



photo: Joel Walker

A Picture Unleashes a Thousand Words

By Nellie Jacobs

An unconventional psychiatrist uses photography to free patients

THE PUSH AND PULL OF DUAL PASSIONS HAS DOMINATED THE professional life of Joel Walker, psychiatrist and photographer. Says the upbeat Walker, "Life is like a journey, and I just let it unfold."

That journey began in 1975, when Walker and his wife Marlene, having just gotten married, decided to take a year off. He would postpone opening a psychiatry practice; she would defer entering the University of Toronto's Master of Social Work program. "Medical school was a long road. You had to be so single-minded." He felt that years of study had shut down all his senses and emotions: "I remember thinking that I really, really needed my space -- to get out there and feel alive again."

With the money Walker had just won in a lottery, the couple bought two Nikon cameras and took a two-day course on how to use them. They then purchased open airline tickets and embarked on a six-month trip around the world, shooting nearly 80 rolls of film. The experience ignited Walker's latent artistic side.



photo courtesy of: Joel Walker

Joel Walker as photographed by a patient

He would go on to study with renowned photographers, such as Freeman Patterson and Eugene Richards, and his photography would blossom from a hobby into a professional career.

Seeing and Telling

RETURNING FROM HIS TRIP, Walker opened a psychiatric practice in Toronto, decorating the walls with some of his surreal images. "My wife always said I never made normal pictures," he laughs. His patients responded immediately: "The photos were a catalyst to start talking. The visual part of the brain is much more primitive -- it gets to the root of feelings much more quickly." Walker became aware of "the power of these images, and how quickly I could get to underlying feelings and conflicts. In talking about the images," he explains, "they were talking about themselves."

Over time, he wondered how other people would react to the images, what a larger sampling would reveal. In 1979, he put on an interactive exhibit in New York entitled *See & Tell*, displaying 10 of his images. His goal was to see what types of responses each image provoked, which images received more or less the same response, and which prompted both positive and negative responses. The photos that provided both types of response would be most valuable for therapy. Thousands of visitors actively participated, anonymously writing their responses on cards left in a box beneath each picture.

Collating the results, Walker developed a kit incorporating the four images evoking the most powerful responses. Known as *The Walker Visuals*, this kit continues to be used in psychotherapy worldwide, and Walker is considered a pioneer in what is known as "phototherapy." Overall, Walker finds that the images are most effective for people who have difficulty verbalizing or dealing with difficult topics such as post-traumatic stress or incest.

Walker provides group workshops to teach individuals how to use the four images in therapy. He divides the participants -- which include psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and therapists -- into groups of four (or, if necessary, eight), and has each participant rotate through the different roles: therapist, patient, observer, and ▶



photo: Joel Walker

"The visual part of the brain is much more primitive -- it gets to the root of feelings much more quickly."



Royal Agricultural Winter Fair

photo: Joel Walker



Royal Canadian Mounted Police

photo: Joel Walker

THE WALKER VISUALS



photo: Joel Walker



photo: Joel Walker



photo: Joel Walker



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This is a partial list of questions that Walker uses with the images. They are not in any particular order, and can be used interchangeably.

- 1) If you were to express the feeling of this image in a title, what would it be?
- 2) Would you like to be in this picture? Why or why not?
- 3) What happened just before this picture?
- 4) What will happen after this picture?
- 5) Does the image make you feel comfortable or uncomfortable? Why?
- 6) If you were to be anything in this picture, what would you be? Why?
- 7) What would you change about this picture if you could?
- 8) If you could change the color of this image, what color would you choose?
How does this affect your response?
- 9) Would turning the image upside down or sideways affect your response?

“scribe.” Participants receive sheets with questions such as, “What thoughts, feelings, and fantasies do you see in the picture?” “What would you add to the picture?” and “What would you delete from the picture?”

As Walker searches for ways to blend photography with therapy, one project leads to another. His photographs of elderly people during intimate conversations resulted in a 1984 exhibit: *Old People I Know: Inner Portraits*. A 1995 Life magazine graphic photo essay arose from another experiment: he left a camera on a table between himself and a patient so that, at any point in the session, either could snap a picture of the other. Using this technique, he was able to show the patient her progression through manic and depressive episodes. As a result, the patient accepted her illness and agreed to take medication.

In 1996, the *Annals* of The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada published a ten-page photo essay entitled *Face to Face: Through the Eyes of Patient and Doctor*. More recently, *We May Never Die*, an interactive exhibition of 18 images, was presented in Mexico and then in the Czech Republic.

Reaching Out Through Art

CURRENTLY WALKER PRACTICES PSYCHIATRY TWO DAYS a week, and photography three days. He particularly enjoys working with artistic patients because, he says, “artistic people have an intuitiveness to which I can relate.”

Walker is now working on photographic projects aimed at a wider audience. A photojournalistic series entitled *Portraits of the Human Spirit* will include images of individuals who have overcome adversity: an elderly horse trainer, a girl battling kidney disease, an Olympic athlete. He is also working on a project that aims to show the world as seen by a man in his late 20s who is losing his eyesight due to retinitis pigmentosa. Walker also wants to use photojournalistic techniques to destigmatize segments of the population, such as individuals who choose unorthodox lifestyles. But not all of Walker’s photographic work is related to his psychiatric career: in 2001 he was hired as the official photographer for the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, an international agricultural, horticultural, and equestrian exposition in Toronto.

When asked which field, psychiatry or photography, is the dominant part of his life, Walker answers, “both.” He clearly lives his philosophy: “I have always believed that whatever you are choosing, you had better enjoy it.” **MH**