

Madness Radio: My Mysterious Son - A Life-Changing Passage Between Schizophrenia and Shamanism

Host: Will Hall

Guest: Dick Russell

Topic: Russell's book "My Mysterious Son" about his son Franklin's journey

Introduction

Will Hall: What does it mean to be called crazy in a crazy world? Listen to Madness Radio, voices and visions from outside mental health. Welcome to Madness Radio. This is your host, Will Hall. Today my guest is Dick Russell, author of 17 books on subjects ranging from the JFK assassination to biographies of James Hillman and Robert F. Kennedy Jr., and the migration of Grey Whales. Today we're discussing his book "My Mysterious Son: A Life-Changing Passage Between Schizophrenia and Shamanism" about his son Franklin.

Dick Russell: Thanks so much, Will. Good to be with you today.

Will Hall: I really appreciate your persistence in joining the show. There's so much we could talk about - we could do a whole show on James Hillman - but I think people haven't heard about your book "My Mysterious Son." I highly recommend it. It's an extremely important book because of the depth of your appreciation for the uniqueness of your son. I don't usually have shows that focus on family members because I like to hear from the person themselves, but I thought your book was so striking and your way of relating to your son was so important for people to learn about.

Dick Russell: I appreciate that. I hope listeners will get at least my perspective, which is quite different than the medical model. Maybe similar to what a lot of people have gone through who have had otherworldly experiences that are unappreciated.

Franklin's Early Signs and Experiences

Will Hall: What do you do as a family member? I would hope that the psychiatric system and family members take guidance from you on how to engage with a son who seems like they're in

a different reality - because maybe they are, and maybe that's valuable in some ways. How did you first discover that your son Franklin was different or not quite fitting the expected normal range?

Dick Russell: Franklin is biracial - his mother is African American and I'm Caucasian. He was raised in an extended family, very bright from birth. Interestingly, when he was born, a close friend said to me, "I think Franklin is really your teacher." In many ways that has proven true - he's taught me that what's called schizophrenia or bipolar disorder is actually someone who is in tune with other worlds that so-called normal people don't see or understand.

From a young age, he exhibited unusual experiences. Shortly before he turned sixteen, he was very nervous but handed me a typewritten sheet describing a vision he'd had the night before. He'd been lying in bed with his eyes closed and passed through a square, then a spiral with protruding rays, then a much larger circle that became a sun. As he moved closer:

"It became a tunnel. This tunnel was as if in space, and nothing else existed. I moved slowly along and through it. All around it was glowing a green-yellowish color. Then there was an opening that I've never seen before, so beautiful I couldn't even imagine. There was a column with a pyramid in front, and more columns on both sides... At this point I was about ten feet above the ground, where there was an open eye, like the one on the dollar bill."

He continued ascending, describing water glistening with sunlight and another tunnel "like a cave, with dips in the earth, although it wasn't musty. It was shiny and full of colors."

Not long after, he came home from school saying, "I can't find my old self again." Despite having had a great summer in Mexico - fishing, learning to surf, getting a full scholarship to a private school in Boston - teachers observed that he sometimes seemed out of touch and unable to focus. One day I found written on his wall in black magic marker: "I'm going to die and the world will be a better place."

The Breakdown and System Response

Will Hall: When he wrote that on the wall - we're talking about shamanism, so I'm thinking about death/rebirth processes. What was the breakdown like? Was he sad, angry, detached?

Dick Russell: The breakdown itself was a detachment. I don't know what he was thinking when he wrote that - I saw it later and was very alarmed. Once hospitalized, he seemed very removed from me and his mom, very paranoid and hearing voices. We didn't know what to do except follow the doctor's instructions. Suddenly he was on three different medications.

This began really tough years - in and out of hospitals, hating medication because it made him feel deadened, yet not knowing what else to do. He lived in group homes at different times. It was a very difficult ten to fifteen-year period.

Will Hall: You were following standard advice, and it sounds like he was experiencing trauma from the system itself.

Dick Russell: He was. He kept a journal where he wrote: "Meditation as opposed to medication - is it the answer, or is a combination of meditation and counseling? Where does bipolar illness come from and why do so many people have it? Is it from abuse? Is it from intense desire? Is it a chemical difference from the norm?" He was speculating about these things in his so-called madness, obviously wrestling with it and trying to figure out what was happening to him.

Will Hall: There's incredible intelligence and creativity. He's questioning that framework while also dealing with stresses of being 15-16, when identity is huge, plus you and his mother had separated.

Dick Russell: We still lived as part of the same extended family - a communal living situation. We weren't together anymore and had both moved on. There was a long period where Eda (his mother, an amazing musician, cellist, singer) and I didn't get along and often differed about what to do about Franklin. I admittedly didn't spend much time with him when he was younger - I was writing, doing what I did. I was happy to let other people raise him.

I discovered later when looking at his journals that he was a better writer than me in many ways. He could really express himself. Here's one example:

"If you're trying to cross a river, you take a boat. If you have no boat, you either make one or swim. If you can't swim, then grab onto a log. If there are no logs, then swing from a vine. If you do not succeed, then try again. If you do not succeed a second time, then ask your neighbor how you will cross the river. If he does not know, then ask someone else. If the whole world doesn't know how to cross that river, then you will either have to give up or invent a new way. You invent because you need. You need because you desire."

