



Photo by David A. Krauss

## Chapter 4

# The Visual Metaphor: Some Underlying Assumptions of Phototherapy

DAVID A. KRAUSS

Time it was,  
And what a time it was,  
It was. . .  
A time of innocence,  
A time of confidences.  
Long ago. . . it must be. . .  
I have a photograph.  
Preserve your memories;  
They're all that's left you.

Bookends Theme  
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**P**ILED in shoe boxes on closet shelves, pasted on bedroom mirrors, neatly arranged on the piano, or in albums, personal photographs document our experience of being alive in the world. They are graphic symbols, representations of the people, places and things in a life. They are artifacts of our existence forever framed and frozen on film. Although these portrayed images are of a past, we always respond to them in the present. The information which personal images contain affects us in many ways, defining and directing our memories of the past, and causing us to remember events from the photograph's point of view. Invariably, this influences our awareness and understanding in the here and now.

This seems to be true not only for our personal or private photographs but for public images as well.

History and behavior are not often thought to be based on mere visual images. However, there is some agreement that the ways we perceive, even the way we remember circumstances may be molded by photographs. People scarcely saw the slums until Jacob Riis photographed them. The depression sticks in memory as Walker

Evans depicted it.<sup>1</sup>

As part of the psychotherapeutic process, photographs, especially those of the "snapshot" variety have been used with individuals, families and groups for gathering information about the past, developing insight in the present, and offering hope and direction for a future.

Client photographs are artifacts that symbolically show relationships, contexts and the dynamics of peoples' lives. As the client responds and reflects upon these artifacts, he or she reexperiences the historical feelings associated with the images. Subsequently, the client is forced to reinterpret this information in the present. This helps clients develop skills in perceiving, feeling, thinking, behaving, and communicating.

A good deal of the power of the phototherapeutic technique derives from the photographs ability to function simultaneously as both an object, such as a picture of a family, and as a metaphoric representation, such as a symbol of all families, and/or what I am reminded of when I see a family photograph. Photographs have content that is both pictorial and emotional.

In the field of psychology, an understanding of the nature of metaphor has been used for years in the areas of dream analysis, hypnosis, projective work, fantasy and art therapy. The purpose of this chapter is to focus on metaphor, its pictorial nature and how the use of photographs and visually referent language are potent therapeutic techniques.<sup>2</sup> It seeks to show the underlying assumptions, and to illustrate the ways in which metaphor affects us so profoundly. It seeks to answer the question, "Why phototherapy?"

### CONTACTING AND COMPREHENDING THE WORLD

On a most fundamental physiological level, making correct adaptive responses to the world determines our survival. The information to make these responses derives from our auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, gustatory and visual senses. These senses are the means by which we discover initially what is real, i.e. what will give us warmth, shelter and nourishment, and what is not real. As we mature, as we become aware and conceptualizing beings in the world, we learn to use our senses in more sophisticated ways as a means for

<sup>1</sup>Goldberg, V. Four who suggest photography has the power to shape thought. *American Photographer* (7)6, Dec. 1981, 34-38.

<sup>2</sup>Although not dealt with per se in this chapter, the use of the visual sense to create pictures or scenarios in our mind's eye is called imaging. The creation of visual images for developing change strategies has a long history in which this process has been used for developing personal power, inner strength or peace, changing behavior, combating disease and pain, etc. In the helping professions imaging is used in such areas as biofeedback, meditation, stress reduction, hypnosis, disease and pain control, etc. These areas have been written about fairly extensively. The book *Seeing With The Mind's Eye* by Samuels is such a good general introduction to this area. In the past few years much interesting work has been done in our culture with guided imagery in combating pain and disease. Books such as *Free Yourself From Pain* by Bresler and Turbo, *Healings from Within*, Jaffe, and *Getting Well Again* by Simonton, Matthews-Simonton, and Creighton document the potential power in these visually oriented techniques which can be used by mental health practitioners. The International Imagery Association publishes a *Journal of Mental Imagery* and it is recommended reading for those who wish to more broadly explore this area.

gathering information. In processes analogous to what Piaget has described developmentally as "accommodation and assimilation" we find that our understanding of the world derives from our ability to create anew at each level of our cognitive development, a figure and a ground, to experience differentiation, to discover ourselves as individuals in the world.

