

# Laughing Gas

## The 2,000-Year-Old Anesthesiologist

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With apologies to Mel Brooks  
and Carl Reiner.



image courtesy of  
rotse1.physics.lsa.umich.edu/summary/defs/galaxy.jpg

Recently I was privileged to interview with Dr. Methuselah Z. Heffenweisser, an ancient man of healing, who is here in Southern California to promote his book, “How To Be Weiss Without Really Trying.” Reported to be 2,000 years old, Dr. Heffenweisser also claims in his book to be the one to give the first general anesthesia.

**KP:** Dr. Heffenweisser, welcome to Orange County. It is a great honor for me to meet you after hearing for so many years of your exploits around the world.

**MZH:** Thank you so much, sonny. It’s just great for me after all my travels all over the world to make it to your California Riviera, although I must say that I have often layed out in da true Riviera, and diss, my son, is no Riviera. And where are the oranges?

**KP:** Oh, the oranges ... Well, doctor, Orange County has changed. You’ll have to go to Florida now for oranges, but I’d like to ask you a few questions about your amazing life. So if I may, I’d like to ask the question that is foremost on everyone’s mind. How could you possibly be 2,000 years old?

**MZH:** Two thousand years old? What are you talking about? I don’t know who told you that. NO, NO, NO, and NO! I’m not 2,000 years old!!

**KP:** You’re not?

**MZH:** Two thousand years old?! Look at me, sonny. Do I look 2,000? Come on! I’m not going to be 2,000 until next summer!

**KP:** So you are 1,999 years old?

**MZH:** In years, dat is correct, but inside beats da heart of a 28-year-old man.

**KP:** OK, then. Everyone would like to know how you have lived so long. Would you say that to stay young, you must be young at heart?

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**MZH:** A young heart, yes!

**KP:** So it's really about one's attitude and one's enthusiasm?

**MZH:** Who knows? Who cares? I had a heart transplant two years ago, and dey put in da heart of a 28-year-old man. Actually I had it done in India. Very economical. No waiting on lists. Done right in my hotel room, very convenient.



**Dr. Methuselah Z. Heffenweisser**

**KP:** Oh my goodness, you are a heart transplant patient! I had no idea.

**MZH:** Oh, dat's nothing, really. I just take three or four pills and watch what I eat—chicken soup mostly, duck soup when chickens are hard to find. Life goes on.

**KP:** OK, so you are a patient as well as a doctor.

**MZH:** Dat's right, sonny. We are all patients. Some of us are doctors.

**KP:** Do you think it's harder to be a patient or a doctor?

**MZH:** Well, many years ago, things were very simple for both patients and doctors. In fact, hundreds of years ago, there vass no doctors, only healers, some called physicians, some called by other names. I myself was a healer, an observer of da human condition, a comforter of those who vass ill. I gave them hope. I lifted their hearts and I raised their spirits. But you must remember that ve had very few things to help a sick person back then. Ve had no pharmacopoeia, no ventilators, no hemodialysis, no nuttin'. The patients had to just lay dere until dey got better, or until dey went kerplunk!

**KP:** I see, doctor. Please go on.

**MZH:** But now, da patients, dey got to work—finding a doctor in your health plan, getting with the authorizations, and getting your health plan to pay for your doctor. It's become a regular full-time job to be sick.

**KP:** But, please, tell me, how did you learn to become a healer?

**MZH:** Vell, I vass vandering around in da desert one time in da Middle East near the Dead Sea, and I found diss cave on da side of a hill. In the cave, there vass deeze scrolls. I opened one up and it had this ancient Aramaic writing

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which described da healing methods of ancient peoples. Back then, I vass fluent in Aramaic, but I don't speak it much any more. It's been a 1,000 years since I needed to.

**KP:** What was in those scrolls?

**MZH:** There vass dis description of a potion that could heal any ailment. So I figured I should copy this important recipe down. But I had to leave da caves in a hurry, so I took this one scroll to read more later. Years later, I heard dat deeze Dead Sea scrolls vass pretty important. I vass embarrassed that I had walked off with one of deeze scrolls, and so it has taken me until now to reveal da existence of diss scroll and da formula.

