

Episode 58 Transcript: 30 Brave Minutes Podcast

“Doing What You Can, When You Can,” a Conversation with Dr. David Nikkel

Recorded February 16, 2023

Released March 15, 2023

Speaker 1 – Dr. Richard Gay

Welcome to 30 Brave Minutes, a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. In 30 Brave Minutes, we'll give you something interesting to think about. Joining us today is Dr. David Nikkel from the Department of Philosophy and Religion. Get ready for 30 Brave Minutes. David, why don't you tell us a bit about yourself, please?

Speaker 2 – Dr. David Nikkel

I won't start with my birth, though. I was born in Bethlehem, so I'm David of Bethlehem, and born in a hospital, but there was no room in the hospital, so I was born in a closet. No, wait. Luke's Hospital in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Anyway, I've been a person who has kind of had one foot in the academy and one foot in ministry. Most of it eventually has been in academia, including I'm now in my twenty-first year proudly at UNC Pembroke. I am pastoring a very small church in Fayetteville. I'm in my fifteenth year there. I also pastored churches full-time earlier in my career, I've been a generalist when it comes to teaching religion. I've taught at least fifteen different courses here at UNC Pembroke. In my whole career, I've taught at least 20 different courses, and I've enjoyed teaching in a lot of different areas, not all of which I necessarily had any graduate training in. Like well, I can tell a story about the Classical Mythology entry in our catalog. On the Religion side of the department, we had a New Testament Christian origin specialist who put that and another course in the catalog, and then ended up moving to another institution before it was ever taught. And some of our majors a number of years ago, said 'oh, gosh, we're really interested in taking this Classical Mythology course.' So, I said, 'Well, I'll ask the current at that time, new Testament and Christian origins person,' if she might be interested, willing to do it. And she said, 'no, I'm kind of content with just teaching what I'm already teaching so I can work on my research and not have to do a new prep.' So, I did it, learned a lot about classical mythology, as well as more about mythology more generally. And I've had a lot of fun. I've done that now four times, including this past fall. And though it's been classical mythology, I've let students write on any tradition, any ethnic, cultural mythology they want to or deal with any theory about mythology, et cetera. So, one of the good things that comes with being a generalist, you're always learning something and just find a lot of different angles that are very interesting.

Speaker 1 – Dr. Richard Gay

That is one of the wonderful things about our jobs. We get to be lifelong learners ourselves, which is always rewarding, or at least it is for me. Now, David, you all have a Ph.D. from Duke University, is that correct?

Speaker 2 – Dr. David Nikkel

Right. Yeah, I got the Ph.D. there after seminary, so I had a master's degree, a Master of Divinity in Religious Studies, more in course theology and ministry particularly. But then right out of seminary I went to Duke, was there four years, and got my Ph.D. and I kind of parlayed some of what interested me in seminary into my

dissertation at Duke University, which the dissertation revolved around a concept about God, or the nature of God called panentheism. And most folks, educated folks, college-educated folks, hopefully have heard of pantheism, which means all is divine or all is God or more, better translation all is divine, because it's often like Asian religions that tend to be pantheistic, and it's not a personal God, that's the version of the divine. But in some of these versions, basically the world and the divine end up being one and the same at the ultimate level of reality. And on the other hand, there were many theologians back in the 1800s and beyond, who felt the classical, traditional Christian idea of God tended to make God way too much up there in Heaven, and not enough involved here on earth. And when I'm talking about this in class. I sometimes mention or ask students, have you ever seen a billboard where there's a black background and white words, I always mention the one that says 'don't make me come down there - God.' Which kind of points to a God who's not very much involved.

So anyway, panentheism which means all is in God, tried to find a middle ground between saying God is maybe so much in the world or the divine is so much in the world, that the distinction is lost on the one hand. On the other hand, making God some being that's kind of up there in heaven and not involved, except maybe supernaturally violating laws, occasionally. So, panentheism literally is all is in God, the world, and everything that happens in it. What happens to each of us matters to God actually makes a difference to God, which in classical traditional theism, it doesn't because God has already totally realized the beatific vision, and all possible value has already been achieved by God. So, for most of Christian history, theologians would tell us, we can't do anything that God cares about that makes any difference to God, makes a difference to us, but it doesn't affect God. So, my dissertation I revised and was my first book and I've done various articles that involve panentheism, including one that's being considered for publication now that brings in pantheism among different forms of non-dualism where in some sense the ultimate reality takes in all reality. Like panentheism would be one form of that all is in God, even though God is much more than the world that is part of God's life.

