Shrink Rap Radio #223, Nov. 13, 2009. Seeking Wisdom in Extreme Solitude

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka "Dr. Dave" interviews Dr. Robert Kull
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Jo Kelly)

Excerpt: *"Self or no self? This seeming dichotomy seems from an all or nothing thinking. It's actually a sliding scale: a cline. Little by little I open to the universal ebb and flow, then it gets too hard and I shut back down. Then that gets too tight, and I open back up. Cycles of closing and opening, like relationships, like the tides and the seasons. Morning head and afternoon head. Small mind, Big Mind.*

During this year I've repeatedly resisted giving myself to the freedom of the unknown, and over and over I've let go and stepped off the edge: physically (opening to the wind, going to the glacier, giving up food treats, and the cabin's comforts); emotionally (giving up email, self analysis, and thinking about the future); intellectually (giving up reading); spiritually (giving up the security of Buddhism to just be here alone in the wilderness.).

My craving for answers is really a longing for security. When I let go of that need and step into the unknown, into the unknowing and trust I'm much more relaxed and peaceful."

Introduction: That was the voice of my guest Dr. Robert Kull. Robert Kull Ph.D. teaches through an online university and is author of the 2009 book, *Solitude: Seeking Wisdom in Extremes*. His website is **http://www.bobkull.org**

Years after a motorcycle accident left him with one leg, Bob Kull travelled to a remote island in the Patagonia wilderness with supplies to live completely alone for a year. He sought to experience the effects of deep solitude on the body and mind and to find answers to the spiritual questions that had plagued him his entire life. With only a cat and his thoughts as companions, he wrestled with inner storms while the wild forces of nature raged around him. The physical challenges were immense, but the struggles of mind and spirit pushed him to the limits of human endurance.

Dr. Kull has spent years wandering North and South America, working as a scuba instructor, wilderness guide, construction worker, dishwasher, truck driver, bartender, painter, fire fighter, and professor. He began undergraduate studies at age forty and now holds a Ph.D. from the University of British Columbia.

Dr. Dave: Dr Robert Kull, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Kull: Thanks Dave, it's good to be here.

Dr. Dave: You have a very interesting story to tell, and so I'm really pleased to have this opportunity to speak with you.

I've been reading your fascinating book which is titled "Solitude" and which recounts your year long adventure in the wilds of Patagonia. It's in the form of a journal. Do I understand correctly that you were able to submit this journal as your doctoral dissertation at the University of British Columbia?

Kull: Yes, they finally accepted it. There was a little bit of resistance – well actually quite a bit of resistance – partly it was the format. As you know in academic work, normally the umbrella is a conceptual structuring. You have a theoretical notion, and then you present that, and within that you use journal entries, or interviews or whatever to flesh out and support the theoretical approach. But the difficulty with that was, the longer I was in solitude the more I realized I knew less and less, and that I wasn't finding the conceptual answers that I thought I was going to go find. And what I was learning was coming to me through my daily living; was arising as much through my body and heart as through the mind.

So I sat for just about a year in front of my computer trying to figure out how I was going to do a dissertation, and little by little I came to realize that the journal had to be the heart of it because that's where my learning and teaching was set; that was the ground for it. And that was a bit of a struggle to get that to be in the body, rather than as a huge appendix that no-one would ever read.

The other thing that was a problem was just the fundamental structure of the whole field work, to be both the researcher as well as the subject of my own research. Some people thought that was just a little bit circular perhaps.

Dr. Dave: Yes, I can imagine. Hearkening back to my own graduate school experiences, both as student and later as faculty, I could see where this would have been a hard idea to sell in the first place. How did you pull that off?

Kull: Well it was patience more than anything.

Dr. Dave: You wore them down (laughs).

Kull: Yes, that's exactly right. I basically just wore them down. And coming in as a mature student; I don't think I would have gotten away with it if I was in my twenties.

Dr. Dave: Plus, you were in an interdisciplinary degree, right? Initially I had just kind of assumed that you were a psychologist, but really it was an interdisciplinary program, right?

Kull: Yes, I have undergraduate degrees in psychology and biology, and really it was just a number of serendipitous movements that brought me to the University of British Columbia. I actually started out in forestry and then it was clear that this wasn't going to fly in forestry, so I shifted to interdisciplinary studies. Because it wasn't just the subject matter – exploring the inner world – the whole structure of the dissertation is to include poetry and just lyrical writing in general; that whole attempting through the play of words to get across what is kind of not "get acrossable" in words in some ways.