Medication Struggles and Alternative Approaches

Will Hall: One of the extraordinary things about your book is there's so much of his own writing and words. He was always showing creativity and imagination from an early stage.

Dick Russell: Yes, and he's still an artist doing very well. He has a shop where he creates unusual sculptures.

Will Hall: [We'll link to it in the description.] So he goes into the system, still struggling to figure out if medications make sense, questioning if it's chemical or something else. It sounds like the most difficult times were when you were all on board with that whole frame and there wasn't anything else being offered.

Dick Russell: That's right. There was a period where he didn't want to be at home anymore. The school he'd been in wouldn't take him back after his breakdown. He did go to a different school - Beacon High School in Boston, for kids with similar difficulties. He saw a therapist regularly, graduated, had a girlfriend, but it was real ups and downs.

Early on they put him on Clozapine, a so-called last resort medication.

Will Hall: An antipsychotic. They'd tried others and he wasn't coming back into so-called normal reality.

Dick Russell: Right. He had so-called delusional thinking, but at the same time he was writing amazing things in his journal. He wrote: "If you're deep as a person, it's sort of like living with your feet in mud for four hours each day. The other part of the day is spent cleaning the feet off."

Another poetic entry: "Your empty core was not the problem. Everyone suffers such human ailments. Your fruitless trail of actual events is what you'll need to repent."

Will Hall: "Fruitless trail of actual events" - that's what you'll have to repent. Wow. Did he grow up religious?

Dick Russell: Not really, but he always had this spiritual side. He was a collector - used to collect fossils on the beach. He always had trouble with focus and finishing problems in school from a young age.

I remember one technique that worked the first time I tried it. One night he was in his room being impossible, angry, wouldn't come to dinner. I went up and decided to enter his world - I started acting like I was talking to the radio, going crazy. He suddenly felt sorry for me, snapped out of it and said, "Dad, are you all right? Are you okay?" It worked that time, but years later the same approach didn't work.

Will Hall: You mention several times that even though he was in these other realities, he had this uncanny capacity to snap into lucidity and communicate absolutely normally when it suited the situation.

Dick Russell: Yes. But he had to stay on medication - we didn't know anything else. He even went through electric shock treatments, which I deeply regret. We didn't know what to do. At one point he was on Zyprexa, which causes tremendous weight gain.

Will Hall: I know about Zyprexa - there was a scandal around it. Eli Lilly wasn't honest about side effects and marketing.

Dick Russell: Exactly. They gave no warnings, knew quite well what that medication did. There was a class action suit and I got Franklin into it - he got a small settlement. I was so pissed off at how this company operated. That was the biggest selling medication in the world.

Earth House and James Hillman's Influence

Dick Russell: There was an important time when Franklin was really not doing well. My brother, who had more money than I did, helped get him into a place called Earth House in New Jersey. It was group living where they emphasized exercise and orthomolecular nutrition. He lost a hundred pounds while there for over a year.

Will Hall: Did they reduce his meds?

Dick Russell: They did, but he still stayed on them to some degree. He'd ballooned up to like three hundred pounds - it was terrible, especially for a young person trying to understand how to manage their body.

Will Hall: [There's an interesting Earth House connection - the caretaker of our Mad Camp retreat center worked there, so there's a possibility he might have met Franklin.]

So you put him in a better environment and he did better, but it was expensive. That says a lot about the system's failings if we're not providing those things for everybody.

Dick Russell: Exactly. Finally, my brother couldn't continue financially. Franklin didn't want to leave Earth House - it was a wonderful place with friends - but we just couldn't continue.

He came back and lived in a group home in the Boston area while I was writing a biography of James Hillman, the depth psychologist and post-Jungian thinker.

Will Hall: Very influential on my own journey. Maybe tell listeners about Jung and how Hillman is distinct, and how Hillman influenced your thinking about your son.

Dick Russell: Hillman was an amazing thinker - one of the great thinkers the world's ever known, though not well known in America (better known in Italy and Japan). He created archetypal psychology and wanted us to get away from monotheism and realize we all have many gods within us that manifest at different times.

He was never my therapist but hugely influential - 21 years older, a mentor in many ways. I wrote a three-volume biography after he passed in 2011.

There was a moment when I went to see James for an interview. We were driving to lunch when he picked up that something was bothering me. He said, "Something's bothering you. Is it your son?" I said yes.

He started talking to me: "Try something different. Don't treat him like the doctors do - like he's afflicted with terrible problems."

Will Hall: Don't talk to him with "How are you feeling today? How can we help you?" - that patient role.

Dick Russell: Exactly. He said if Franklin goes off on tangents - he would often say things like "I built that building over there" when we were driving, making things up, especially in public, which made me cringe - James urged me to just go with wherever he was going.

Will Hall: So-called delusions that maybe have greater depth if we listen more deeply.

Dick Russell: Exactly. That's what James Hillman was urging me to do.

The Hillman Approach and Breakthrough

Will Hall: One of the remarkable things about Hillman is he encourages us to treat the imaginal realm - dreams, fantasy, ideas - as real as this world. He's very open to shamanism and different realities, rather than therapy focused on solving problems in this world. Maybe you need a relationship with images, symbols, gods, and powers in that other world as a way of cultivating your soul.

Dick Russell: Yes, exactly. Here's a passage from my book about this:

Hillman had been a practicing therapist for forty years with broad experience with mental illness. He spoke of how, as years went by, the intensity of schizophrenia lessened, but the personality diminished at the same time. People afflicted often don't grow emotionally beyond their first breakdown.