Speaker 3 – Dr. Ashley Allen

I appreciate you going through the definition of those two different terms and distinctions and ways to characterize God. It made me wonder what your favorite research topic has been since you've been at UNCP. If you have a specific project that you worked on with a student or independently. Do you have one that really made an impact on you?

Speaker 2 – Dr. David Nikkel

Well, my dissertation involved two theologians, one who is Paul Tillich, who arguably was the greatest Christian theologian as well as a great theorist of religion of the 20th century. I've done a good number of articles on Tillich, was involved as an officer with the Tillich Society and with the American Academy of Religion, with the Tillich Unit. The kind of things that have been published in more prestigious journals have involved embodiment, and I might call it radical embodiment. The idea that we, well, some of this goes back to my main mentor at Duke, his name was William or Bill Poteat. He coined the term mindbody, all one word, because philosophically, going back to a guy named René Descartes, his idea was basically that there's mind on the one hand, which is immaterial, and on the other hand, there's matter, which is extended in space and includes our body. And mind and body or matter are absolutely different. So, you may ask, well, how do these come together in a human being? And that was kind of difficult for Descartes to answer, and everyone who's tried to grapple with Descartes try to take seriously in some way what he wrote, because basically it kind of ended up either with Descartes saying that nature and the material world and our bodies finally in and of themselves are meaningless.

And whatever meaning there is, our immaterial mind imposes on things, on the one hand. So, we kind of often end up with more everything's finally mind, everything that matters anyway. And there's a lot of what is called social constructionism that still kind of picks one side of the dualism. Like the mind constructs every society and everything's relative right to every society. But no, we're embodied beings and have bodily needs.

And from my perspective, whatever meanings we have, ultimately do not make any sense unless they're connected with our embodiment in the world, in our social worlds, with one another and animals, as well as their natural world. Nothing makes any sense or has any meaning unless it connects to our embodiment in the world. So that's the radical embodiment. On the other hand, if you focus on just okay, you take the other side of the split, everything is just purely matter, and mind is just an epiphany or an illusion, then we're just our brains synapses or our selfish genes, to refer to biologist Richard Dawkins. Well, as one cognitive scientist of religion put it, we are robots who have been programmed by evolution to believe we're not robots. So, my thing is wait, we are mindbodies who find meaning with our bodies, our mindful bodies, our sentient, value-laden bodies that engage with our meaning-laden world and worlds. And that's where it all comes from. And language only makes sense and our traditions only make sense because, in some way or another, we connect them to our bodies. And there were some philosophers, one was primarily a linguist, who made the claim that all of our language either refers to bodily schemas, like how we move, or up, down in, this is in my hand, now it's out of my hand, right, left, and so on. Or, metaphorical or metonymical extensions of our bodily schemas, which include our emotions too. So, I agree with that and I see tradition as being important for very important for religion, because through traditions which we dwell in, we also extend our bodies. Our language allows us to extend our bodies. Our traditions allow us to extend our bodies in ways no other animals on this planet are able to. So anyway, my latest article is entitled *Tradition as Body* which was published in the Journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*.

Speaker 1 - Dr. Richard Gay

You've given us a lot to think about there, David. There's a lot, I can't help but think about Battlestar Galactica, the Reboot, where I don't know if you're familiar with that, but there were all of these robots who didn't know they were robots.

Speaker 2 - Dr. David Nikkel

Not exactly, but the whole thing about artificial intelligence and what's the possibilities of that, or one of the things that I thought about and even wrote and mentioned in teaching, like in science and religion and things like that, yeah.

Speaker 1 - Dr. Richard Gay

Right. Now, I have a question for you. In the construct you were describing to us earlier when you talked about the mind, is that being equated to what others might call the soul? Where does the soul fit into this? Is that the mind component you're talking about?