So I was very careful in choosing a committee. I didn't get any experts, I got only people that I could really talk with that I felt were up for an adventure; that were just open minded, who didn't have a set agenda about how the world is but who were willing to explore with me. And the default setting was, we are not guaranteeing a Ph.D. out of this, it sounds like a fascinating project and we are going to support you, but we are not going to guarantee a Ph.D. and there is no funding, you have to fund it yourself.

So a lot of it after that was just leaning against what seemed like solid walls until they sort of dissolved, and became doorways.

Dr. Dave: And you were in your fifties, right?

Kull: Yes I started my Ph.D. when I was in my mid fifties, and I started my undergraduate when I was forty. I was teaching scuba diving in the Caribbean and I wiped out on my motorcycle. Some drunk ran over me so I ended up in the hospital for a year getting the leg amputated; and I lost my scuba business, and decided since I can't walk very well I'll try the intellectual world. I had dropped out of Berkeley when I was nineteen or so. I just fell in love with academics for a while, until I started recognizing how disconnected it was from my own life. It was just theory, and abstract notions; so when I went on to graduate school my bottom line was I'm not checking myself at the door anymore. That my basic thing was: I'm

bringing all of me into this process, and so the university is going to have to deal with that.

Dr. Dave: That's really great. That's one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you. I think showing that kind of courage and authenticity you know at mid life is a good example for me and for my listeners

Kull: I just had no choice. It wasn't courage so much – I just had no choice – it was just what I had to do.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Kull: And also I grew up in a conflicted, born again Christian family – my mom wasn't but my dad was – and I always felt disappeared in that situation, that I couldn't be who I felt myself to be; and that's probably one of the reasons I started spending long periods of time alone in the wilderness. So I've got a hair trigger on that side of things, of being denied the possibility of being who I authentically am; and so in some ways it can be seen that I went overboard in this project and just demanding that I bring all of myself into the process. And I'm not saying that everybody should do that but I certainly think there should be that opportunity for people that want to do that in the academic world, because the academic world claims, whether it be in science or natural to be studying the universe, and yet there is huge swathes that are denied and rejected as subjects for study in many schools of exploration.

Dr. Dave: I totally agree, and that's one of the things that's sort of driven my quest in this podcast series, is to present a much broader picture of psychology, that embraces not only the objective and the scientific, but also subjective explorations.

Kull: Absolutely. In some ways there is no pure objectivity – that's a dream – and what we call objectivity is a bunch of us have experiences, and we compare our experiences and when we find common ground we say, this must be objective reality. But how can we ever possibly know that we have found objective reality? We have the experience of it but then our experience changes. We think this is how the world is, and we are damn sure of it and then all of a sudden something happens and we go, "oh the world isn't how I thought it was at all."

Dr. Dave: And this may in fact play in a bit to the fact that you are a practitioner of Buddhist meditation I believe?

Kull: Yes.

Dr. Dave: And I am wondering how much of a role did that play in your desire for a year of solitude?

Kull: It played not so much a role I don't think in my desire, but it was an enormously valuable tool in pulling it off.

So the drive, the fundamental drive was when I was 28 I was working as a logger on Vancouver Island, and being a macho and doing all that stuff, and something was happening that I just felt that I really needed to spend time with myself – significant time – and I had spent up to a week by myself but nothing really long.

It was one of those times where we feel like a passenger in our own life, that we are almost a spectator watching our life unfold, and I felt carried along as I bought a canoe – I had never really canoed much, a little bit but not much – and talked to people where I could go and not see anyone for three months, and got food and headed out into the bush of British Columbia. And I almost didn't come back, because I really didn't know what I was up to. I had a little bit of inner exploration but not much, and it had been years previously – and so I was strongly wedded to this kind of macho image of who I thought I was, and after about a month and a half out there things really started to fall apart. And I was identified with my self-image and so when that started to crumble, one of the powers of solitude is that in our culture as you know, we reflect, we mirror back to each other the image we project. Whether it's a favour or not it's what we do for each other, to help each other hold our personas in place. So you project to me how you want to see yourself and I support that, and then you do that for me.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Kull: And that doesn't happen in solitude, nature doesn't do that.

Dr. Dave: That's right.