Hillman didn't necessarily buy into schizophrenia being strictly genetic. He spoke of how mysterious the disease is - doctors don't really know what causes it or what medications work best, coupled with it striking most victims in late teens or early twenties. He seemed to indicate there's a soul choice involved by the individual.

Regarding Frank's unwillingness to take certain medications, Hillman said it's important to "respect resistance" - maybe he knows something we don't. He said regression is critical for recovery - "falling into nothingness, being useless and dirty."

The key was to just go with wherever Franklin was going when we were out together. Have a good time with it, play with it, don't let it make me uptight. Tell him about your day - nobody treats him like a normal person. Just talk to him like you would with anybody.

Once I started doing that, it changed everything. It completely changed my relationship with Frank because he no longer felt judged. I was no longer this cop watching nervously about everything he did and said, which made him do that even more sometimes.

Will Hall: That probably didn't help the paranoia either.

Dick Russell: I'm sure it didn't. I'd been making a big mistake.

I remember one time in an Asian restaurant - he likes Chinese food - he started speaking to the waiter in made-up Chinese. The waiter looked nonplussed and walked away. Later he came back and Franklin says, "Oh, don't worry. You and I are speaking in Mandarin, but he only understands some other Chinese dialect." We started to laugh - it was a wonderful moment. That's what we started to do - we could just have a good time together. That meant the world to both of us.

Family Systems and the Path to Africa

Will Hall: That's a real turning point. I see this a lot in families - getting the focus off "how do I fix this person" and onto "what's in the relationship that I can change? How am I stuck in my way of helping, controlling, fixing, problem-solving?" Shifting into being more playful, taking a different role, maybe even being the one telling your son about your day and asking for advice.

It sounds like it helps reduce stress and fear - less fearful than "what's the right thing to say to help you get out of your condition" and more like "let's be together and enjoy our company and explore this creative world you're presenting." That was a real shift in family system dynamics.

The idea of the soul's code or choosing your parents - it's not that suffering is your fault because you chose it. It's more like there's something here you can make use of for your own growth and development. Maybe there are clues of a direction you should go instead of "I'm failing to be who I'm supposed to be."

When did you start making connections with shamanism and the decision to take Franklin to Africa?

Dick Russell: That emerged after I actually took Franklin to Africa twice. The first time we went with his pediatrician who had grown up in Tanzania. We spent time seeing wildlife.

At the end of that trip - which was a huge breakthrough for me and him - we were at the Ngorongoro Crater. Franklin became more and more distant, and that night he was really angry at me. He was lying on his bed looking around and suddenly started telling me, "I don't like you. I don't like anything about you." I didn't know what I'd done.

He launched into this incredible riff, going way back in time - 16,000 years - to when Africa was first settled, as if he'd been there back then.

Will Hall: Wow.

Dick Russell: I was really scared because I thought I should never have brought him on this trip - he's so far out there now I don't know if he can come back. This will sound cold, but I was sitting across the room and, being a writer, started taking notes on everything he said because it was so extraordinary.

Will Hall: Which is one of the most incredible things about your book - how detailed your documentation is. There are so many quotes and rich descriptions of interactions. It's a tremendously rich book because you're a writer.

Dick Russell: Thanks. I was making notes from the very beginning, desperately trying to figure out what was wrong, thinking maybe there were clues.

He went off talking about the snake god. He said, "Everybody's hypnotized by Dick Russell, Dick Rascal. I probably just gave you all the secrets of Earth. You don't respect me or know me. If you want me to be your son, why do you oppress yourself?" Then he rattled off invented words. I was asking myself, "Who is this that's speaking?" I was getting more scared.

He said, "I try to be nice to you when you boss me around... like that fight we had when I was at Spark School." He went back to a very traumatic event where we actually had a physical fight and almost fell out a window when I was angry at him for listening to rap music, long before his breakdown.

Will Hall: You were angry at him for listening to rap music.

Dick Russell: Yeah, I was not very tolerant as a father during that period.

He said, "I came here 16,000 years ago. It's subliminal and people don't believe it, but it's true. I'm just here suffering right now. I've been dunked, lowered into a position here in Africa."

Will Hall: My God, he's channeling, definitely connecting with history and the ancestors.

Dick Russell: The slave world - completely. He's black, I'm white, I'm this Dick Russell, the rascal saying stop listening to rap music. We start to see this person's psyche is very in touch with reality, but maybe a deeper reality than us ordinary, hypnotized, normal parents might be in touch with.

Dick Russell: Right, exactly. He talked about this clock, saying "I came before Adam. The original king was Alpha. Maybe you could fly me to the Matrix and we'll hang out there a while. I don't want that star destroyed. I'm there right now eating. The three wishes thing. I'm sorry the earth came to love money so much."

I'm sitting there writing all this down when suddenly I heard this cry outside the window - like no cry I'd ever heard. It was like "Ahhhh" - a bird, but otherworldly. I saw this image of a banshee.

I went up to get something to eat, asked if he wanted to come - he didn't. Then suddenly he said, "Well, will you just turn the lights off when you go, please?" He was just back.

Will Hall: Yeah.

Dick Russell: I thought about Stefan, our guide on the trip - a Maasai who got along so well with Franklin because he never questioned anything Franklin said.