Speaker 2 – Dr. David Nikkel

Yeah, usually. I mean, sometimes there has been some distinction in Western philosophy made between the mind and the soul, but pretty much like with Plato, certainly with Descartes, the mind and the soul end up being more or less synonymous. If you go back to hunter-gatherer religions, Indigenous religions, ancestral spirits or in

animism, the spirit of the wind or rain. They did not believe in immaterial spirits. They weren't Cartesian philosophers. They thought of people that died who were in the afterlife, they had a finer matter, their bodies were made of a finer matter. But when you were maybe sacrificing an animal, you would tell the spirit, so they'd get out of the way and they wouldn't be hurt by the sword. Or they believe a spirit might be captured for a moment in a box or something. So originally, God was not thought in the Hebrew Bible, maybe even in early Christianity, was not thought of as totally immaterial. But in the Hebrew Bible, the old Christian Old Testament, we have the body of God. face of God. hand of God. You can see my backside, literally, but you can't see my face and live. So, with Plato and certainly with Descartes, there was this idea of making the mind something and soul totally immaterial, which really does not at all go along with a Christian, at least an original Jewish Christian Islamic idea of resurrection of the body, which that's a lot different than an immortal or at least a totally immaterial soul. And then Christianity kind of ended up being influenced by Plato and other Greek philosophers, theologians, so, we have to say, okay, when we die, we immediately go to Heaven, if we're good, right?

And we hope you will. And then we'll have the day of the Last Judgment. We'll be reunited with our bodies, which doesn't mean anything because we already experienced God and Jesus in fullness. And of course, we already recognize our ancestors or friends who have gone before, and well, and why do you recognize them and see and hear them? Because we actually have bodies that we aren't admitting we have bodies, or imagining we have bodies anyway. Anyway, there are all kinds of, some of these cognitive scientists of religion talk about an innate dualism, that even babies have literally. I mean, a great psychologist, Paul Bloom, wrote bestselling trade books, *Descartes Baby* being the first, saying that babies literally are innate dualists. And when I went back to a reunion one time, I asked him afterwards, so what evidence is there that babies are innate dualists versus that they just are able to distinguish from a very young age, between animate beings like humans and other animals, and something like this? Well, there's no difference, or there's no evidence that babies are cartesian philosophers at this point. 'But I think one of my colleagues is working on I think is going to come up with the evidence.' Well, that's been many years ago. There's no evidence of that.

Speaker 1 – Dr. Richard Gay

I think that would be a bit of a project to sort through that.

– Chancellor Cummings advertisement

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Speaker 1 – Dr. Richard Gay

I want to go back to something you mentioned earlier about how we talk about our experiences based upon our existence in a body, and how it makes me think of how we use language, right? We, can't...the importance of language and being able to have the words to talk about these abstract concepts and stuff.

Speaker 2 - Dr. David Nikkel

Right, right.

Speaker 1 – Dr. Richard Gay

As someone who studied a lot of medieval art, I think, about how it appears that we've imposed an earthly hierarchy on a celestial realm. We talk about a Lord, for example.

Speaker 2 - Dr. David Nikkel

Sure, of course.

Speaker 1 – Dr. Richard Gay

I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on that. And I've always kind of thought of it as a way for us to try to understand something that in our own terms, something that's relatable for us. So, could you comment on that phenomenon, please?

Speaker 2 - Dr. David Nikkel

Yeah, absolutely. And I talked about social constructionism and well, Freud and some other reductionists, but Freud as a psychologist would say, everything religious is a projection from our unconscious, right? This hierarchical thing, Freud is we're projecting our earthly fathers onto a cosmic or screen in the sky, right? And so, we just project our human social categories and often hierarchies onto religion. And I don't deny that there's some truth to that. And often maybe we kind of in more primal or indigenous religions, and even in folk religion, like I mentioned, even though supposedly Christians might say, well, my immaterial soul goes to heaven. But we don't really think, imagine it that way, actually. So, we do, when we're speaking about things that are supposedly beyond our bodily earth, at least our physical, earthly, bodily realm, we do speak of them. And our language about God or our language about the Tao or Brahman is very symbolic, very transcendent. So, among the more educated philosophical, theological thinkers, there has often been a sense that we are using everyday language, bodily language, that is the only way we can really understand, but we at least understand we're not using it literally. But sometimes even theologians, maybe as well as everyday religious practitioners may be using it too literally. But again, I admit that we use it metaphorically and sometimes ignorantly maybe. But on the other hand, to kind of say we can't or shouldn't use that or it's wrong to use that, that's totally misguided as well.

