

# Portraits of the Human Spirit:

## *Lessons In Living*

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I have always thought in images rather than words. For me, the visual world — with its shapes, patterns and colours — is the world of the imagination, of dreams and fantasy. In my early years as a psychiatrist, it was only natural for me to mesh my passion for photography with my work. I came to realize that images can be a window on the unconscious, and discovered that photography helps people to understand themselves.

Through my dual practice as psychiatrist and photographer, I have had the privilege of being entrusted with intimate moments. I have been allowed the rare opportunity to witness and portray the magnificence of the human spirit on film.

How do we recognize the qualities of the human spirit? One aspect is certainly the ability to move on despite adversity — without being angry, bitter or dejected — to stay positive when the merely human part of us would give up. Each of the people in this book has faced his or her own special challenge. The way they have dealt with these challenges reflects the heroic aspects of the human spirit. I was humbled by their love for life, their desire to reach out to others, and their pride in being the best they could be. I felt that if the spirit they showed in facing their life circumstances moved me so strongly, it could also affect others, directly or indirectly.

I was determined to do more than tell wonderful stories; I wanted to share the excitement, awe and admiration I experienced as these people touched my life in ever more profound ways. I had discovered that not only were their stories individually inspiring, but each offered essential lessons for living in our times. How was I going to capture and convey this essence? The answer was, of course, to use images to enhance the words.

I approached these individuals with my idea of creating a series of photo essays with no small concern. After all, not only was I asking them to bare their souls, I was asking them to show their faces. But each one of them welcomed the idea with encouragement and enthusiasm. They chose to see that the message of hope and inspiration that was at the very heart of their lives would be shared with the world. This project celebrates their generosity of spirit and greatness of heart.

For me, these seven people exemplify hope, motivation and aspiration for self-fulfillment, despite being faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles or illness — even death. These photo essays invite each one of us to acknowledge the qualities of the human spirit within ourselves as well as in others and hopefully inspire us to choose to live more in them. Any one of the following chapters can serve as a jumping-off point to address themes and issues common to us all.

What do a young girl with kidney disease, a horse trainer in his eighties, a heart surgeon, an aspiring singer-songwriter, a dying therapist, a woman struggling with bipolar disorder, and a gold medal Olympic athlete have in common? Male and female, young and old, and from a variety of backgrounds, they each deal with extraordinary challenges in extraordinary ways — with strength yet with humility. Their most important common characteristic is their will: they never give up on themselves. They show that hardship can lead more often to positive outcomes than negative ones if only we endure; that the power of the heart is greater than the power of the challenge. Most importantly, that suffering can lead to deeper levels of self-discovery, and what we are likely to discover is our magnificent Self.

To create a genuine record of their spirit, I needed to build a relationship with each of these people in which we truly trusted one another. I learned a profound lesson in trust from an unlikely source. When I was a resident in psychiatry, I had a horse named Kokoro, a Japanese word meaning “mind without conscious thought,” or “heart.” I chose him because he had more spirit than the other horses; he had actually thrown me three times before I bought him. I loved the way his muscles rippled and his free spirit soared. He reminded me of the wild horse in the *Black Stallion* books I had loved as a boy. Without wanting to break that spirit, I let him have his lead. I began to trust him, and he trusted me. Riding him was a continual lesson in trust, a lesson I have been able to apply in diverse situations throughout my career and my life.

Photographers and psychiatrists traditionally become skilled in creating a setting and atmosphere that allows their subjects to feel safe exploring in any direction, while freely revealing themselves. With the added element of the camera, I was concerned these people would feel less safe somehow. Fortunately for me—and for you—these people trusted me enough to proceed as if the camera were not there. They courageously allowed me to step into their intimate physical space.

Another key strength of a psychiatrist is the ability to really listen, to ask the probing question and then keep quiet while the patient works through the issue. In ordinary conversations we are too quick to respond. An extended silence allows people to go deeper, to freely associate, to elaborate, and ultimately to feel free to reveal the real person inside. I invite you to look at these images with that kind of silence.