We may also consider this developmental process as the two broad categories of physical and spiritual needs in Maslow's self-actualization hierarchy. Initially our senses help us obtain physiological needs and ultimately they help us set the stage for transcendent experience. They are the materials by which we build cognition and derive our sense of wonder about the world.

Because our senses are our primary link with our reality, it follows that the more we can utilize any and/or all of our sensory inputs at any given time (up to the point of sensory overload) the more we will be in contact with the world, the more information we will have to work with as we organize responses, and the more functional and adaptive these responses can be. We seek the ability to fluidly utilize any one or combination of senses in translating that sensory input into information and action.

Authors such as Bateson and Bandler and Grinder have demonstrated that although people can and do employ all their senses to some degree, we all have favorite, sense-derived orientations for accessing or receiving and ordering incoming stimuli and for representing our reality. As basic as the process is, the dominance of a primary sensory orientation has built-in problems.

First, since the engagement of any sensory mode entails a disregarding of information from other sensory channels, some of our ability to functionally employ all of our senses may greatly diminish over time rigidifying our reality and limiting our experience.

Second, just as the language we speak influences our thought processes, each sense allows us to know things in ways specific to the sense employed. Additionally all human senses have finite limits in terms of sensitivity which prevent us from gathering fuller and more complete information from the environment. For example, we do not see the same part of the spectrum visible to bees, hear as well as canines or have olfactory abilities equal to many animals.

As we search for the real and true nature of our existence, our senses become inadequate. One might describe the problem we encounter in this search by stating somewhat paradoxically that the human situation is one in which we have enough awareness and understanding to know that there is much about our existence that we cannot be aware of or understand. Our quest for knowledge might be likened to an attempt to open an infinite number of Chinese puzzle boxes. Inside each box we open, we find another small box.

The creation of culture is a collective attempt to grapple with and solve this puzzle; it is a way of creating an aggregate of shared sensory derived perceptions and beliefs about the world in the hope that the ensuing gestalt will better approximate the truth than the average individual is able to do. The creation of culture attempts to answer for its time, and in its way, the question "What is

true?" and it provides reference points from which to continue the search. Additionally, it attempts to ease individual anxiety concerning the best way to live a life by the creation of a mutually shared myth system which is sometimes called a "map of reality."

It is within the parameters of the cultural definition of reality that we compare and refine our personal versions to it. We look to the culture to create a more encompassing, "truer" map of reality than we are able to conceive of as individuals. We look to this map to supplement our own and to show us the missing territories. It becomes the scale by which we measure our experience, a way to extend our understanding. This belief is exemplified by the analogy in which a large group of individuals each with lanterns, trying to bring truth to light, gather together on a dark night. They gather together so that their combined light will illuminate more brightly and further in all directions than any one individual with his or her lantern could accomplish, thus increasing the likelihood of finding what they seek. (The underlying assumption being that the night is not infinitely dark.)

Three of the most powerful forces a culture develops to this end are religion, art, and science. They create a complex lens through which reality is viewed. While other older or more "primitive" cultures traditionally tend to view these forces in a more integrated way, contemporary western culture generally views them separately. This fragmentation of view and the disintegration of a single cultural perspective has diminished traditional certainties of belief without furnishing any one viable convincing alternative. Additionally, the constant, accelerated change and the explosion of information and knowledge which is so characteristic of this time has broadened these schisms.

Because our culture lenses no longer focus on the same things, because they have lost their powers of resolution, individuals are left more to their own devices for creating viable symbol systems on which to base their beliefs and behaviors. This is an awesome burden.

#### SYMBOLS AND MAP MAKING

The creation of symbols is an ongoing spontaneous activity which takes place both in and out of our awareness, while we are awake and while we dream in sleep. We constantly seek to understand the world, to cause it and our existence in it to make sense to us. We seek to create larger and more connected meaning with objects and ideas. We attempt to go beyond our logic to arrive at a more whole and deeper understanding. In paying attention to our process of symbol making we become aware of how the vast majority of these symbols are predominantly pictorial in nature.