Speaker 3 - Dr. Ashley Allen

I was just thinking about how you do have one foot in academia and one foot in your ministerial role. How do you think each of them inform the other? Or maybe make you better in the other area, so how does being a minister make you a better as a professor, and how does being a professor makes you a better minister?

Speaker 2 - Dr. Nikkel

Sure. Well, first of all, how does it make me a better professor? Well, I'm teaching about religion and one of my hats is a theologian who tends to be somewhat of a more abstract, a little more on beliefs, a little less on practice. Although there are aspects of theology that talk about sacraments, rituals, ethics, things like that, that get a little more concrete. Talking about religion in terms of the practical aspects, the social aspects, I can come up with all kinds of examples right, from church life, like in Theories and Methods today, a capstone course on the Religion side, we dealt with Max Weber, a very broad thinker that touched on about everything socially, economically, culturally, religiously. These examples really help make things more concrete for our students. It's good to have that. Fortunately, I'm mainline, right? So, I'm not dealing with parishioners who are fundamentalists or very conservative evangelicals who would tend to take the Bible rather literally. So, I can talk about how this or that need to understand what it meant to people back then. And we understand how the process of how God created the world is different than how they might have understood it back in the day 2000 years ago, or how 3000 years ago Hindu texts thought about the origin of things and so on. So, yeah, they really do help each other out or mutually reinforce each other in a lot of ways. Students, you know, their experiences of religion mostly have come from being in churches or sometimes, occasionally some other religion. So, they get to tie stuff into what we're discussing as well, both the more concrete and the more abstract things about religion in some way can connect it to their experiences.

Speaker 1 – Dr. Richard Gay

David, I know you're a very prolific scholar. You've generated over 20 peer-reviewed articles and you've definitely had a very distinguished career. And I don't think you'll think badly of me if I say that you're getting ready to retire soon.

Speaker 2 – Dr. David Nikkel

Not at all. No, I'm not making it a secret.

Speaker 1 – Dr. Richard Gay

No, and I was curious about what do you attribute your productivity to? I mean, for many of us when we're teaching, it's very hard to maintain a very prolific scholarly output for a number of reasons, time and money and discipline and institutional support, stuff like that. Can you give some of us a secret to your success?

Speaker 2 – Dr. David Nikkel

Yeah, I don't know that there's any great secret because I'll admit during regular semesters, fall and spring semesters as a full-time instructor or, for the past fifteen plus years, Chair, and with a bit of a reduced teaching load, it is very hard to do much in the way of research and writing during the semesters. But I use summer, I use the breaks, make a little time in the evening or make a little time on a weekend, if I can. And if something is due, then you do a little extra pushing. You get something back and they want major or minor revisions or whatever, or we reject it. And then you think of, okay, maybe, but if they've given a review, I'll revise it and send it to

another journal. Of course, you tell yourself to make time, even if it's not ideally there, and you'd rather be doing something else, in one part of your divided being.

Speaker 1 – Dr. Richard Gay

Right, I'm hearing a theme, though, of consistent prep, small steps.

Speaker 2 – Dr. David Nikkel

Yeah, exactly. You got to just kind of do what you can, when you can. Sometimes it can be a little hard to, sometimes I have to put, okay, I'm going to start a new, something new writing, have a paper accepted, and often what ends up being published was first a paper at a conference. But, yeah, sometimes you need to find a little block. Oh, this is a week where I have less grading than usual, or we're doing this in class. Oh, it's library instruction today, so I don't have to prepare for class.

Speaker 1 - Dr. Richard Gay

Right.

Speaker 2 - Dr. David Nikkel

You try to find a day when you can block off enough time to get started or to do a significant revision, or work on getting the citations the way this journal wants it rather than some other way that you'd rather do.

Speaker 1 - Dr. Richard Gay

Those mechanical things do have a way of eating up a bunch of time. Now, you're an expert on Paul Tillich, so would you mind telling us a little bit about him? It's been a while since I thought about Tillich, so I was curious if you could give us sort of a mini-update on his thought.

