

THERE'S MORE TO PHOTOS THAN MEETS THE EYE. PHOTOTHERAPY TECHNIQUES REVEAL THE POWER OF PICTURES AND SHOW HOW TO UNLOCK THE SECRETS OF FAMILY ALBUMS

PHOTO THERAPY



Y

ou know those cupboards that families are supposed to keep their skeletons in? Well they actually do exist. They are called family photograph albums. Those apparently boring snaps of the family on the beach or posing in front of the new house are actually the domestic equivalent of a gossip column – who's in, who's out, who's close, who's not.

What you have is the unexpurgated version of the family history, only it is in code. And the person with the key is Canadian photographer and therapist Judy Weiser. Her book *PhotoTherapy Techniques* seems likely to unlock a graveyard of skeletons.

Weiser sees clients in much the same way as any other psychotherapist but finds that photographs can speed up the recovery of forgotten or repressed memories. 'They are often stored visually so trying to get them with words can be difficult; photos are a fast-track to the unconscious.'

When Weiser looks at an album she looks for patterns. Are there two people who are often photographed together? Is there someone who is usually off to one side in any family

gathering? 'In my family album,' says Weiser, 'there are lots of pictures of me and my mum together but when my father is in the frame he is always in the background.'

'There are almost no pictures of me and my father together. On the surface all was fine in our family but what those pictures revealed was a deeper and more nasty truth which was that I was frightened of my father and didn't like him.'

Noticing these patterns can produce surprising revelations. Weiser tells how one of her clients, asked to bring a 'happy' photo to a session, came with a picture of herself, her sister and her mother on the beach. 'She was telling me about the holiday when suddenly she spotted something she had never been aware of in the picture before – a newspaper lying on the rock beside her mother.'

'She began shouting at her mother in the photo, saying she had never had enough time to talk to her, how she was always buried in a book or newspaper. These were feelings she had repressed for a long time. When she released them they made ▷

EXPOSED – SARITA MONTROSE SHOWS PHOTOTHERAPIST JUDY WEISER A SELECTION OF SNAPS

○ I'VE ALWAYS BELIEVED THE ONLY THERAPY I NEED IS A REGULAR TRIP TO THE HAIRDRESSER'S. YOU GET A

therapeutic head massage, a sympathetic ear to life's hassles and you come out feeling good about yourself – all for about the same cost in time and money as a session on the couch.

That said, I'm as human as the next person – same insecurities, the odd panic attack in *Next* and a regular dose of who/what/why-am-I self-analysis. So a meeting with Judy Weiser over a selection of my photos was never going to be a walk in the park.

Traditional therapy relies on the subjective input of the client who reveals as much or as little as he or she wants. And when the very problem you are trying to deal with becomes too painful to confront, the therapist's probing questions can elicit anger, aggression and lies. With PhotoTherapy there is a third dimension – the pictures are a testimony that can't be denied. As▷

Body language: Sarita Montrose as a child with her mother (top right); a favourite photo of her sister (top left); and relaxing with friends (above, far right) – Judy Weiser noticed that her favourite photos were all informal



Alastair Hume, an ex-client of Judy's, says, 'You can't run away from photos which are yours,

which are personal to you.'

And, as I found, you can't even run away from the ones you left at home. One of the first questions Judy asks is 'Are there any photos you specifically chose not to bring?' This applies to nude or embarrassing pictures as well as those that are emotionally hot. And the next question is, 'What would be the worst thing that could happen if you did bring them along?' Well, when you put it like that...

The whole process is disarmingly simple, and that is its strength. This is no therapist-as-God scenario. Judy is keen to establish mutual ground; it is a joint exploration and, although the questions are loaded, the context is familiar – like showing holiday snaps to your colleagues or reminiscing with friends.

The art of the therapist is to read the underlying messages. 'It's not what the photo is of that's important, it's what it's about,' says Judy. She watched as I arranged my pictures on the table, then asked me to describe the stories they tell, pen and paper in hand to note the themes and patterns of my response to each image. Nothing goes unnoticed. It's not just what you say about each picture, it's how you say it, your body language, tone of voice – and how quickly you skip over the ones you want to avoid.

I thought I'd got away with it: this is me, mum, my boyfriend, the mountain-in-Switzerland-where-my-dad's-ashes-are, my friends, my sister...

'Let's just go back to this' >

sense of the other problems she had.'

There are no rules for reading albums. They are not modern tarot cards in which a picture of a car represents material goods or someone in a corner symbolises being trapped. 'The only meaning lies inside the head of the person I am working with,' says Weiser. 'What can also be very revealing is discovering the different meanings that one picture has for different family members.'

For example, when a marriage is in trouble, the opposite ways a couple respond to a picture can often provide a metaphor for what is driving them apart, like the wife who saw the picture of a girl hugging a cat as cute and cosy while the husband saw it as suffocating. That was a starting point for them to work on themselves so she didn't feel abandoned and he didn't feel overwhelmed.

