We have too many other wars. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: Amen. (laughs) Amen sister!

Susan: (laughs)

Dr. Dave: We refer to the fact that you've been writing a book and I am wondering, what's the process of that writing? What's that process been like for you?

Susan: (laughs) It's huge. It's the biggest thing I've ever done next to raising children, I should add. Um, it's been everything from being incredibly inspired and feeling very supported by women and elders I've met, and elder men too, dreams I've had, other writers in the local community who've been very supportive, and some days it just flows. And then there have been dry periods where I tell myself I don't know anything, and what do you think you are, and I think the process is, um, I don't think you can write a book like this without embodying it. And I think the ways that I have not known my own value or trusted what I know, which is part of becoming a crone. I've had to really work a lot with myself. So, it's been everything, from exhilarating to frustrating, to almost too much, but I think it's the first time in my life I've felt like I must do this even though part of me would just like to not do it. It's almost like I can't not do it.

Dr. Dave: Right. Right. So, it's not just writing a book, it's also a growth process. . .

Susan: Yeah, for me.

Dr. Dave: . . .and they, um, kind of a cauldron that you're cooking inside of.

Susan: Yes. Wonderful crone image, the cauldron. Yes. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: So, based on your studies and your own personal explorations and experiences, what advice, if any, would you give our listeners as they confront the latter part of their own lives? I know this is kind of putting you on the spot, but. . .

Susan: Yes, um, boy that's a big question. Well, one thing, I'd say, is everyone ages differently. The current elders we have are pioneers in this uncharted territory that our grandparents never lived to see. The life expectancy was 45 at the turn of the other century, so, um, current elders have a lot to teach us. I'd say hang out with people older than you are. Um, and there's a lot of books emerging on the market of successful aging, productive aging, ageless aging, and so I love seeing those, but I think allowing ourselves to find our own way in the last half of our life is part of what that's about. Within a community of people, like talking and listening, but there aren't rules that I - I mean I could make up a few - I'd say like, trust the process and learn how to die and enjoy the ride and hang out with cronies, but I don't know if there's any hard and fast rules because experience is different. Some of us have some cognitive challenges as we age, or health challenges, others don't. And the models that we've had, even in gerontology, I think up to fairly recently, of elder people have really been based on medical problems, as if that was the norm. Sort of like looking at adolescence and only looking at kids who get into drug abuse and thinking that's what adolescence is about. So I think we've had a

really skewed picture toward the problem end and it isn't that there aren't challenges, um, but the elders I've been running into these days - not just in the stories, but ones in bodies - are incredibly alive and positive, and they already know that this can be the best time of life. Where I've seen the most fear is in young people. I think because of the stereotypes.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Susan: You know, the idea of getting old is all wired up with disability and disease and dementia and it isn't that those never happen, but they aren't necessarily the norm.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. I think that we all have a sense that we don't live in a culture, unfortunately, that prepares us very well, or gives us positive messages about aging.

Susan: Yeah. Right. I agree.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Well, you mentioned books. Are there one or two books that come to mind that you would recommend in case any of our listeners want to follow up on what we've been discussing?

Susan: Yeah. For um, men and women, James Hillman's *Force of Character*. . .

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Susan: . . . which is not a very sexy title, but it's a wonderful book on the virtues of aging.

Dr. Dave: Hmm.

Susan: From kind of a Jungian perspective.

Dr. Dave: Hmm.

Susan: Not aging as not being youthful, but what are the qualities and dimensions of age that are wonderful.

Dr. Dave: What was that title again?

Susan: It's called *The Force of Character*. . .

Dr. Dave: The Force of Character. . .

Susan: . . . James Hillman. Terry Apter wrote an interesting book on women at midlife called *Secret Paths* about how women are navigating that passage and I guess I think of the second half of life as 50s on, maybe at this point, and I think they are very connected and I think that the 50s are very different than the 80s from what I can see.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Susan: Another beautiful book on later life is Florida Scott Maxwell's *A Measure of My Days*. It's kind of narrative writing and May Sarton's poetry and writing on 80 and other work she's done. And I think Gene Bolin's work with *Goddesses in Every Woman* and Marion Woodman has written - and she also has an audio series - called *The Crown of Age* that's very inspiring.

Dr. Dave: Yes, I have that series. . .

Susan: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: . . . and it truly is inspiring.

Susan: Yeah. So those are some that leap to mind that I've really enjoyed and gotten a lot from.

Dr. Dave: Well, Susan Stewart, thank you so much for this interview. I've really enjoyed the process.

Susan: Yeah, me too.

Dr. Dave: Consider yourself shrunk and rapped. (laughs)

Susan: (laughs)

Dr. Dave: Or should I say expanded? (laughs)

Susan: (laughs)

Dr. Dave: That's the interview. In my introduction, I forgot to mention that Susan is a member of the psychology faculty at Sonoma State University and I know that you've heard mention of the psychology department at Sonoma State University and several of these podcasts. This is the institution that I've been associated with for many years, so it's only natural that I would start out close to home because there are many extraordinary individuals there that I want to share with you, but don't despair, don't think that our focus is going to be terribly narrow. Indeed, I will be networking out across the whole country and indeed, to other countries as well as, in fact, I've already done. So, don't think that you're gonna have just the total parochial

point of view here focusing only on Sonoma State University, as wonderful as that psychology department is. And also I want to mention that Susie is just the first of many women that I plan to interview. I know that the early podcasts were a little heavy on the male side, but that is changing. You might know that in addition to being a psychologist, I am also a market researcher and next week I'm going to be in Beverly Hills at a market research conference and while there, I intend to collar some of my colleagues who are also psychologists and market researchers, and to interview them about how they see these two worlds coming together, their take on consumer psychology, etc.