Kull: so things start falling apart, this self image starts to crumble, and to the extent that we are identified with it – and when I say "we", I mean "me" you know, I'm speaking from what I know personally, and it seems as though it's probably common, but I don't know. So it's kind of a generalized "we" but it's not an insistence that this is how it is, it's a suggestion that this is how it is, because this is how it worked for me – and so this starts falling apart. And there was this real sense for me of terror, of

existential terror, of annihilation, that I was going insane, I was going to die out there.

Whether it was serendipity or grace or whatever I came through that, I reached a moment where I had to call out for help because I thought a bear was going to eat me, and I was just on the edge of just raw panic.

Dr. Dave: Was this during the year, or was this during an earlier ...?

Kull: No this was in my twenties, and this is what pushed me into wanting to go for a year, because at that point there was this incredible transformation of consciousness; and this sense of just being woven into the universe, and not being alien any longer, and vulnerable but that the universe was my home and it was all a flowing whole that I was part of. And that came and went during the next three weeks, but there was a sense that some day I would like to spend a year alone in the wilderness, and that took about 25 years to come to fruition, I did a lot of other things in between.

Dr. Dave: Well it's such a rare thing, you know. We are programmed so deeply to be social creatures. I recently heard that solitary confinement in prisons is now considered to be torture, just because we are so deeply programmed to be social, and that isolation can drive us to madness. You weren't imprisoned, but you were in solitary.

Kull: I think there is an enormous difference between choosing solitude and having it forced on you – just enormous. It's like being shipwrecked, or choosing to go, sort of a thing – there is no comparison. If you are fortunate and strong, if you can have solitude forced on you and then choose it during the process – wonderful – but I don't think many people have that capacity. And it's also different being locked up in a little concrete cell, and being out in the wilderness, because I certainly wasn't alone, I was surrounded by life.

There are many, many stories of Hindus and Buddhists who lock themselves up in caves and somebody brings them food once a day and they spend years in there, and they have chosen and developed the skills to explore their inner life, their inner world. But if you don't have any notion of that, and your whole attention is focussed on the concrete walls around you, and the lack of any input – yes, horrible.

Dr. Dave: I have always delighted in the story about the Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli, who is known for an approach called Psychosynthesis,

and the story as I heard it was that he got imprisoned by the Fascists, they threw him into prison for some number of years, and his response was, "oh I've always been so busy in my psychiatric practice, at last I have a chance to meditate."

Kull: Yes, when I think of prison, and what we think of as rubbing shoulders, or other parts of our bodies unfortunately with some of the inmates in there, I would kind of think like I may prefer solitary. It might be a lot more relaxing than having to deal with all the macho pushing and shoving stuff, psychological and physical that is going on.

Dr. Dave: As you suggested, probably depends a lot on how we frame it.

Kull: Absolutely. It's just like pleasure and pain: the same sensation we interpreted as pleasure or pain, physical sensation, depending on how we frame it. Because I explored this, there was a lot of pain in this year, and I explored both the difference and the similarities between excitement and fear, and pleasure and pain; and I think a huge amount of it is whether we choose it or not; whether we have a sense of efficacy in our choices. So something that is shoved on us, and that we don't have any control, we are at the mercy of, is often interpreted as pain. Where if it is something we have chosen, the same physiological sensations can be interpreted as intense pleasure.

Dr. Dave: Therefore we need to choose what we have, right? (laughing)

Kull: That's exactly right (laughing), that's the challenge.

Dr. Dave: Let's back up just a little bit. How did you come to choose Patagonia for your year long adventure?

Kull: After I graduated from McGill with undergraduate degrees, I applied for and was accepted to go on to graduate school, and I got a scholarship/fellowship but every place I checked they were hooked into the neo-Darwinian evolutionary scheme of things. It was problematic for me because of this first experience in my twenties where the world was no longer a collection of individual organisms competing with each other, but each organism was a manifestation of an underlying unity; and there seemed to be some inherent intelligence in this whole process, it didn't just seem to be random mutation and natural selection.

In my undergraduate biology there was no exploration of that at all, and if you even began to suggest that you were considered cuckoo and a

creationist, etc etc, if there was any kind of intelligence inherent in the universe.

So when I applied for grad schools I was accepted but I couldn't find a place that wasn't locked into that paradigm; and I thought I don't want to spend a huge amount of time and effort adding my little block to a structure that doesn't really make sense to me.

So I went travelling for a couple or three years, and I thought I was going to Mexico for three months and I ended up gone for a couple of years, and ended up in Tierra del Fuego and came up the Patagonian coast, the Chilean coast in a ferry – there is a ferry that plies that coast – and I just fell in love with it. It's astonishingly beautiful and there is nobody there.