Speaker 2 - Dr. David Nikkel

Yeah, sure. And I fell in love with both Charles Hartshorne, what's known as process theology, which was developing the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy, and Whitehead did a little bit on theology, but then my other love in seminary was Paul Tillich. So I ended up going to Duke, and no one there was an expert on either one, so, I was kind of on my own, basically, and doing my dissertation on the intersection of those two theologians. But anyway, Tillich was one of the two that I worked on in terms of that concept of panentheism, and Tillich came out of Romantic idealism from the 19th century in Germany, and they were the first to come up with panentheism. He was in that tradition. Well, one of the things Tillich would often say is, "God is not a being. God is being itself," which in some ways goes back to way back, like St. Thomas Aquinas, maybe even earlier.

But by 'being itself,' Tillich meant the all-inclusive reality. So, wrapped up in that was his saying that we're not separated from God, we are not external to God. And in some ways, that goes right along with the idea of God knowing everything, right, the traditional idea of omniscience, except not in terms of fore-knowing what we're going to do, because Tillich believed we have some actual indeterminate freedom, that we can tip the balance at times when we're torn between how much we're going to serve ourselves versus serve someone else, how much you're going to serve your present self, versus 20 or 30 years from now, when you're maybe smoking or drinking to excess, or eating something you shouldn't, you may regret your decision.

So, God is not even the highest being, because that would make God one being alongside others. So, there's that angle. He also felt besides this immediate connection God has with us, the divine has with us. He mentioned we can't even call God a person because persons always are somewhat external to one another. We're always somewhat separated from each other and God is not separated from us, although we separate ourselves through sin and so on. But still, God is immediately present to us even when we sin. And while speaking of that, he kind of modified, he was in the Lutheran tradition, so he modified Luther's 'we are justified or made right with God through faith apart from works of the law.' He said 'we are accepted in the depth of our being, despite being unacceptable.' And he kind of talked about being accepted sometimes, 'even when we have doubts about God, we still may have the courage to be,' that's one of his lectures and one of his most accessible books, which I used, whenever I taught modern theology. We are accepted despite being unacceptable. And besides justification by faith, he tacked on to that justification in doubt. It can be justified even when we doubt, right with God, even when we doubt, because it's natural to have some doubts, even though we supposedly have this immediate awareness of God, but not always at a conscious, linguistic, explicit level. And he was also a great theorist of religion, so he ended up saying everyone is religious. But maybe he wasn't really respecting a died-in-the-wool atheist that much. But he said, everyone is religious because we have this immediate awareness of God, whether we know it intellectually or not. But even the atheistic scientist, and he's not saying that all or even most scientists are atheistic, but some are. But he was saying even the very atheistic scientist has an ultimate concern with truth, we might say capital T, and willing to let the chips fall where they may, but all of us as human beings have some ultimate concern, and so everyone is ultimately concerned.

Moral decisions are always a risk because of our fallibility, we may place our faith in something that's wrong, even if we are devout Christians. But he said about Nazism, which he escaped from Germany just ahead of the Gestapo, because he was one who spoke out after Hitler took power. And he was aware, unlike most theologians, that the Nazis had a reworked Christianity that took away the old testament and made Jesus Aryan and so on, which there's a whole book about that. But Tillich said the Nazis for their ultimate concern, it's the nation, it's the soil, it's the blood, it's the charismatic leader Adolf Hitler, who embodies the ultimate for the German people. And he said the reason why so many German youth were attracted to Nazism was because traditional cultural and religious goods, including some of that artwork that Richard referred to, that had some religious meaning. Whether even when it was not necessarily explicitly religious. All of those just became kind of commercial goods that distinguished you as a member of the upper class, or upper middle class, rather than actually having real meaning for you. And so, this loss of deep meaning ended up attracting a lot of youth, and we might say other people, to Nazism because it did have, Tillich said, a demonic ultimate concern, but it was an expression of their ultimate concern. So, religion is ultimate concern. That's another, most everyone who teaches intro to religion will bring up Tillich's theory of religion as ultimate concern.

Speaker 1- Dr. Richard Gay

Ultimate concern. You certainly have given us a lot to think about today. And I'm curious, as a scholar of religion and a minister yourself, I'm curious what your response is to individuals who take the attitude that religion is responsible for so many of the wars that the world has seen.