Keep in mind that the way we relate to others depends a lot on how we see ourselves. I hope this book will serve as a gentle reminder to let go of our prejudices and preconceptions — of ourselves and other people. If we take labels too seriously, if we lock in to our prejudices and stick to them, we severely limit our experiences. And worst of all, we miss out on endless possibilities. As you read through each photo essay, I invite you to step free of labels and step into the images.

**Julia** was a very sick ten-year-old with kidney disease when I first met her. Over the four years of our close interaction, she was an amazingly courageous “trooper” who suffered two strokes and countless setbacks. Julia didn’t allow her condition or the severe effects of her medication to slow her down a bit. No matter how she looked or felt, Julia continued to travel with her family on holidays and to attend summer camp. She was curious and interested in all aspects of what was happening to her: she asked questions and demanded answers. Throughout her ordeal, her relationships were vital to her; she relied upon the unwavering support of family and friends, as well as the medical personnel who connected so easily with her.

**Clarence** was an old horse trainer with a great zest for life. Stone deaf without his hearing aids, he had a loud, booming voice that could be quite intimidating. I saw behind the tough, crotchety image he conveyed. Over time, I came to know various sides of him, including his gentleness. It was really something to see him absent-mindedly stroking a horse’s silky ear between his thick, coarse fingers, or hear him play the violin and mouth organ. For various reasons, he didn’t have much schooling. But despite heart surgery and broken limbs, he kept on learning as much as he could about what interested him — and teaching whatever he knew — right up until he died.

**RJ** is a heart surgeon who also defies typecasting. The stereotypical specialist is serious, exacting and aloof. RJ, however, is humble, warm and patient. And he is also willing to let his sensitivity and compassion show. He is psychologically astute, concerned about feelings and generous with his time. At ease with mask and gloves in the demanding conditions of the operating room, he is also a family man who putters around the house with his little daughter. Rather than being concerned mainly with statistics, RJ is willing to defy the odds and try anything to help his patients. They adore him.

**Liz** is an aspiring singer-songwriter. She is a sweet young woman on the one hand, and a tough street fighter on the other. In elementary school, many of her schoolmates were frightened of her. She is a great pool player, a skill she learned from hanging around pool halls when she was growing up. In high school she was the only student allowed to play on two separate teams at once — basketball and volleyball. By now she is comfortable with the many aspects of her spirit. I was astounded at how open she was to talking about the turmoil in her life. She is appreciative, polite, down to earth, and talented. Liz definitely has star quality.

**Arnold** was a therapist who, when I met him, had just been given three years to live. He had a real presence: he stood very tall and emanated an air of supreme self-confidence. Until his illness, multiple myeloma, he was quite proud of his image. He was extremely bright, a Renaissance man. Sometimes, however, intelligence can be a barrier, especially if it is the main way a person relates to the world. If we allow too little room for feelings, it's hard to connect with people. After Arnold's diagnosis, his body literally shrank and changed considerably. That, and the loss of control of his destiny, humbled him. But through it all, he became more personable and approachable. Finally opening to his own feelings, he discovered new sides of himself.

**Glenroy** is an Olympic gold medal athlete. Many people assume that Olympic athletes are dedicated entirely to physical training and performance. Glenroy transcends that stereotypical image. He is absolutely unpretentious, with no airs or big ego about him. A meditative and self-reflective individual, he is a university student who studies philosophy. He enjoys discussing the deep questions of life. He also cares about people. He is not necessarily the fastest member of his team; however, he puts in the longest hours and is certainly the hardest working.

**Anna** is a woman in her fifties who was struggling to come to terms with bipolar disorder when I first met her. By working with a camera in therapy, she was able to see her dramatic mood shifts and accept them for the first time. As she says, "The camera brought a new vitality to the therapy, a greater honesty between us." Through the photographs, she became an observer rather than a victim, and she started to take her medication.

Each one of these seven individuals is different from the others, yet they are also so similar. They represent all of us. They remind us to look for the real person inside, the true beauty within. Their stories invite us to go deeper, with compassion for ourselves. Their images inspire us to challenge the image we carry of ourselves, to open ourselves to be free and go with new opportunities. They encourage us to continue to peel back our protective layers until we reach the core of our human spirit. And as we become lighter and soar, we, in turn, will inspire others.