There is an area from the crest of the Andes out to the ragged edge, the western edge of the archipelago – it's a fractured coastline like the coast of Alaska, Northern British Columbia – and there is just nobody in there. It's a hundred, hundred and fifty miles wide, and probably close to a thousand miles north to south, and there is one little town and occasional boats, fishermen wander through, and there is no logging or mining, and no aeroplanes, and it was just amazing.

I thought wow, this could be where I come. And during that trip up the coast these different threads of my life: this desire to spend a year in solitude, and go on to a graduate degree – because my original notion was to do an animal behavior study, and take myself into the wilderness because the field work I had done before you go out during the day to study an organism, then you come back into the human camp. And I wanted to really embed myself into the natural, non-human world and bring myself as the researcher into the process, and bring some of the social science understandings of the role of the researcher into the natural science process; because usually in natural science the researcher is just invisible, there is an assumption of an objective world and the consciousness of the researcher and the perspective is not really included much.

Dr. Dave: So how long did it take you to prepare for your trip?

Kull: Well, my life, of course.

Dr. Dave: (laughing) Yes.

Kull: Because apart from the academics there is all the survival stuff. The need to be able to survive alone in the wilderness: both camping and

fishing, and building a shelter, and repairing stuff; and then all the internal stuff.

The actual academic preparation was about three and a half years I guess, longer than I expected. What happened during that time is that I realized this notion of doing a biological animal behavior study but including myself as the researcher and my own shifts of consciousness, either I wasn't up to it or I had lost interest in it, or both. And I decided that the organism I really wanted to study was myself. Little by little I shifted; and of course I lost all my funding when I did that – because funding is how the academic world keeps researchers in line – and so once I went all wingy on them, you know.

Dr. Dave: So how long did it take you to gather the materials, because you did have to build the shelter, and you had to be able to get about; how much physical preparation did it take?

Kull: Not terribly long. I made lists for a couple of years, when I would get totally sick of the academic reading I would go look at maps. For quite a while I wasn't sure if I was going to stay here in British Columbia or go down. It would have been way easier to stay here, but the more I read about the coast of British Columbia I realized there is a fair amount of traffic. There is a lot of aeroplanes and boats, and mining, and logging; and if I really wanted solitude, if I really wanted to step off the edge and be completely alone for the year I was going to have to go a lot further away.

Dr. Dave: Yes it's getting harder and harder to find.

Kull: Yes very much harder to find. You have to go into an extreme climate that is real difficult to get to. But I made lists, I would look at maps and I would make lists, and when I finally got around to shopping and organizing the lists I guess there was about three or four months of active preparation up here. Then once I got down to southern Chile I shipped a couple of crates of stuff down, and once I got down I was in a city down there right at the bottom of South America – Punta Arenas – for another six weeks buying additional stuff. So all my heavy stuff – the food, the lumber etc for the shelter – I got all that stuff down there.

Dr. Dave: Yes, yes.

Now you have already made reference to the fact that as a result of an accident you had to have part of a leg amputated, so as if living in the wilderness isn't sufficiently daunting, you were further encumbered by having lost part of one of your legs.

Kull: Yes.

Dr. Dave: How much trouble did that – I mean just the thought of going off into the wilderness and being all alone, and having that extra burden, I don't know, to me that's a pretty striking part of your story, I must say. How much trouble did the leg end up giving you?

Kull: A lot. The leg is one of the fundamental reasons that I wanted to be on the water. Otherwise, it's easier to find solitude if you are willing to inland someplace, but any place you can drive to – if there's a road then somebody's going to show up, and I just can't carry huge amounts of stuff for long distance any more. So I needed to be in a place where I could get around by boat, and that's one of the main reasons I chose the coast. The other was the more modulated temperatures – it doesn't get to 30 below zero on the coast – although the climate where I was was just ferocious. Huge wind – it's the windiest place on earth – and the ocean froze sometimes, and it rained and rained. It was raw.

Dr. Dave: Well it ended up being a much harsher environment than you expected, right?

Kull: Oh yes. They warned me, but I just didn't – it didn't compute. (laughing)

Dr. Dave: It's not in your nature to listen to warnings, right? (laughing)

Kull: Right, (laughing) that's right. And the three days I came up the coast on the ferry that I mentioned, happened to be three of the nice days of the year, so I had this kind of search image inside of me that it was chilly, but it was blue sky and wonderful; and that was kind of what I expected.

