

**Shrink Rap Radio #32, April 10, 2006, Healing Through Art
David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Jennifer Linton,
a successful artist living in Toronto, Canada**

(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio by Dori Lehner)

Excerpt: *Well, I was abused by a family member when I was eight years old. And this went on for a few years, up until sort of my early pre-pubescence. I guess like many survivors of abuse, I kind of sublimated it for many years and didn't address it. My family members also sort of – it was never explicitly spoken about.*

Introduction: Those are the words of Jennifer Linton, a successful artist living in Toronto, Canada. Jennifer is also a wife and a mother, as well as a regular listener to Shrink Rap Radio. She's also an incest survivor. Through her work in the fine arts, Jennifer has found a way to process the anger, pain, guilt, humiliation and betrayal that are the inevitable result of such early childhood abuse. And Jennifer is also courageous enough to share her story with us in this interview.

Dr. Dave: Hi, Jennifer, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Jennifer Linton: Hi, Dr. Dave. Thanks for having me.

Dr. Dave: Yea, it's great to have you here. Let me give our audience a quick recap of how you got here. You're kind of like Alice, stepping through the Looking Glass, because you were a listener who wrote that you'd like me to book an art therapist as a guest, and you said you were interested in this as an artist who uses your art to work through a history of childhood sexual abuse. So, old Dr. Dave turned the tables on you, and suggested that you be a guest, and you graciously agreed.

Jennifer Linton: [laughs] Yeah, that's right. In listening to your program, I felt that there were a lot of parallels in some of the dream work and when you were talking about archetypes -- parallels in that with what I was doing just natively through my own artwork. And I found that to be particularly interesting.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, and that's really true. You know, I do intend to follow your suggestion and to get one or more art therapists on the show, but I thought, you know, it would be great to speak to you, who's not an art therapist, but ... I'm not sure if it's fair to say you've stumbled on to something great about the therapeutic potential of art.

Jennifer Linton: Yeah, um hmm.

Dr. Dave: But let's back up a little so that everybody's kind of on board with your story. And I know you don't want to go into explicit details, but tell us what you feel comfortable with about the sexual abuse that happened in your childhood.

Jennifer Linton: Um hmm. Well, I was abused by a family member when I was eight years old. This went on for a few years, up until sort of my early pre-pubescence. You know, I guess like many survivors of abuse I kind of sublimated it for many years and didn't address it, and my family members also sort of – it was never explicitly spoken about, but there was sort of, I think, an implied understanding that there was something that was wrong.

Dr. Dave: So you have – so it was kind of like the elephant in the room that nobody would talk about.

Jennifer Linton: Um hmm, I think that's an excellent analogy. As in many families and cultures, people don't like to address the things that are difficult to look at, because then it suggests you have a problem, and then when you acknowledge you have a problem then you actually have to do something about it.

Dr. Dave: Right, and also a child doesn't have the cognitive skills to exactly know how to deal with it, you know, what kind of framework to put it in, and so on.

Jennifer Linton: Well, yeah. That's just it.

Dr. Dave: Now, I'm wondering if, in retrospect, if you have any feelings that your parents, by being in denial – that they didn't protect you.

Jennifer Linton: Yes. I mean, I do feel that way. I certainly did feel that way and the reasons for that, who knows. I mean, without having a very open conversation with them, one will never know why they made the choices that they did make. That being said, I don't blame them. One doesn't want to – I don't want to go through life carrying the baggage of, "My parents did this or didn't do this," and therefore I'm screwed up.

Dr. Dave: Sure, I understand. Yeah, I understand that. Is having an open conversation with them still an option? Are they still alive?

Jennifer Linton: They're both still alive. My father's quite ill, however, and they're both in their sort of mid-70s. I think my father has a history – I don't think of sexual abuse, as far as I know – but I know that his childhood was not a happy one. And I think he has some issues that he needs to address. I think because he's sort of in the twilight of his years, I hesitate to bring up the subject matter.