Will Hall: This is a black man we're talking about.

Dick Russell: Yes, a Maasai, wonderful guy. I thought maybe I should bring him down to help, but then thought, "Whatever I've got to do, I've got to do it myself."

I went back, sat down. Franklin started heading for his riff again, and suddenly I couldn't take it anymore. I got up, walked to the bed, and said, "Frank, I can't handle this. It's too much for me. You've got to help me. This is driving me crazy. I don't understand the language."

Suddenly he stopped, looked at me and said, "You're crying." I wasn't even aware that I was - I don't know the last time he saw me cry. He said, "Are you having a breakdown?" Suddenly he's the one filled with compassion, in charge.

Will Hall: You switched roles there.

Dick Russell: Completely. I said, "Maybe I am. I don't know." Then he looked at me and said, "Well maybe you're the one who should be hospitalized." I'll never forget it.

Will Hall: Oh my goodness. There we go.

Dick Russell: I'm no longer the father, he's no longer the son - we've completely switched roles.

I later wrote in the book:

What's happened in the room is that I've been forced to let it all be, to let Franklin be Franklin. And he goes a long way toward becoming the plumed serpent that he's talked about in that moment. All of us want spiritual things to be pure, serene. Our heroes and our saints, our holy men and women, our mad monks and priestesses - above it all. They're not. They're all half-crazy Joan of Arcs. But they have a job to do, a job that may last only for a time or a lifetime, which may destroy them or lift them up, as likely to crucify and crush them as to redeem and save them. What we owe them - yes, our own sons and daughters - is to honor them in their calling, serve them, love them, and admit that we are made of different stuff.

Recognition of Franklin's Gifts

Will Hall: Beautiful. There's so much failure to recognize that sometimes people are just very, very different. They may have way more wisdom, intelligence, knowledge, and connection than we can comprehend. They need to be welcomed and accepted in their state rather than forced into the mold of a nine-to-five job or being like their parents.

At some point you're thinking in terms of shamanism because in some cultures, when someone has these qualities or powers, it's crucial to recognize them. It sounds like what you're picking up over and over is that Franklin has incredible psychic, telepathic, ancestral channeling gifts that are like sparks coming off of him.

Dick Russell: There were many times. He used to talk about James Hillman without knowing anything about him. One day sitting in the car, I mentioned James Hillman and he says, "Oh yeah, he wrote the human genome." I said, "No, it was called 'The Soul's Code.'" He says, "Well that's what I mean - the human genome, right?"

Right when James Hillman died, Franklin was suddenly seeing dead people in the carpet where he lived. He was so in tune with my inner and external reality and what I was writing about.

In 2012, I'd met Robert Whitaker, read his books, and was appalled at what psychiatric medications had done to people. I went to a conference in Maine where alternatives were presented. [You might have been there.] I'd just read "The Horse Boy," about taking an autistic son to Mongolia where they ride horses, which totally changed and opened something up in the son.

Will Hall: Riding horses isn't a verbal activity. Being autistic or not is kind of not even relevant if you ride horses well.

Dick Russell: Exactly. There was a woman at the conference who spoke about having a shaman help her condition. I'd never really thought much about it, but my wife Alice and I went to see someone and realized Franklin needed to see someone from an indigenous tradition.

Alice remembered that when I was working on the Hillman biography, there was a man James had known from men's groups - Malodoma Somé, a shaman from West Africa who'd come to the US. He had quite a story, wrote a great autobiography called "Of Water and the Spirit."

Meeting Malodoma Somé

Dick Russell: Malodoma described being taken from his village in Burkina Faso when he was small, raised by Jesuits in another area, then escaping and running away at twenty-one. He made his way back to his village, but they didn't want him back - he didn't even speak the language. He went through the initiation you usually do at 13, but when he was 21.

He was told his grandfather had been a shaman and his mission was "makes friends with the stranger." He got educated at the Sorbonne and Boston University, telling this story to men's groups and becoming well-known in the US for carrying shamanic tradition from West Africa.

He was in Ohio doing a workshop, so I made arrangements to see him. This began an incredible relationship that lasted many years.

Malodoma does divination with a cloth in front of you where you move objects - bones, coins, glass - in a clockwise direction with your strong hand if you're male. He reads the pattern.

What he saw about Franklin was that he was a remarkable person, very in touch with other worlds. But he said, "Your ancestors don't know who he is. They need to give him a place at the table."

I was assigned a series of rituals - go to the beach in Malibu, bring rum and pieces of corn, perform water ritual putting these into the waves. I also had to start communicating with my ancestors, bring out their pictures, do different things.

Will Hall: So the focus had been on Franklin, but now Malodoma is saying, "Hey dad, you need to work your ancestral lineage."

Dick Russell: That's right. It became an amazing experience. I'd never really thought much about my ancestors. I'd separated from my parents in my twenties, went off on my own. I saw them, but didn't really think much about it.

I took Franklin to Jamaica when Malodoma was there and they met - had an amazing time together. Malodoma said it was like meeting a colleague because in indigenous traditions, so-called schizophrenics would be called shamans.

Will Hall: They're very similar in experience and ability to communicate with beings, or they may be in the midst of their initiation process, going through the so-called crazy phase but they'll come out once they're reborn into this reality.

Dick Russell: Exactly.