Dr. Dave: Oh my goodness.

Kull: Yes, so the problem with the leg: there were a couple of things, one is my balance isn't nearly as good as it used to be; and probably even more significant that I didn't realize it at the time – I have to wear as light a boot as I can find, because any extra weight at the end of that lever that is the prosthetic leg adds a huge amount of effort. So the boots I took, the rubber boots – and I didn't realize I was going to be spending virtually all my time in rubber boots because of the wet – they didn't have Vibram soles, and on the rocks there is micro algae and so it was incredibly slippery and I fell several times.

Several years previously I had, working as a logger, torn the rotator cuff in my right shoulder and I re tore it badly, and then I fell again and tore the one in my left shoulder. Both of those were significant events in terms of the quality of my experience. There was a lot of physical pain during the first six months, because I couldn't stop working to let things heal: I had to be out fishing, and getting firewood, and finish building my shelter; and every time things would start feeling better I would re injure it.

So that was probably the most significant impact the prosthetic leg had, that indirect influence of causing a fall, and damaging my shoulders again.

Dr. Dave: Yes and it was painful to read that part of the journal. I felt like I was in some sense on the journey with you, and saw you struggling to kind of meditate away, or meditate through, or try to do something to cope with the pain. And it was painful to read in that way.

Kull: Yes, and it was intended to be.

Dr. Dave: Yes (laughing) well you succeeded!

Kull: I figured, if I have to go through this – damn it – the reader is going through it with me (laughing).

It was, as always, a huge amount of the distress of pain is the kind of "why me" mindset that goes along with it – this taking it personally, as though the universe is being unfair to me. And when I was able to let go of that, and really deeply embrace the understanding that pain is inherent in living, there is no way around it.

Some of us experience more than others, but our culture we have this kind of fantasy that somehow we can get away from pain, and it always catches up with us: psychological, spiritual, physical pain. We try to drug it away, and then essentially we go to sleep on ourselves. We lose consciousness by trying to escape immediately pain, and then more metaphysically death, the end of our existence.

So for me, a lot of the year was exploring that sense of vulnerability, and sense of my own temporariness in the universe, and that that doesn't have to be a terrifying experience. If we can let go of our ego in the here and now, and this sense of self protection, and if we can choose to let that go, then the flow of life and death loses a huge amount of its sting; and so does pain.

Dr. Dave: And you also in the midst of that you had to deal with a lot of fear, right? That was sort of at the root of a lot of what you were experiencing?

Kull: Yes, and I still question the relationship of fear and anxiety. The immediacy of fear is in some ways not a problem – something comes up, and the adrenalin rushes, and we deal with the situation – it's the kind of grinding anxiety of "what if" that poisons us and our consciousness.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Kull: That was a huge part of this; and it's at that level, the sense of having to embrace death, at a deep level of recognizing death as an ally. I don't have a lot of interest in Buddhist theology of reincarnation in terms of what happens after we physically die, but certainly reincarnation is active in the here and now. Every moment we have to die to this moment in order to be alive to the next moment.

To the extent we cling to the past in our conceptual notions of how the world is, it takes us out of living in the present, and this flow of life, this immediacy of spontaneity of life. And for me I slip back into that kind of dead-ish state over, and over. It's not like having an enlightening experience and then be fixed for ever, that has just not been my experience.

Dr. Dave: A few nights ago I realized that I had some resistance to doing some more reading in your book. Then as I looked at my resistance, sort of what my conscious thought initially was, "Oh there is too much fear in here, and this guy is having to deal with all this fear." Then I confronted myself and said, why is this bothering me? And what it did was put me in touch with how fearful I am.

Most of the time I am not in touch with that, and not aware of it – I'm reasonably well defended – but at three in the morning when I wake up in the middle of the night and all my defences seem to have escaped me, and in some past psychedelic bad trips when I was totally naked against that fear.

So I find in myself that fear, the kind of fear, gnawing anxiety that you are talking about is somewhere at the root; and maybe it is for all of us, I'm not sure.

Kull: Just as an aside, I have just finished reading a fascinating story of a father and his son, Canadians, that in 1981 or 1982 paddled a canoe from

Winnipeg in Canada down the Mississippi River, around the Caribbean and up the Orinoco and to the Rio Negro and down the Amazon. It was twelve thousand miles; it took them two years. It's a journal format, and he talks about their terror – frequent, frequent terror – of huge seas in the Caribbean, and pirates and military guys threatening to murder them.