There are many kinds of symbols cultural and personal, public and private, and there are many levels and uses of these symbols. For example, spoken language is a consciously agreed-upon symbol system, a way of giving noises

created by our vocal chords generally agreed upon meanings. The earlier descriptions in this chapter of culture as a lens through which we view the world, or our creation of maps of reality, are metaphors, the figurative language derived from symbols which creates juxtapositions and new perspectives, allowing us to consider these areas of human concern in new relationships. Metaphors are information presented in ways which go beyond analytical or linear points of view, offering us the potential vehicle to expand our perspectives and to see things in a different light. (This making of metaphor is a tremendous source of power and vitality in arts, sciences, and religions.)

The spontaneous making of symbols in both the awake and the sleeping states has been the domain of concern of psychotherapy from its inception. In the early days of psychoanalysis, Freud and Jung spent much time studying their patients' symbols from accounts of their dreams and their free associations while in therapy.

There evolved the understanding that the patients' personal symbols were potent metaphors for their concerns and their present states of being. Freud further noted that visual symbols are a much truer (more useful) account of a person's concerns and processes than were verbal reports because our constant familiarity with words and their conscious combinations in sentences are more knowable and more highly defended (filtered) than our more "primitive" visual processes.

Jung was further able to demonstrate in *Man and His Symbols* (1964) the universal nature of the symbol making process and the surprisingly similar symbols that humans throughout history have used to respond to the unknown to make it comprehensible.<sup>3</sup> In this way the early psychoanalysts were able to glimpse into the murky workings of our unconscious processes and view what was revealed by our symbols.

Our photographs are personal symbols that have the energy to summon and demonstrate the dynamic power of our lives. They are amenable to exploration. As symbols photographs have a number of characteristics; in snapshots, for instance, the photograph serves as an artifact, icon, or totem that allows us to reconnect, with a past event in the present. Photographs are slices of the past, frozen dreams full of the dreamer's symbolism. Their form and content are determined by the photographer. Photographs also allow us to examine events and relationships in time. They therefore can be viewed as projectives, self-portraits, and/or metaphors revealing a way a photographer sees the world. They are simultaneously *of* something (dad's birthday party) and *about* something (what the data in the photograph implies regarding my relationship

<sup>3</sup>These similarities in symbol making appear to derive from the very evolution of human consciousness and the bilateral nature of the cerebral cortex. Brain research to date has shown that visual images seem to access a different part of the brain than words or writing. Visual images seem to access the nonsequential, nonlinear, more intuitive and integrative part of the brain. This has been labeled by researchers as "right-brain mode" since it takes place predominantly in the right hemisphere of our brain in 97 percent of the population.

with dad, or what could be elicited about that relationship through conversation, etc.) They are symbols that we have created in the past and revitalize in the present.

From a more concrete perspective photographs are two-dimensional graphic representations of three-dimensional events that have occurred in time, arrived at by use of camera and film. They show us what an event looked like at a certain moment, from a certain angle and distance, at a certain lens opening and shutter speed, using a certain camera and film. This film is then printed in a certain way to create a graphic, symbolic representation of the event. As tenuous as the process would appear, many photographers have made images that, according to consensual validation, are good samples or good fits with reality.

Photographs allow us to remember forgotten details of our personal past and permit us to discover new truths of our universe. They show what we wore at our fifth birthday party, and what the moons of Saturn look like. They document our growing up and they permit us to glimpse inside a working human heart.

On encountering a photograph, we orient it to us by making a number of decisions and assumptions about it such as: which side is the top, what constitutes the figure in the image, what is familiar and what is unfamiliar, what is the content and how do we choose to respond to it.

When we view a personal photograph we say that the people represented in the image "are our family." As we focus on the content of the photographic image we project a "depth of field," which allows us to "know" that the house is in the background and the people are in the foreground. Without the training and benefit of being able to use the renaissance perspective we would most likely have a difficult time making the image make sense. This often happens in cultures without the benefit of renaissance perspective and for most people when they view abstract images, images from novel perspectives, and extreme close-ups or macro-photographs.