Dr. Dave: Sure. Yeah, I understand. So what was the impact of the event on your subsequent growing up and development? I mean, you say it started at eight. It went on for several years, so, you know, you're starting to be a preteen – 11-12, somewhere in there. What was the impact as you look back now?

Jennifer Linton: Oh, well, I think I was very angry. And I continue to have sort of anger management issues. Certainly around that time, in my preteens and teenage

years, I was kind of a wild kid, didn't do particularly well in school and had a problem with authority figures in particular. Still do, actually. [laughs] You know, ran with a kind of a wild group of kids and drank a lot and took drugs and, you know, certainly had a precocious sexuality, which I think in retrospect I'm not sure that I would have had, not having had the experiences that I did have.

Dr. Dave: That often goes – you know, that precocious sexuality often goes along with early childhood abuse.

Jennifer Linton: Um hmm, um hmm.

Dr. Dave: It seems like it can go to one extreme or the other.

Jennifer Linton: Yes, yes.

Dr. Dave: And I take it you didn't seek out or receive any counseling or therapy?

Jennifer Linton: No, no. I never have officially sought out therapy. Probably in retrospect I think I might have been further along than being in my sort of later 30s and ... Although I would say I'm much more healed now than perhaps I would have been otherwise had I not had the outlet of my artwork. But I've never gone into therapy.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, well, you know, as a somewhat of a confirmed Jungian, I'm of the belief that there is this part of us that is always seeking healing and working on our healing, and looking for tools so that we can come into balance. And it sounds like those processes really have been at work within you, and that you're... I know you've studied mythology and your combination of your involvement with mythology and with art seems to have helped to potentiate that healing, if you will.

Jennifer Linton: Um hmm. Well, and it's interesting that when I was in art school and then probably for the few years after my graduation, my work was fairly, I guess you would say, impersonal. It was certainly informed by a more academic discussion of gender roles and feminism and things like that. And it wasn't until '99 – 2000, that my work became personal and I began using childhood photographs of myself, but then inserting them in these stories, these legends that I was familiar of from classical mythology. And of course these stories serve as basically a vessel, you know, a sort of a ready-made into which I can pour my own history, you know, and depersonalize to some extent the content, to make it a little easier to deal with. Because I think it's so raw that you almost have to take a step or two back, and by using these stories I can sort of displace myself in, say for instance, the story of Persephone. And then from there go onwards and, you know, push it maybe into more personal spaces once I'm more comfortable.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah. I'll want to hear more about your use of ...

Jennifer Linton: [Sneezes]

Dr. Dave: Bless you. Sounds like you're sneezing on that end.

Jennifer Linton: Yeah, I think I've got a bit of a cold.

Dr. Dave: Uh oh. I'll want to hear more about Persephone and how you've used that myth. But before we get into that, still sort of [laugh] dwelling on your past here, did it create problems for you, the early abuse, as you came into your adult sexuality? Was it hard for you to move into a trusting relationship, or not?

Jennifer Linton: Yeah, I mean, there's always, I think, going to be issues of trust, and, you know, I think my natural tendency to life tends towards pessimism and sort of tending to expect the worst of people, and being somewhat suspicious of hidden agendas, and you know...

Dr. Dave: Well, not surprising given that your trust was violated.

Jennifer Linton: Yeah, absolutely, you know. So I think that that is pretty much the usual, but I have been in a number of fairly long term monogamous relationships and I now have been married for a number of years now, and, yeah, I think it must be very difficult for the partners of people who have gone through this early trauma. One has to be, I think, very patient. I think with sort of the right partner certainly everything works out.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah. Now another thing that I'm curious about is reportedly some people recover memories of abuse that have been repressed. Did you ever forget about the sexual abuse or any pieces of it that you had experienced?