But he doesn't seem to have that second level, at least as it's written about, of feeling fearful of the fear; of feeling bad. Like I have this notion of being a coward, and all tangled up in my own cowardice, and it just didn't seem to have that impact on them. They were definitely troubled by the situation and the fear, but it was just part of what they were doing. So I thought that was a very interesting thing to read about for me.

In terms of fear for me is the whole notion of projection; that's one of the things I discovered in the three month retreat in B.C. and that I've been working with for years. I project my fear. So I have an experience of fear and it's extremely uncomfortable, so I project it out that I am afraid of something external: bears, or the wind, or other people, or whatever situations; and that has the advantage that I can theoretically escape. So if I move myself away from the source that I have projected my fear onto, then I don't have to feel afraid anymore. The problem is of course it always catches up.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Kull: We project onto something else, and we can't do anything with that.

So a major part of this year was sitting with the fear, and not doing anything with it. Not trying to confront it, not trying to escape from it – because confronting our fear is just another way of not experiencing it – so there was a sense of simply allowing myself to experience the fear in and of itself. Not even the experience of being afraid of something, but simply experience the fear. And what happened over and over, it's in some ways very parallel to depression, is when I allowed myself to settle into it – not with any feelings of confronting or escaping, simply experiencing – it would open out. This knot of fear, or knot of depression would open out into an experience of joy and wonder and lightness.

So in some ways, if in fact – and I don't know that this is so, but it's a kind of an accepted understanding – is that we are afraid of the unknown, that the unknown generates fear. That if we are exploring the sense of aliveness, and the sense of spontaneity and living moment by moment, the sense of the spiritual – whether we call it God or absolute consciousness, or whatever –

that is all mysterious stuff; it's not something we can control or know about or define. So fear is the gateway to that. Instead of something to be pushed away it is something to be embraced and rejoice in, because it's the gateway through which we can come into contact with the unknowable.

Dr. Dave: While we are on this spiritual vein here – and it's all spiritual vein – something I wanted to explore with you is that I got the impression that you were really hoping for some major spiritual breakthrough as a result of having so much time to meditate. And as I read through the journal entries I really got a sense that you were burdened by what I would have to call a sort of Buddhist guilt. That you weren't present enough, that you couldn't meditate all your physical pains and fears away, and so on.

Kull: Absolutely, absolutely.

I think that in some ways our western culture is so grounded in this notion of progress. The Buddhist enlightenment – or whatever religion or spiritual practice – has been smuggled in to our culture as a process of progress. Enlightenment is a destination, and it is a final state; that we reach this final state of enlightenment where non dual consciousness and we are not caught up in our comings and goings. So that was my goal.

Not only that but to come to understand how to control that shift into that state of consciousness, so that I could kind of have a button on my arm, and push the button and I would shift into that. Then I could come back and teach other people about it. I had certainly read other groovy teachers that had found this answer; and they had this system, and they were coming back and you could touch the hem of their robe or join their process.

So it was that sense of, "I will find out how to teach this to others, and that will be my gift to share with others as well." And that's just not what happened.

So there was a sense of profound disappointment during the year that this experience was not living up to my expectations.

Then slowly I had to let go of that and just start experiencing things as they were, and then as I did that things started to change, but not in the way I had expected. I wasn't finding conceptual answers. I wasn't finding this perfect end state, but rather coming to allow myself to experience what actually was going on with a more open heart. And the recognition that everything comes and goes. Some days it's just flat and closed down, and other days it

is wide open and feeling woven into the universe. That for me is just how it is.

Also as far as I can tell there are no one, two, three steps to make all this happen. The spiritual journey is a personal journey. It's like learning to dance. Nobody can teach you how to dance: some people like free form dancing and go their own way; others can learn the basic steps; but sooner or later you have to come into relationship with your body and with the music, and allow yourself to experience it on your own.

And I think the same with spiritual practice. Each of us has to come into relationship with our own lives, and it's not easy. It's like a kid growing up, there are no short cuts to growing up in the physical world; and that's my sense in the spiritual world as well, we just have to explore it all and find our way through.

Dr. Dave: Well I totally agree.

I'd like to give our listeners a window into your writing, into your process. So I'd more or less at random ask you to read one entry from your Journal from January 24th 2002, which was in the last two or three days I gather of the trip. So if you would read those few paragraphs I'd really like that.