Sometimes a conflict is captured unknowingly in a picture. One of Weiser's clients was furious with his mother but didn't know why. 'She was the perfect mother,' he would say. But one day he brought in a photo of him as a young child sitting on her knee. Both are smiling, but she is gripping his hands and forcing them into the best position for the photo. 'That picture became a symbol for him of what was really going on,' Weiser said. 'He realised that it was years of resentment at her total control that was fuelling his anger.'

The pictures that are left out of an album can be as eloquent as those that are included. 'I am a large woman and I'm not afraid of physical work,' says Weiser. 'When someone took a picture of me mixing concrete I showed it to my mother because I

thought it was fun and true. She was horrified and said there was no way she was going to have me looking like that in the album,' says Weiser. 'That sort of thing happens a lot. Girls are supposed to look cute while boys are usually pictured doing something. When you see that you know there is likely to be a side of the girl that hasn't been expressed.' JEROME BURNE *PhotoTherapy; Exploring The Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums* by Judy Weiser is published by Jossey-Bass, priced £29.95.

Above: Sarita's mother (far left), father (right) and brother (front), circa 1969. Double take, top: in therapy, Sarita would be asked to make the photos of herself (left) and her mother talk to each other

THE PICTURES ARE A TESTIMONY THAT CANNOT BE DENIED



Wild at heart, above: Sarita goes back to her roots.

Fatherland, right: the emotionally charged photograph of Switzerland



PHOTO THERAPY

one,' Judy interrupted, and my heart sank before slowly rising to my throat. Bull's-eye – we both knew she'd pushed the right button. Dignity was restored by the consensus that I was there as a journalist and this wasn't a therapy session; we moved on.

If it had been for real, Judy said she would have asked me to create a dialogue between the pictures of myself and my mum, both as kids, looking so alike. She also grouped the pictures I

MY HEART SANK BEFORE RISING TO MY THROAT. WE BOTH KNEW SHE'D PUSHED THE RIGHT BUTTON

talked enthusiastically about – 'fun, brilliant' – and asked me what they had in common. I noticed the obvious – they were all outside, with people I loved (Would I have brought pictures of people I hated? she asked without a hint of sarcasm); Judy noticed that they were all informal.

At moments like this, you half-expect – and want – a horoscope-style personality assessment – so what does my choice of pictures mean? Does bringing the mad-woman-on-

the-moors picture of me and my boyfriend mean that I have a low self-image or that I'm comfortable with myself? But you are the keeper of secrets, not the therapist; she's there just to draw out and explore the things you already know. She may uncover the truth – and make it bearable – but it must be your truth, not hers.

As in art, each person's response to a photo is different. And when looking at an impersonal image we all bring our own emotional baggage to an apparently objective exercise. Looking at a picture I'd torn from a magazine of a dreamy couple gazing out to sea, Judy explored this, asking me to imagine what the couple were doing, how they got there and what they'd do next. If I was the girl, what would I do? Would I like to be her...?

Like therapy, photos reach into your subconscious. 'Why do you have the pictures you have, and what would be missing in your life if you didn't have them?' Judy asks. She holds one flat at eye level; it's just a thin strip of paper but, like a credit card in a door, it has the power to unlock your psyche. I, for one, will never look at photos in the same way again. SARITA MONTROSE

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS CAN BE USED TO FIND HIDDEN SECRETS IN YOUR OWN FAMILY ALBUM

- 1 Which are your favourites?
- 2 Why?
- 3 If your house was burning, which two would you save?
- 4 Why?
- 5 If these photos disappeared, what would be missing in your life?
- 6 What are the differences between pictures of yourself that you like and dislike?
- 7 What would you have to change about the ones you don't like to make them likeable?
- 8 What is the story of each picture – how did it come to be?
- 9 Look for patterns and repetitions in the family album. Who is touching who? What are your family's rules of presentation?
- 10 Is your family album a true representation of your childhood as you remember it? If not, what would you change to make it accurate?

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ELLE



SUSAN WERNER

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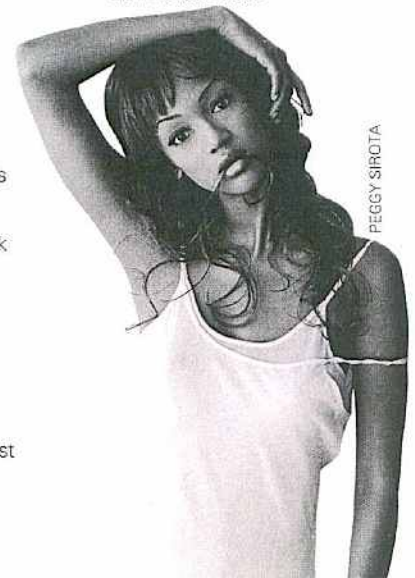
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