Jennifer Linton: There are elements sort of from that period of time, I think, where my memory seems somewhat hazy. And there are certain instants that I recall that I'm not entirely certain whether it was an actual event, or if it was a fantasy that I had. For instance, I have this, I think, memory of finally confronting my abuser and sort of giving them a shove down a couple of steps on these stairs in my house. And I swear this happened, but in retrospect it almost seems a little too good to be true that that actually happened. I mean, I did eventually, as sort of a preteen, become a bit scrappy and a bit of a fighter, I think as a result of the abuse. You know, one looks around and realizes that the only help that's coming is going to be from yourself. So, you know, if there's one good thing that's come out of this, I'm a fairly – I don't know if you'd say "thick skinned" – but, you know, I think I'm a fairly strong individual because you have to be.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, and certainly that's how you come across.

Jennifer Linton: Oh? Well, thank you.

Dr. Dave: You grew up in a family where – and it makes sense – “we couldn’t talk about this, we didn’t talk about it.” But at what point did you decide to come out and to be more public, because here we are talking about it.

Jennifer Linton: Yeah, well it was with my series called “The Bitter Seed.” I mean, it might have been possible to have exhibited that work and not have mentioned my own history, and people would have come to the work with their own sort of baggage and history and knowledge, and taken from it what they would have and gone away. But to me it was very important that the body of work had a certain reading, and I think that that series is richer from knowing my own biography, as is the case with a lot of other artists who do, like Frida Kahlo, very autobiographical work; that somehow their own personal stories enrich the work and give the viewer certain insight into it. So with “The Bitter Seed,” there was – I mean, some of the work’s certainly divorced from the larger body, maybe sort of misinterpreted as, “Oh isn’t that a nice little drawing of the little girl.” But certainly when you see the group together there’s a sinister component to it that I think is unavoidable. And I wanted people to know where that was coming from.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I’ve been to your Web site, and I’ll put a link to your Web site into Show Notes, as well. I looked at the links to your paintings and certainly knowing the backstory helps to make those, you know – to know how to read them. So, I’ve looked at the paintings and drawings and some of the interviews you’ve given. Clearly you’re an accomplished fine artist at this point in your life. And so it sounds like gradually you moved away from art that was sort of coming from the head, if you will, into art that was coming more from your heart and more from your soul.

Jennifer Linton: Um hmm. And I think it’s certainly the better for it. I mean certainly there are – you could still argue there are academic components to the work, I mean, in that I reference classical mythology and there’s also a lot of biblical references. You know, I have a degree in art history, Western art history, so I often reference previous paintings, stories, that if you’re familiar with art history and with just basically the culture of Western Europe, you would be familiar with what I’m doing. But I inject my own personal story, which I think makes them a little more interesting.

Dr. Dave: Right. Now somehow your story is you’ve kind of discovered yourself in the archetype of Persephone, and the two stories kind of are woven together for you. Maybe you can give us a recap of that Greek myth.

Jennifer Linton Persephone is the daughter of the Greek goddess of agriculture named Demeter. And her story is that one day she was abducted by the Greek god of the underworld, and his name is Hades, which is also the name of the underworld. He basically takes her away to be his bride, and her mother doesn’t know where she’s disappeared to, and is searching the earth and the cosmos for her daughter.

In the meantime, of course, the earth, the crops fail and all sorts of ecological disasters take place because she's not doing her job. And eventually it is revealed that she is with Hades. And so what ends up happening is Zeus – who's basically the king of all the gods – makes a judgment and says that Persephone has to remain in Hades for a third of the year because she ate a seed from a pomegranate, and there's sort of this rule, that if you eat food while you're in the underworld, you have to stay there. So they strike a bargain and say for a third of the year she stays in the underworld, which is like the Greek afterlife. They don't really have heaven and hell; they just kind of have one place. And then the rest of the time she's above the surface and so it's spring and summer and then, of course, fall. Her mother anticipates her leaving and things start to die.