Kull: OK.

January 24th 2002. I returned at dawn from the island to the north of here. I went at dusk the day before yesterday and slept under a clear sky and a half moon. Last night it clouded over and started to blow. I had no sleeping bag or pad, but did the best I could with a piece of plastic in a rocky nook.

Although I usually spend most of my day outside or on the porch, I feel I've become too attached to the security and comfort of the cabin, so for now I'm staying outside as much as possible. I didn't come here to live in a cabin in the wilderness, but to join the ebb and flow of nature. The climate though is so intense I've spent more time than planned behind closed door, shutting out cold and Cat alike.

It sometimes seems I've always been homeless. But this isn't quite so. What I've done is cycled between homelessness and close attachments. When wandering free and easy, I love it and dread being closed in and tied down. Then I reach a point where physical, psychological and emotional comfort and security – no matter how disagreeable they sometimes are –

seem very attractive, and I jump into a new relationship, a new job, a new life. I lose all balance and tether myself so tightly that I eventually become restless and break free again.

It's as though these are separate worldviews and personalities. One loves security, my own nest, friends and lovers, peer respect, etc. When in that mode, the thought of wandering homeless and alone with all the fears and discomforts frightens me. Yet once I set off I love being out there, and the comforts and relationships I have left behind lose importance. Then in some vital way there isn't any out there. It's all right where I am.

I experience the same apparent dichotomy between security of a contained, familiar Self – no matter how uncomfortable at times – and the longing, fear, and joy of letting go into the mysterious unknown of the flowing now. What I forget over and over is that in surrendering to homelessness there is the possibility of being at home everywhere.

Self or no self? The seeming Dichotomy seems from an All or nothing thinking. It's actually a sliding scale: a cline. Little by little I open to the universal ebb and flow, then it gets too hard and I shut back down. Then that gets too tight and I open back up. Cycles of closing and opening, like relationships, like the tides, and the seasons. Morning head and afternoon head. Small mind, Big Mind.

During this year I've repeatedly resisted giving myself to the freedom of the unknown, and over and over I've let go and stepped off the edge: physically (opening to the wind, going to the glacier, giving up food treats, and the cabin's comforts); emotionally (giving up email, self analysis, and thinking about the future); intellectually (giving up reading); spiritually (giving up the security of Buddhism to just be here alone in the wilderness.)

My craving for answers is really a longing for security. When I let go of that need and step into the unknown, into the unknowing and trust, I'm much more relaxed and peaceful.

Defencelessness is a question I've been struggling with for days. If I stop defending myself, will nature roll over me? I think the problem is seeing myself as a separate thing instead of as a process that's an integral part of nature. Just because I let go of the conceptual idea of who I am doesn't mean I stop caring for myself physically. The actual processes of life continue. My immune system continues to function, I wear protective clothing, I'm cautious while walking on slippery rocks and while paddling

the kayak. Rather than defending myself against a world I imagine as my enemy – I buffer myself as much or as little as I feel necessary for survival.

Dr. Dave: Very nice. Thank you for reading that.

Kull: My pleasure.

Dr. Dave: It really touches on a lot of the themes that we have been talking about. I was struck by "morning head and afternoon head". You said, "like the tides and seasons. Morning head and afternoon head. Small mind and big mind." And it reminds me of long bicycling trips that I took some years ago and the morning head and afternoon head – in the morning full of energy, and bright optimism, and everything is wonderful, and the open road; and then as the afternoon comes on, and fatigue sets in, and the picture kind of changes. So that's what that suggested for me.

Kull: And that's just the opposite of what I experienced.

Dr. Dave: How so?

Kull: Over and over, my morning head is "small mind". Anxieties, feelings of alienation, and then as the day progresses, typically especially in the wilderness things open up, and by late evening often that is the time of feeling the universal flow of the world. And I go to sleep feeling that wonder and aliveness, and wake up the next morning and it's as though I have to begin the journey all over again.

Dr. Dave: Oh, that's fascinating; yes totally.

Kull: So there is this question – what happens when I'm asleep? What's going on in my sleep to bring about this shift – and that is an ongoing and interesting question.

Something I just discovered that is kind of neat, is I don't typically remember dreams. I've gone through periods of my life where I have seriously worked with dreams, but unless it's a pretty powerful dream I don't typically remember it. But one of the things I just started noticing the last few months, is when I wake up and do remember a dream, and I'm in that kind of half state of half asleep and half awake, I start to adjust my dreams so that I look better in them.