Speaker 2 - Dr. David Nikkel

Right, right, and they speak with a lot of truth. Cognitive science of religion, which I kind of think tends to be very disembodied, but that article I mentioned, others, if one of their goals is to try to make cognitive science of religion more embodied. But the idea is that religion is, when you appeal to religion, you're appealing to something ultimate. And then cognitive science has kind of shown that religion actually fosters cooperation within groups, but it also tends to exacerbate divisions among different groups. So, yeah, certainly religion has done the latter, we have to admit. Actually, I have a hard time trying to get that across to some of my students, like in Introduction to Religious Thought, where I'm saying, 'well, why has religion been invoked for these witch hunts, wars, holy wars, the crusades, to blame Christianity, right, for one example?' And they kind of say, 'well, they're just using it as an excuse.' And I'm saying, 'no, I don't think it's quite like that.' I forget right now who said 'an evil person can do something horrible, do horrible evil without any religion, but a good person, a moral person, can only do horrible things because of religion or through religion,' right, because the stakes are ultimate. You're getting people to Heaven in some traditions, or keeping people out of hell, so you can justify really tremendous evil. Religion can do that. And so, we got to, those who are religious, need to be aware of this, right, and try to ensure that religion is used in positive ways rather than negative ways.

Speaker 4 - Dr. Joanna Hersey

So, David, I've loved how much interdisciplinary talk we've had today. We've talked about language and linguistics and, of course, philosophy and religion coming together. We've talked about art and politics, and all of that belief system, and I can see, in the history side of it, too, how attractive this career is and how meaningful it is. Can you share with us what brought you to this? We went from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and we know you ended up at Duke, but tell us how you chose this career.

Speaker 1 - Dr. David Nikkel

Yeah, I grew up in a Methodist church, which was important to me, you know, religious parents. I was very good and very interested in math. So, I went to college as a math major, and I actually was interested in, I was also very interested in politics, reading op-ed stuff, and so on, as well as in science and mathematics. My father was a physicist, a metallurgist in particular, working in Bethlehem Steel originally. So, I went thinking, well, maybe I'll do a combined major with political science and mathematics. But I soon realized, well, but they intersect with statistics, and I'm not particularly into statistics, so I started to think about what are other possible careers? Well, I was certainly interested in religion, thought about religious questions. Also found, my friends would tend to come to me, talk about sometimes personal issues, kind of as an informal counselor, but sometimes more religious or spiritual kind of questions. So, I kind of started to think, maybe being a minister or maybe being a chaplain at, say, a college might be something I want to do. So, by my junior year, I decided, okay, I'm going to go to seminary. But then I fell in love with my first theology course. So pretty soon I was, okay, I'm going to try to go on for a Ph.D, which I did at Duke. And then most of my career has been as a full-time academic and part-time pastor. In hindsight, if I had done what probably would have most benefited me in terms of maximizing an academic career, I would have immediately applied for positions right out of my Ph.D. program. But, and United Methodism is by the conference, so, at that time, basically, whether it's a two-stage ordination process, my conference said 'you can only be permanently ordained as an elder if you serve in a local church full-time, two years.' So, I said 'okay,' and then by the time I started to apply for teaching positions, they were really hard to

get by that point, and they're even harder today, especially in the humanities. Eventually found a position at a college in Hastings for a time, and then my position was eliminated. But then I went back to a local church full-time for four years, and then I ended up here, yay, here until retirement a few months from now.

Speaker 1 - Dr. Richard Gay

Well, we certainly benefited from your presence here at the university over the years.

Speaker 2 - Dr. David Nikkel

Thank you.

Speaker 1 - Dr. Richard Gay

I've really enjoyed our conversation today and wish you the very best on retirement. I'm pretty confident that you're going to continue to be a prolific scholar...

Speaker 2 - Dr. David Nikkel

I hope so.

Speaker 1 - Dr. Richard Gay

...even though you might not be in the classroom anymore. So, I'd like to thank everybody for joining us, and let's all wish David, a very happy retirement.

Speaker 2 - Dr. David Nikkel

Thank you so much.

Speaker 4 - Dr. Joanna Hersey, Credits

This podcast was edited and transcribed by Joanna Hersey and our theme music was composed by Riley Morton.

Speaker 1 - Dr. Richard Gay, Credits

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