The Middle Passage Ritual

Dick Russell: One time we were having a really hard time in divination. Malodoma read the pattern, looked at me and said there was something I had to do: "You need to go to the middle passage where Franklin's mother's ancestors crossed in the last century. You have to perform a ritual there. You've got to somehow bridge the gap between the ancestors on her side and yours. You need to obtain a slave shackle and go there and return that shackle to the sea."

I looked at him like, "Are you kidding me? How am I going to do that?" I found a slave shackle actually on eBay and bought it. But when it showed up in the mail, I found I couldn't open it.

Will Hall: You felt so strongly emotionally that you weren't able to open the package.

Dick Russell: I couldn't even open it. I left it sitting on my desk for a long time. Eventually I went to Baltimore where Eda was living, took Franklin with me from Boston, then went off by myself to Cambridge, Maryland, very close to the middle passage.

Eda had by now seen Malodoma herself for divination - we were very much in Malodoma's world.

I'd written a book called "Black Genius and the American Experience" - I've always been drawn to Africa. I wrote it as a response to "The Bell Curve," which tried to say black people aren't as smart as whites - horrible. I wanted to write about great people.

I decided to go to Frederick Douglass's birthplace, then to where Harriet Tubman was from - two people I'd written about. I had the shackle with me in my rental car.

I wasn't welcomed at Douglass's birthplace by people who had taken over the homestead, but I went to the river where Douglass used to fish as a boy. I took the shackle out of its package and went through a whole ritual.

Then I went to the Harriet Tubman Museum in Cambridge, Maryland. While there, they showed a film. Afterwards I went to a plaque on the wall - one plaque. It was a reward from the 1850s for a family of escaped slaves. They were called "mulatto slaves" and it was signed by William Russell.

Now I have no indication that was an actual ancestor of mine, but people often called me Bill when I was growing up. It really did me a turn.

Will Hall: That's a huge synchronicity for sure.

Dick Russell: I was like, "Oh my God."

I went to the water and discovered there was a sailing ship going out the next day - a replica of an 1812 sailing ship. I thought, "They're going out into the middle passage. I'll book a passage on that ship."

That night and next morning I went through inner turmoil about this whole situation. I didn't know what was going on, but I was holding the shackle in my hands, crying.

Will Hall: You're not a person who cries very often, and now this ceremony has brought it forward.

Dick Russell: Yeah. I called Alice and told her what was happening. As I hung up the phone, my watch stopped and would not start again. As I left that hotel room, Ta-Nehisi Coates was on TV talking about an article he'd written about giving reparations for slavery. I was in this world.

Will Hall: You were in it - in a different reality, a more real reality, an archetypal reality.

Dick Russell: Yes, exactly. I went out on the ship - thirty people on it. I thought, "How am I going to do this without people seeing me?" I had this shackle in my little black bag over my shoulder.

Will Hall: Following the instructions Malodoma had given.

Dick Russell: Right. But I found a moment when I was suddenly alone toward the bow of the boat. I brought the shackle out of my bag, threw it into the water and said, "Take it, water spirit."

Something happened. I could feel a shift inside me when I did that. I didn't know what it was or where it was leading, but it was an amazing moment. Eventually - I'm not going to tell this whole story, but I do in a new book I'm writing - I had to confront a slaveholder ancestor. That was the culmination of this particular situation.

Will Hall: The shift inside you - was it completion or emotional release? What was the feeling?

Dick Russell: Not quite completion, but a feeling of release. Like I had opened a door and also closed a door. I didn't know what was going to happen to me. Coming back to Boston, suddenly young African American kids on the street would turn my head. I eventually became mentor to one of these kids - that's a whole long story I'm doing a book about now.

Will Hall: You talk a bit about that in "My Mysterious Son" too - this whole path led you into mentorship.

Dick Russell: It did, absolutely. It also led us - Franklin's mother, himself, and me - to make a trip to Burkina Faso in West Africa with Malodoma in 2016 for a healing ritual. That made a huge difference in our lives.

The Journey to Burkina Faso

Will Hall: How did that affect Franklin? What was his experience?

Dick Russell: It affected Franklin profoundly. There were like 20-25 people with us - everybody had come for their own reasons, whatever situation they were dealing with. Malodoma had found a holy man in a tiny village near Bobo, the second largest city in Burkina Faso, right near Ghana and Nigeria.

We were going to meet with this holy man who had a Muslim temple but also used animism - both his Muslim training and animistic practices. He was a beautiful man who wore long robes and sat in a separate room from however many people were taking part.

This sounds crazy, but it's Madness Radio...

Will Hall: It's not going to sound crazy.

Dick Russell: We each gave a big pen. The holy man was in the next room. We blew into the pen with our intention. The pen was taken to him, and he divined what he was going to give us in terms of big clay medicine pots full of herbs, cola nuts, and different prescribed concoctions from that culture. We were to take these pots with us and both bathe with them and drink from them at different times.

There was another young man there with similar problems to Franklin's, so they had each other to talk to. I remember Franklin going up to him asking, "Are you a good machinist?" Franklin always loved welding and machines.

Franklin said, "I think we're starting on a marathon here." He got a haircut when he first saw the holy man. I asked what he thought of him, and Frank said, "He's a ghost-based ninja."

Will Hall: That's a great definition of a shaman - a ghost-based ninja.

Dick Russell: I think so too. He got his haircut, which he often did when going through a change in his life. It was very symbolic to him.

He was at the time on Abilify and Clozapine.