Dr. Dave: That's what Freud claimed we do! (laughing)

Kull: OK, I didn't realize he said that.

Dr. Dave: Well not in quite that way, but he felt that we dress the dream up, that there is this internal dream censor if you will, that kind of dresses the dream up so that we are not overcome by anxiety.

Kull: I hadn't thought about it in terms of Freud and censorship, but one of the things is at first when I caught myself doing this I thought it was pretty sleazy to put spins on things – essentially dishonest – since it hadn't been a very conscious process. But once I recognized that there was a sense of, oh maybe it's a way of working with the unconscious, of kind of bringing some light down in there.

In terms of finding an answer, finding what I went looking for in the wilderness, I went to find a conceptual answer. How to control this shift from small, self-centered, anxiety based, alienated mind, into Big Mind of feeling woven into the universe; of feeling alive and filled with wonder and joy and feeling the universe is sacred. I went to try to learn to control that shift, and that didn't happen. But what seemed to happen was in moving back and forth between those states of mind, those styles of consciousness – the boundary between them became more porous – and the poem that there is no path, that we lay down the path by the walking – seemed to be what was happening as I moved back and forth across this boundary between different states of consciousness. I intuitively learned how to make that happen, even though I can't explain it conceptually and don't even understand it intellectually.

It's a kind of process of surrendering to the world. It's not a matter of control, but surrendering and allowing the world to pick me up and carry me along. That's what I try to do in the book as well – is invite readers to go with me as I move back and forth, in and out of these different states of mind - so readers as well can have that experience with me.

Dr. Dave: It really succeeds in that way. It's very raw, and it feels very honest to me.

Have you been able to hang on to that now that you are back?

Kull: I think that hanging on to it is exactly the problem.

Dr. Dave: Yes (laughing), I sort of felt that as I was asking the question; I realised.

Kull: Right; because it's letting go that is the core of the journey.

We live our lives hanging on. Whether we are hanging on to physical pleasure, or experiences for spiritual experiences – it's that exact thing of hanging on that causes the problem. And it seems to me that's why we can't control this shift, because the very entity – whether we call it ego, or self, or whatever – that wants to hang on, that's what we are trying to let go of. That's what is causing the problem; that is the core of the knot. That is the knot. Even when that entity is trying to surrender, trying to let go so that there can be this sense of flowing freedom, it's a Catch 22 – it's a cosmic Catch 22.

That's the dance: of how do we move ourselves to that place of actually surrendering, without surrendering so that we can get something; without the surrender being a manipulation.

Early on it was essentially just beating my head against the cosmic wall, until I was so exhausted that I let go. There was a moment of kind of a crack in my armour, and now there is less of that – there is more of a relaxation, of that boundary line has become more porous for me. There is a sense of holding on, of clinging, and over and over of letting go; and the understanding that in some ways many of us treat nature as though it were our church. We can critique Christians or whoever for thinking that God only lives in church, in this building; that they have to go to this special building to find God. Yet we do the same thing with nature – as though cities aren't sacred, as though spirit doesn't live in cities – and I'm caught up in that as well, that I find a forest more beautiful than a concrete wall.

It's an ongoing challenge for me to try to allow myself to be wherever I am, because it's right here and right now that we find what's always been here. We keep looking out there someplace, or in the future, but it's becoming still and it seems to me that it's in allowing myself to become still that I become aware of what's always present.

One of the things that we have touched on, but that I think in today's social context, cultural context, that was a major part of what I was doing was exploring my relationship with the non-human world. There are so many theories, and rules, and regulations about not destroying our environment; but I think a fundamental thing that we often overlook is the actual, direct experience of belonging.

It's like family – if something happens to a family member we are immediately, seriously concerned. If something happens to a stranger we

are intellectually concerned, but generally don't have that same powerful identity. So a large part of what I was working with was actually experiencing myself directly as part of the non-human world, and to explore that. So that also is a big part of the book, of our relationship and trying to move ourselves to experience life as sacred, so we don't continue to destroy it.

Dr. Dave: Well Robert, I think that is probably a wonderful place for us to close, even though I could go on asking you many more questions, because I certainly have lots more; but I think this is a good place for us to wrap it up.

So Dr. Robert Kull, thanks so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Kull: Well it's been my pleasure – I've really enjoyed our conversation, it's been great. So thanks for inviting me on.