So it's basically a Greek myth that on the surface tells a story to explain the changing of the seasons. And it's also that very kind of archetypal death and rebirth story, in that annually, you know, you could say that Persephone descends into the underworld and dies. You could even make a parallel to, of course, Christ, and also to all sorts of other legends – that there's this annual sacrifice and then she – but she always comes back from the dead. And this is just this annual cycle.

So, I kind of saw myself as Persephone, as this kind of basically sacrifice, and of course Persephone's abducted, essentially raped. The whole series began with a photo of myself as a young child holding a piece of fruit, and I made this piece of fruit a pomegranate. Of course, the pomegranate is essential to this story, so – and this is a symbol that I've used to this day throughout my work. But that was kind of the impetus for that. And then the idea, of course, of descending into the underworld harkens back to – if you want to tie it into Jungian psychology – the idea of going into one's subconscious, looking into the dark places where we don't want to look, and...

Dr. Dave: Precisely.

Jennifer Linton: ...confronting them with the hope, I guess, of being reborn, of working through those dark places and coming out the other end.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Yes. And it sounds like that's the process that you are immersed in.

Jennifer Linton: Well, you know, that's what I'm hoping, anyway. [laughs] And so that was what I was kind of working at with that series. And then a couple years later, I went on to do – after that series I went on to do a series of work that dealt with more, like, animals and animal rights. I needed a break from the very personal stuff. And then two years later, I kind of revisited the same – my same history, but this time around, as an adult. And I slipped myself into the role of St. Ursula, who's sort of a fringe saint in the Catholic hagiography or whatever. She's the patron saint and protector of school girls. So I show myself dressed as, like, a Catholic schoolgirl, with a kilt, and I've got angel wings and a sword. And

basically I kind of worked through this series being the protector that I guess I wanted as a child but didn't have. There's one image in particular where there's a double self-portrait of myself as a child and myself as an adult, sort of counseling my younger self. And it's this kind of imagined, fantasy driven encounters, you know, and so again I'm sort of using this fringe saint, but again essentially again doing this very personal work.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, but it's really interesting that you took this two-year break. Before the break your work really, I think, was focusing on unearthing the victim, and really identifying with them and being in touch with the pain of being a victim, and trying to give that some expression. And then there's this two-year hiatus and it comes back to you, but now you're in the role of protector and giving some protection and nurturing to that inner child. It's very interesting that this, you know, it sounds like a spontaneous healing process. Do you have any – have you noticed changes in your psyche and your sense of well-being over time? Do you have a sense of being in a healing process?

Jennifer Linton: I think so, yeah. I mean, I would say, you know, in my teens and twenties I was just generally kind of an angry person. Even though I was in a committed relationship and was married in my twenties, you know, I think I still had to really work through some issues that I had about men, you know, about my relationship with my parents, my relationship with just people in general. I would say – of course, I'm older now, but – and now I'm a parent, so I've – I would say generally I'm a happier person than I used to be, and let's hope a more sort of emotionally mature person. And I'm not willing to just place the blame at the feet of others. I'm certainly not suggesting that I'm to blame for this, but there does come a point where you just have to let that go. And I'm hoping that that's kind of what I worked through, and probably continue to work through with my own work. Often my work is sort of where I put all of my angst. So sometimes you could look at my body of work and say, "Well, wow, there's a lot going on there [laughs] that's maybe on the negative side." But I think it's just – I tend – that tends to be what goes into my artwork, although my newer work now is really more a reflection of my role as being a mother. And that imagery, I guess because I've got my little guy in them, they're a little bit happier.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, and as you point out, we go into the dark places; we go down into the underworld hopefully to come back and to emerge out of that darkness into the light and, you know, and so you've gone into your darkness a lot. You may be going in some more, but there's some light.

Jennifer Linton: Well, it's a lifelong thing, but, yeah, one doesn't need to dwell – and one shouldn't dwell – in the darkness for too long, because it tends to mess up your head, and I don't think it's a very healthy place to be.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, and that reminds me of the myth as you told it. It was an annual rite, suggesting that periodically one is called to go back down, sometimes kicking and screaming.