**KP:** This is absolutely incredible. I suppose you are in a proprietary relationship with a pharmaceutical company?

**MZH:** No, not yet.

**KP:** This could be the biggest blockbuster drug of all time! When will you reveal the formula to the world?

**MZH:** Vell, it's in my book, but you want I should tell you right now?

**KP:** Right NOW?! You would? Unbelievable! We are making history today! OK. What is the formula?

**MZH:** Vell, you need water.

**KP:** Yes?

**MZH:** And a pinch of salt.

**KP:** Un huh.

**MZH:** And you bring it to a boil.

**KP:** Yes.

**MZH:** And den you drop in the chicken.

**KP:** What?! Chicken? You're talking about making a chicken soup?

**MZH:** Yeah, but not JUST a chicken soup. You got to put in da celery and da carrots. You didn't let me finish!

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**KP:** Chicken soup? Oh, I see, that was good. You had me for a moment, but really what was it you read in that scroll?

**MZH:** It's like I said—chicken soup.

**KP:** Chicken soup? That's it?

**MZH:** Yeah. But sometimes, you couldn't get the proper ingredients to make a good chicken soup. For example, there was a long stretch that I vass living in the Far East when chickens were very hard to find. Instead, dey had deeze special Peking ducks, so I had to adapt and I made dis duck soup. The peoples went wild over my duck soup, and it was almost as good as the original chicken soup as a medicinal potion. In fact, dey loved it so much that dey began to call me "ducktor." To me it sounded like doctor, and so from den on I came to introduce myself as Doctor Heffenvesser.

**KP:** But getting back to that lost Dead Sea Scroll, how could chicken soup be so miraculous? My own mother gave it to me all the time and it didn't seem to do anything.

**MZH:** It's all in da details, sonny. The most important part of da recipe was to use high quality ingredients and to make it from scratch.

**KP:** So then, in all your years of healing and ducktoring, how did you learn about anesthesia?

**MZH:** The School of Hard Knocks.

**KP:** Aha! So, do you mean that you learned by experience, by trial and error, by making mistakes and learning from them, and trying to do better the next time?

**MZH:** No, no, no. Not at all. I vent to da actual School of Hard Knocks. They had a school dat taught you how to whack a guy in the noggin to produce various levels of insensibility. You had rubber mallets of different weights dat you used to whack patients, in different parts of the head, with different angles, and with different velocities of impact, and, using this technique, you could produce different levels of anesthesia—light, medium, and heavy. Of course in those days with all the whacking and so forth, conscious sedation vass beyond our ability, but even then ve knew dat there vass no practical difference between deep sedation and general anesthesia.

**KP:** Well then, if someone taught you in your School of Hard Knocks, how can you claim that you gave the first general anesthesia?

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**MZH:** The first general anesthesia? Oh, sure. That was in the year 1789.

**KP:** Wow, that's more than 50 years earlier than Crawford Long!

**MZH:** It vass in New York, in Federal Hall on Wall Street, on the day Washington vass to be sworn in as President of the United States. They called for me because dey needed anesthesia, and dey needed it quick. General Washington's teeth was rotten and he needed someting so someone could pull out one of his teeth so he could be comfortable enough to take his oath of office.

**KP:** And you gave Washington general anesthesia for that? Well, how did you do it? What technique did you use?

**MZH:** Vell, I came with my mallets. Dat is why they summoned me because I vass well known in New York City in doze days for my whacking wit' da mallets.

**KP:** You whacked President Washington?

**MZH:** Vait a minute! He was General Washington then, a famous military man, in fact, the first general of the U.S. Army, but that day he vass the President of nuttin'.

**KP:** But, general anesthesia?

**MZH:** Look, sonny. He vass the first General and I gave him anesthesia with a whack to da noggin, so that's it! I gave the first General anesthesia.

**KP:** Dr. H., you never took advanced training in anesthesia?

**MZH:** Well, I vass in demand. It vass hard to find da time.

**KP:** There seems to be such a rich fabric of experience in your stories. Can we learn more about the history of anesthesia by reading your book "How to Be Weiss Without Really Trying?"

**MZH:** Not at all. That is a book about brewing beer. You wouldn't believe how easy it is to make a good Heffeweisser. But it's all in my book. Please buy da book. I don't care if you read da book, but please buy da book, so at some point it can be a choice on Oprah's Book Club.

**KP:** Thank you, Doctor Heffeweisser.

**MZH:** Ducktor Heffeweisser, please.