In this process we must first choose to pay more attention to the photograph than to other stimuli impinging on our senses, i.e. there is some filtering and selecting of sensory input which causes a photograph (figure) to emerge from the rest of the perceivable environment (a ground). This process is repeated and refined as we select a figure and a ground in the photograph itself. From a physiological point of view, it is interesting that the white border of most photographs is seldom perceived as figure or ground, since the strong figure-ground relationship between the border and the rest of the photograph is its most obvious aspect.

What has happened, however, is that we as viewers through our experience, needs and expectations have learned to selectively disregard certain aspects of the object and change others so that the photograph can make sense to fit into the frame of a personal cognitive map of reality, a process not unsimilar to re-

sponding to a Rorschach inkblot. As always, our past experience, present needs and expectations greatly color our ability to see in the here and now.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, a number of photographers have discussed the explicit metaphoric qualities of photographs and have consciously created metaphoric images in their work: Alfred Stieglitz, Ralph Hattersley, Minor White, among them. Stieglitz titled some of his images "equivalants," and attempted, for example, to symbolize metaphorically in the photograph the emotional state the photographer experienced while making the photograph. He hoped that that viewer would be able to experience, in some way, the emotions, perceptions, and/or understandings which correlate with the photographer's experience when the image was made. These photographers and others like them have operationalized sophisticated concepts of the medium and its emotive and evocative power.

John Szarkowski demonstrated in assembling the 1979 Museum of Modern Art photography exhibition, and subsequent book, *Mirrors and Windows*, that photographs are not only windows to the world which allow us to, for example, "see" our family in the picture, they are also mirrors which we project upon and have reflected back to us various aspects of our awareness. The exhibition was another in a long series of explicit affirmations of the projective and metaphorical quality of the pictorial information.

This dual quality is useful in therapy. Client photographs are not only windows that show us the "who, what, where and when" of their lives, they are also the mirrors, the symbols and the metaphors of their lives. Photographs made in the past as well as those made with instant materials during a therapy session have this quality and can be considered in this light. The client's choice of these personal symbols in the photographs and the therapeutic interpretation can bring to awareness that which formerly took place primarily at an unconscious level. Picasso has been widely quoted as saying that art is a lie which leads us closer to the truth. The same processes are involved in understanding client photographs: their literal and symbolic statements are vehicles which when explored, can also lead us closer to the truth.

#### THERAPEUTIC APPLICATIONS OF THE VISUAL MODE AND METAPHOR

The therapeutic process is a process of change. It is a refocusing of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, which help create a different outlook and greater insight. Much of this process is educational where we collaborate with clients to help them "to be" different. Since people learn in various ways, depending on

<sup>4</sup>Because viewing photographs does involve various elements of projection, all mental health practitioners have a professional obligation to be as aware and clear as possible about their personal projections, and their needs and expectations concerning client photographs. Therapists need to do their own work in this area; they need to explore their own photographs from this perspective.

motivation, readiness, amount and kind of prior learning, and the way they access, organize, and represent information, it behooves us as therapists to have in our repertoire flexible and adaptive behavior. By engaging and understanding the visual mode and its metaphoric implications, the therapist can tap into powerful information and communication areas creating change strategies that will affect clients both implicitly and explicitly, as well as literally and symbolically.

As we have noted, the visual sense is dominant in our culture, and we find that many clients also use it as their primary sensory orientation to the world. Problems often arise for therapists with these clients in therapy when they are asked to respond around feelings, i.e. "How do you feel about that?" These clients' feelings are not immediately available to them because they are accessing and representing their experiences from their visual sensory orientation. They have initial difficulty finding their feelings because they are seeing an image and can't "see" what the therapist means in terms of feelings (the kinesthetic sense). Clinicians trained only in talking about feelings (kinesthetic and auditory senses) may fail to make contact or much therapeutic change with these clients.<sup>5</sup> As a result of this miscommunication, clients may be labeled as "not good candidates for therapy," "resistive to therapy," or "not insightful" (!). These clients can, of course, be in touch with their feelings, but these feelings must be reached through the visual orientation, i.e. "When you don't see your way out of this situation, how does your world look and how does that make you feel?" What is important to understand here is the use of visually referent language as a way to make contact and be in communication with the client. Therapists should consciously use a vocabulary based on visually referent words and phrases such as I have used throughout this chapter. They include, for example: *change in outlook, viewpoint, or point of view, get the picture, flash of insight, sharper focus, greater depth of field, bring to light, occluded perception, blind spot, greater acuity, different angle, vignettted details, near sighted, far sighted, myopic, look away from, distorted self-image, etc.*