Jennifer Linton: Oh sure, you know, because we don't often want to look at the dark stuff. It's easier, I suppose, to distract oneself with, you know, other nonsense in your life, but I think every now and then maybe it's good to check in and see how your soul's doing, I don't know. [laughs]

Dr. Dave: Sexual abuse of children is far more prevalent than used to be believed, I mean, shockingly so. And it's likely that one or more listeners have themselves been victims at some point or another. Is there any advice you would have for them?

Jennifer Linton: I would say, you know, don't wait too long to maybe seek out professional help, I guess, if they're comfortable with that. I mean, certainly I would say seek out some kind of counsel, at least if you spoke to a friend about it. It's, I think, better to at least, you know, exorcise your demons to some degree rather than letting it fester inside. So that would probably be the best recourse because if you do walk around with that inside, it's going to come out in – and if it's not addressed maybe in a creative manner, then it's probably going to come out in a destructive manner. And I've seen it in people who've had issues – not necessarily even of sexual abuse – but just people who have some baggage they need to deal with and if they don't deal with it in a positive way, they quite often end up alcoholics or drug addicts or, you know, lord knows what.

Dr. Dave: Right. Well, that sounds like wise advice to me. Well, to wrap things up here, I had made reference to your Web site and said I would put it in the Show Notes, but not everybody makes it to the Web site, unfortunately. Why don't you go ahead and give us the address of your Web site.

Jennifer Linton: Okay, well it's easy to find. It's www.jenniferlinton.ca. That's dot ca because I'm in Canada. A lot of people say dot com, but that's another Jennifer Linton.

Dr. Dave: Oh, okay. So make sure you say dot ca so that you get to the famous artist in Toronto [laughter] and Jennifer, I want to thank you so much for your willingness to be on the show and to share your experience and the wisdom that's come out of it.

Jennifer Linton: Well, thank you. Thank you for having me.

Dr. Dave: Okay, that's our interview with Toronto artist Jennifer Linton. I admire her courage in being willing to share her story with us. And I hope you take some inspiration from her account to face some of your own inner demons. We all have them.

For me, Jennifer's account underscores the value of using what Jungians refer to as "active imagination" in working toward healing and wholeness. The idea is that by combining imagination and expression, whether that expression be through journaling, poetry, movement, collage, painting, or other forms of artistic expression, we're able to give voice to those dissociated parts of ourselves which need to become better integrated into our working personality. Clearly, Jennifer's artwork serves as a vehicle for her to revisit painful places and to reprocess them in ways that are expressive and sometimes playful or whimsical. She's able to give voice to what could not be spoken as a child. I'm also struck by Jennifer's use of the Greek myth of Persephone. By identifying with Persephone, she's able to step outside the pain of her own story and see it in the context of a larger, timeless, archetypal story. It's still a tragic story in some respects, but it also is a heroic one.

When we find ourselves in the mythic pattern, it can give us a sense of larger meaning to our lives. We come to see our own particular pains as challenges to grow and persevere in a larger, timeless, heroic quest. If you've been following this series, you'll recall my recent interview with [Alberto Villoldo](#) on shamanic healing. I've been reading his most recent book. He emphasizes there that the South American shaman, with whom he has studied, don't make the sharp distinction that we do between inner and outer, real and imaginary. For them working in the imaginal sphere is working on reality, and it's in that imaginal sphere that they do their healing work. As Alberto Villoldo says in the introduction to his book, "The shaman believe that the physical world rests within the realm of the mind, which rests within the domain of the soul, which is held within the folds of the spirit. Spirit is the wellspring from which everything else emerges. Change at the level of spirit transforms the world."

For us in the West, mythology and art are two possible pathways to help us enter into this imaginal realm, the realm of psyche, where the real soul work needs to be done.