Will Hall: Two antipsychotics at the same time.

Dick Russell: Yes. In consultation on our own, including Frank quite willingly and ready, we decided to start weaning him off or down on the medication as we went through this new ritual.

Malodoma took us to see a stick diviner. Franklin sat there drawing geometric patterns and hieroglyphs, which he often does in his art - goes all the way back to ancient Egypt.

They talked about forces of adversity - that there was an entity that had Franklin contained, something very special, and there was an attempt to adversely affect it when he was seventeen and had his breakdown.

Will Hall: Wow. Did that tie back to any biographical info you know from seventeen, or was this something that maybe happened only Franklin was witness to, or on an imaginal, archetypal spirit level?

Dick Russell: Yes, I think so because he never spoke about it, but he was often talking to someone. He spoke once about a genie who came - a genie from Jupiter that showed up and

gave him three wishes. He said something very strange: "The genie was cursed." I've just thought of this moment that maybe that has to do with what we were being told in West Africa.

A lot of stuff happened over there. There was adversity experienced by Malodoma. We had people showing up at our various offerings. One time he ordered a new vehicle and it showed up upside down. We got very close to being in an accident one night coming back from...

Will Hall: It showed up upside down, the vehicle? How did it...?

Dick Russell: Yeah, in the shipping container.

Will Hall: Oh. So these weird coincidences, synchronicity, uncanny atmosphere is happening all around this. And you were in an accident or something.

Dick Russell: Almost, yes. We had a minor accident on the way back from a night when we were taken to be with these goats. Eventually I think one of them was to be sacrificed for us. There were animal rituals involved.

When you're in that world and looking for something so different, unique, and potentially life-changing, you just go in that world. At least we did, and so did the people who had chosen to go on this voyage.

We went through a chicken offering - chickens for each of us - where it was very important that in the sacrifice of the animal, the chicken end up on its back. If it didn't, this was a bad omen. I later studied things about chickens, cows and bulls - these go back centuries in terms of the importance of these animals in ritualistic settings.

One time this old woman showed up at the gate of Malodoma's compound who was really a witch. Eda shook her hand and couldn't get the chills off her hand after she took it. We were really in a very sometimes scary world.

Frank through the process of all this was tapering off his meds. In the end, we were there for several weeks, traveling from Malodoma's village back to this small village where the holy man was, seeing the stick diviner. We even went to a funeral - a funeral for a local person, but I had all these images come to me of my ancestors going back through the centuries.

One of the people with us on this trip went to a mountain where the contomble, the little people, live. Malodoma had said to me in the very beginning, "If we can get you to the contomble, get Franklin there, I think he'll be able to speak their language."

Will Hall: Who are they? These are some sort of spirit helpers?

Dick Russell: Yes, there are spirits who live in Burkina Faso and are guardians - guardian spirits.

This may sound all very strange to people...

Will Hall: Like I said, it's Madness Radio. This is what it's all about.

Dick Russell: One of the women with us on this trip, after going to this mountain where the contomble were, had this download as she went to sleep of a parade of Africans in their native dress who had died during the slave era.

Will Hall: This is like a vision that she saw, like a downloading.

Dick Russell: She actually saw them going past her bed.

Will Hall: She saw it, wow.

Dick Russell: We went through at the end - we had to choose a bowl that would be sacrificed for us. This was done by the holy man himself. I remember Franklin saying, "The medical unity is at hand."

Then we had to go through a ritual with the heart of the bull. I will never forget sitting in the mosque. The holy man was giving his sermon there, which I couldn't understand, except I was told he was talking quite a bit about Franklin to the people in the audience.

Will Hall: Wow.

Dick Russell: Suddenly I felt this feeling in my heart like I've never felt before or since. It was like a flame bursting out of my solar plexus, rising up and just staying there. It seemed like a long time - probably just seconds, but it was a fire. I literally felt like I was on fire internally at my heart.

Then we went in and ate the heart of the bull that had been sacrificed for us in an adjacent room. The holy man spent a lot of time with Franklin toward the end and had him bring some of his clothing - a t-shirt and flip-flops - and leave it with him. We received protection to take home with us.

When we were saying goodbye on the last day to the holy man, I remember going up to him. He started speaking to me in his native tongue, which was Jula, and I could understand everything he said. He wasn't saying a lot. I remember he definitely said, as I had chills, "It's in the hands of God." And I wept as we left.

We went back to the nearby town of Bobo, and suddenly Franklin got very paranoid about going off his medication. He was worried he was going to be hospitalized again. He'd been through this before - traumatized in hospitals - and he hadn't been off medication like this.

Will Hall: And the trip is going to end. He's going to go back to the US.

Dick Russell: Yeah. That night he suddenly told us the next day - I'm glad he told us - but he'd suddenly gone back up on the Clozapine, way up from like 100-200 to 300 milligrams or something like that.

Will Hall: Just on his own, he started taking it.

Dick Russell: Just on his own, he jacked it up, which was alarming because of how he's going to react to that. But then he said he would like me to call his doctor back in Massachusetts. So I did and told him what we were going through. He knew we were going to make the trip.

He said, "Well, I would have probably done it more slowly, but you can't argue with success." So he was fine with Franklin having done this - fine with him going off the meds as much as he had. Which said a lot for the doctor - he respected what we were trying to do.