In working with clients, their initial willingness to bring in and discuss photos can be a metaphoric indication of their trust level and readiness to be involved in the therapeutic process. Clients who bring in one or two selected images may be symbolically making quite different statements than those who bring in the album or those who dump a couple of shoe boxes full of snapshots on the desk. Also, the number of different kinds of photos clients bring into the session gives the therapist much information about the depth and diversity of their world and the range of subjects that can be viewed and discussed, i.e. a metaphor for norms and rules about being and experiencing are presented.

Additionally, on the same metaphoric level working with client photographs

<sup>5</sup>The recent article by W. Falzett in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 28(4) presents some experimental results confirming that subjects perceived counselors more trustworthy when the counselors used predicates that matched the subjects' primary representational system.

brings the client's process to light. For example, is the client shy or resistive in presenting photographs? What is said about the images and how is she or he organizing the presentation? The therapist sees how clients organize and present photos and how they interact in a relatively unthreatening therapeutic encounter. The therapist also learns how clients define themselves and the amount of ease and/or degree of difficulty the client has in organizing, presenting, and changing subject matter, angle, and point of view. Combined with the photographs themselves this information gives the therapist quick and efficient access to a client's history and present strengths and weaknesses, creating a baseline from which to measure change. By engaging in the use of the phototherapeutic techniques, the therapist develops a relatively comprehensive picture of the client's way of being in the world which is in sharper focus and has greater depth of field.

Even more fundamentally, the profound power of photographic images to function metaphorically as catalysts to insight and understanding can be demonstrated from the following two short examples where personal photographs were allowed to speak for themselves. I had the opportunity to work with a divorced woman who was willing to look at her family photos. What we saw in the images made by her husband was that he had a hard time facing and making visual contact with her. He would only photograph her obliquely or "on a pedestal" where she was somehow above him. He also would not photograph her at close range, preferring some distance. This behavior changed when he photographed their young child. He would make images at a much closer range, often eliminating the mother's head or other parts of her body but always including the child. Reviewing these images for her was an experience of understanding in a new way some of the problems and dynamics of the relationship that had been there pictorially since courtship. Her ability to see this information in the photographs allowed her to feel better and to resolve emotionally some things she knew intellectually. Discussing these photos was an affirmation for her.

Another woman who was a therapist herself asked me to go over her photos so that she could see first hand how photography might be used with clients. She had a fairly large number of snapshots and I asked her to select a few that were the most important to her. She proceeded to choose about fifteen or twenty. I spread them out on the table before us and started asking questions about the images while I looked for themes. Two images caught my attention. One was of her mother and herself at the kitchen table in mother's house. Mother was seated and P. was behind her mother in a position where she had her arm around mother's shoulder and her head next to mother's breast — a look that she later described as "loving, nurturing, and taking care of." In a second photograph she assumed what appeared to me to be a similar posture on a living room chair with a (now former) lover. When I moved the other photographs aside and presented these two to her side by side, she put her palm

to her forehead and had what we refer to in therapy as an aha! experience. She said that a number of things suddenly made sense to her and proceeded to elaborate on this experience. In this case the metaphor created by presentation of the two images side by side was enough to create a powerful discovery for this woman around her personal issues of independence, nurturance and dependence. These two cases illustrate two ways in which we commonly use the visual metaphor in therapy: to show some new reality visually by the discussion and positioning of photos, and to make clear the concerns or themes to which a client is at least partially blind.

This chapter has looked at the visual: the visual sense as it accesses and represents information, visually referent language, and the various ways photographic images may function as symbols and metaphor. It has attempted to demonstrate the potency and primacy of the visual in our search for understanding the world and our successful survival, and how the power inherent in visuals can be utilized in therapy. By actively working with all appropriate aspects of the visual metaphor and encouraging clients to explore the boundaries of their vision, and to gain insight, the clients and their picture of the world changes. The evolved perception and vision enlarges the clients' ability to view the world and to create their place in it.

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