When we went back to the US, over the course of the next year, we'd gotten it fairly low - the amount of medication he was on - but his doctor took him off all of it. He was doing okay until he got to the very end where it was all out of his system, and then he had a temporary crash.

Will Hall: So he crashed - went into a crisis, back into the hospital? What happened at that point?

Dick Russell: He did for a little while. He ended up moving in with his mom in Baltimore after the hospital. That's proven to be wonderful - they're still living together to this day. She had lost her husband who died of cancer, and Frank was there to be with her and take care of her.

Will Hall: So they became closer, and that was part of the outcome of this incredible journey and meeting with the healers and Malodoma Somé connecting you with all this tradition and ancestry. There was a big shift in Franklin's living situation. How was he responding to all of this incredible experience? Was there a positive impact?

Dick Russell: Yes, oh yeah. I've thought about it a lot in the time since. I think what made it so positive was that we were doing this together as a family. Eda had been living on her own when she got married again, and we would see each other occasionally, but here we were the three of us who had been there since that night in 1979 when he was born.

I think it meant a tremendous amount to all of us. We were sharing this experience, living out of these medicine pots and going through these rituals with goats and bulls. It really brought the family together - it really, really did. It's a bond that has never gone away.

Frank calls me almost every day - we talk and I see him regularly. His art has continued to be wonderful. I'll read you one other thing that I end the book with. It's from his journal in the early 2000s, one of my favorite of his pieces.

Will Hall: This is Franklin's writing.

Dick Russell: Yeah:

"There was a man that lived in a box. The box was his heart. So he would explain to the world that his heart was square and empty. The world would say they already

knew. He would ask why, and they would say that theirs was too, and that he was stupid to ask such a question.

Now, when the man realized that his heart was an empty box, he cried and was aware of his emptiness. So he had a plan. He would fill the box with beautiful presents and give it to someone. The presents were shiny and brilliant. Some were soft and mushy. So he asked the world who he could give the full box to, and no one could tell him.

He waited years. Every day he said goodbye to yesterday. The others with the empty box hearts were jealous and bewildered. Then one day he met a wise man. The wise man asked why he filled his heart with things. He told the wise man that his heart had been empty. The wise man replied that those were things of the world, and that they would disappear in time.

Then the man realized this and cried again. He asked the world what he would do. They did not answer, for they did not know. So he decided to burn the box that was his heart, and he began to live alone, his heart on fire."

Will Hall: Incredible. It's like an ancient folk tale. So powerful.

Dick Russell: Yeah, it is.

Current Life and New Connections

Will Hall: Bring us up to date. How is Franklin doing now? You say he's an artist, creative and active. How is he doing after this incredible experience you all had together?

Dick Russell: We're actually almost ten years past it now, and I couldn't be happier with how he's doing. He's in the best shape he's been in since before he had his so-called breakdown.

He calls me all the time. He's much more social - goes out with his mom and her friends, has made some friends on his own. He has a shop where he does sculptures and paintings.

I still sometimes hear him upstairs in his room talking to somebody when I'm there. It's not somebody he's making up - there is this being.

We made a trip this past spring. He had met - without getting into the whole story - I had been mentoring a young man named Romeo, who is a genius in mythology. I met him when he was seventeen. He'd grown up - his father was in jail, his mother was on drugs in Las Vegas - robbing people on the streets to survive. That's what he was doing when I met him.

But he'd had mythology in his life. He'd discovered it when he was eleven, studied it when he was in juvenile hall in detention. They made him study the dictionary, then he started to read more and discovered he loved the myths. He had a photographic memory, so he memorized the myths of every culture.

I needed to know more mythology because I was writing this book on James Hillman.

Will Hall: James Hillman, yeah, of course.

Dick Russell: Mythology was a big deal. Long story, but I became his mentor not long after I met him. We are now finishing a book together called "Bridges: A South Central Odyssey," which is coming out in June, and we're doing a podcast series around it. He's amazingly well spoken.

The book is a chronicle of our relationship using alternate voices throughout - how does this old white guy from the Hollywood Hills and this young black kid see the same thing they're walking through?

In the course of that, he met Franklin. He went to Baltimore and stayed with them along with me for a few days. Then I took Franklin and Romeo to Greece and Egypt last spring. They got along just fine.

We spent time at the culmination of that trip at the Sphinx and the Pyramids. Years ago when I was traveling in my twenties, I'd had a very mysterious experience where I'd slept at the feet of the Sphinx one night, climbed to the top of the Great Pyramid in the morning, felt this energy come into me. Nobody saw me do it, but I felt something come into me that was somehow mapping out parts of my future. I write about that in the new book.

I wanted to go back and experience the Sphinx and the Pyramids again with my son and my sort of adopted son, Romeo.

Will Hall: Because you sort of met Romeo as a result of all the following through with Franklin's process as a shaman and visionary.

Dick Russell: I absolutely did. I was drawn to this meeting called Echo, where they bring inner city kids together to let down their hair about their lives, and I met this kid. I see it all as a thread, part of a long thread I've been following.

Will Hall: And the soul's code perhaps.

Dick Russell: Yeah, perhaps. I think definitely.

So I took the two of them there. We went to the pyramids - years ago I'd gone into the king's chamber, which now had a whole other entrance, not easy to navigate. Romeo went with me, Franklin wisely decided not to go in. He's bigger than us. You go almost on all fours - it's a long crawl, pretty heavy duty.

Later I was looking at the Sphinx and felt that same energy - it was still happening. We rode camels, and when we finished the camel ride, Franklin jumped off, threw his hands up in the air, and said, "The UFOs are here." I didn't see them, but he was communicating.

Now I'm writing a book about UFOs. I couldn't be happier with how he's doing. I'm very close to his mom, who's an incredible person. They have each other in Baltimore, and I'll be going back to see them again pretty soon.

Malodoma's Legacy and Current Work

Will Hall: Dick, this has been just incredible. I'm so grateful to have you on the show. What a feast of possibilities and threads and visions for you and your son, and also for a whole different way of thinking about what we call mental illness. Wouldn't it be wonderful if everybody who goes into these remote, seeming delusional places were met with some kind of exploratory process of connecting - if that's right for them, if that's what they respond to - with the ancestors, finding what might be the mystical, artistic side.

Where is Malodoma Somé in your life today?

Dick Russell: Sadly, Malodoma died a couple of years ago. He was only 65. I was going to write a book with him based on a series of ritual workshops he was doing, one of which was called Ancestralization. It was at that workshop that I actually met the ancestor that I believe was a slaveholder and went through a whole internal thing, culminating that exploration.

Will Hall: You met through a visionary state.

Dick Russell: Yes, during a ritual there. Tremendously powerful experience. It's sometimes a matter of - so I understand - you not only need to confront an ancestor, but they need forgiveness from you.

Will Hall: It's reciprocal - there's unfinished business to attend to.

Dick Russell: Which has really been the story with Malodoma since the beginning. But he died of a heart condition and is deeply missed. I just deeply wish he was still with us and we could have continued to work together in whatever way that would have manifested.

Resources and Final Thoughts

Will Hall: Let us know the name of your book and also the upcoming book, and how people can get in touch with you - the podcast and if they want to follow up.

Dick Russell: I have a Substack I've started to write. I write about everything from the environmental destruction happening right now, to Robert Kennedy Jr. and what he can do for the public health crisis in our country, to some fascinating new revelations about UFOs that are happening.

Will Hall: The UFOs are here, it seems. There's a lot happening.

Dick Russell: Yeah, there's this fascinating thing going on. Some of these special forces guys - really amazing military soldiers who worked in intelligence - one named Jake Barber recently came forward as a whistleblower because he had actually, using a helicopter as a pilot, picked up a craft that he says was of NHI - non-human intelligence. Nobody's ever come out and said that before who's been involved directly in such a thing.

Then he told a story recently on the Ross Coulthart show. There was another craft on the ground, and suddenly from it, he was overwhelmed with emotion. Even telling the story years after it happened, he began to cry. He said it was a very feminine energy emanating from this. He spoke about something called psionics, where people with psychic abilities are being trained to actually summon these otherworldly craft, and it's going on right now.

So frankly, to say the UFOs are here - something's going on.

Will Hall: If we talk to indigenous cultures - I'm sure this is true of Malodoma Somé's heritage as well - they recognize that humans aren't the only intelligent beings. What we call spirit beings or angels or other realities starts to blend with the idea of non-human intelligence and non-human existence.

Dick Russell: Yeah, I think we're on the edge of some big revelations about it. I've been writing about that in my Substack as well, which is substack.com/dickrussell (two S's, two L's).

I have the UFO book coming out next year. The book with Romeo, "Bridges: A South Central Odyssey," will come out in June and will be introduced with a podcast series we're starting to tape right now. I have a website, dickrussell.org, which I don't use often, but I'm putting more in the Substack.

I'd love to hear what people think about what I've been talking about today. It's been great being with you and getting a chance to delve into some of this with somebody who feels to me like you've got a real understanding from personal experience.

I'm not trying to prescribe shamanism.

Will Hall: No, that's not what it's about. It's about opening a door that people should know is open if that's what they want to explore, along with other doors.

Dick Russell: There are a lot of doors.

Will Hall: What works for you? That's something we say a lot on Madness Radio. Find out what works for you.

Dick Russell: I think so too. Just to realize that there's something beyond the despair we often feel as parents, and certainly the child is going through that similar kind of thing - that all there is is medication.

I'm not saying everybody should go off medication. I'm not promoting that either. But I think there are alternatives. They've shown in other countries that people who have these problems, if they come together communally and share what they've gone through, sometimes even live together - places like Diabasis, Soteria House - that makes a huge difference. Certainly it did when Franklin was at Earth House. He was surrounded by young people like him who had similar things they needed to share.

I hope that's the takeaway people would get from our conversation - that there are other possibilities, things that can open doors you might never have expected were there. As I said, Franklin has taught me and broken through a lot of my fixed ideas, and I'm very grateful for that. Grateful to have him in my life as well as his mom. And here we are.

Will Hall: Wonderful. Dick Russell, thank you so much for joining us today on Madness Radio.

Dick Russell: Thanks so much, Will. I've really enjoyed talking with you.

Closing

Will Hall: You've been listening to an interview with Dick Russell. He has written 17 books on subjects ranging from the JFK assassination to a biography of James Hillman and a biography of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and the Migration of Grey Whales. His book we discussed today is "My Mysterious Son: A Life-Changing Passage Between Schizophrenia and Shamanism."

That's all the time we have on Madness Radio. Thanks for tuning in. What does it mean to be called crazy in a crazy world? Listen to Madness Radio - voices and visions from outside mental health.