

PHOTOTHERAPY - THE BIGGER PICTURE

Every snapshot a person takes or keeps is also a type of self-portrait, a kind of "mirror with memory" reflecting back those moments and people that were special enough to be frozen in time forever. Collectively, these photos make visible the ongoing stories of that person's life, serving as visual footprints marking where they have been (emotionally, as well as physically) and also perhaps signalling where they might next be heading. Even their reactions to postcards, magazine pictures, and snapshots taken by others can provide illuminating clues to their own inner life and its secrets.

The actual meaning of any photograph lies less in its visual facts and more in what these details evoke inside the mind (and heart) of each viewer. While looking at a snapshot (whether paper or digital), people actually spontaneously create the meaning that they think is coming from that photo itself, and this may or may not be the meaning that the photographer originally intended to convey. Thus, its meaning (and emotional "message") is dependent upon who is doing the looking, because people's perceptions and unique life experiences automatically frame and define what they see as being real. Therefore, people's reactions to photographs they feel are special can actually reveal a lot about themselves, if only the right kinds of questions are asked.

How Therapists Use Photos to Help People Heal

Most people keep photographs around, without ever pausing to really think about why. But because personal snapshots permanently record important daily moments (and the associated emotions unconsciously embedded within these), they can serve as natural bridges

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for accessing, exploring, and communicating about feelings and memories (including deeply-buried or long-forgotten ones), along with any psychotherapeutic issues these bring to light. Therapists find that their clients' photos frequently serve as tangible symbolic self-constructs and metaphoric transitional objects that silently offer inner "in-sight" in ways that words alone cannot as fully represent or deconstruct.

Under the guidance of a therapist who has been trained in PhotoTherapy techniques, clients explore what their own personally-meaningful snapshots and family albums are about emotionally, in addition to what they are of visually. Such information is latent in all photos, but when it can be used to focus and precipitate therapeutic dialogue, a more direct and less censored connection with the unconscious will usually result. During PhotoTherapy sessions, photos are not just passively reflected upon in silent contemplation, but also actively created, posed for, talked with, listened to, reconstructed, revised to form or illustrate new narratives, collected on assignment, re-visualized in memory or imagination, integrated into art therapy creative expressions, or even set into animated

dialogue with other photos. This allows clients to better reach, understand, and express parts of themselves in ways that were previously not possible.

As explained in the book, *PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums*, and the related informational website www.phototherapy-centre.com, PhotoTherapy is best viewed as an interrelated system of photo-based counselling techniques used by trained mental health professionals during sessions where they help clients better understand and improve their life and its problems.

Thus, "PhotoTherapy techniques" are therapy practices used for helping others, whereas "Therapeutic Photography" (which is sometimes also confusingly called "Photo-Therapy", particularly in the U.K.) is self-initiated photographic practices done by people themselves outside of any formal counselling context (situations where the skills of a therapist are not required), using the camera as an agent of personal or social change at individual or community levels.

Since PhotoTherapy is a collection of flexible techniques, rather than fixed directives based upon only one specific theoretical modality or therapeutic paradigm, it can be used by any kind of trained counsellor or therapist, regardless of their conceptual orientation or preferred professional approach. This is one of the many ways that PhotoTherapy is both similar to, yet distinct from, Art Therapy - as well as the reason it can be used so successfully by a variety of other mental health professionals who are not specifically trained in Art Therapy. *Since PhotoTherapy is about photography-as-communication rather than photography-*



as-art, no prior experience with cameras or the photographic arts is required for effective therapeutic use.

PhotoTherapy involves people interacting with their own unique visual constructions of reality (using photography more as an activating verb than as a passive/reflective noun). Therefore, these techniques can be particularly successful with people for whom verbal communication is physically, mentally, or emotionally limited, socio-culturally marginalized, or situationally-inappropriate due to misunderstanding of nonverbal cues. Therefore, PhotoTherapy can be especially helpful (and usually very empowering) in applications with multicultural, disabled, minority-gender, special-needs, and other similarly-complex or marginalized populations - as well as beneficial in diversity training, conflict resolution, divorce mediation, and other related fields. As people become increasingly comfortable with using electronic technology and digital imagery, more exciting possibilities continue to emerge for using photos as counselling tools with clients who have scanners, digital cameras, photo-manipulation software, family websites, and/or those who are able to participate in online cyber-therapy.

The Techniques in General

The five PhotoTherapy techniques are interrelated and interdependent. Like the fingers of a hand (and similarly inseparable from it), they work best when synergistically combined. They can also be useful in activating other therapy process; for example, enhancing symbolic communication in Art, Play, or other Expressive Therapies, assisting Jungian or Gestalt process work, focusing hypnosis or guided imagery work, giving visual form to family patterns or personal

narratives explored in Family Systems or Narrative Therapy, and so forth.

Each therapist using PhotoTherapy techniques will use them a bit differently, depending upon that person's own professional training and theoretical preferences, as well as each client's particular therapeutic situational needs and goals. Thus, there isn't one single fixed or correct way to use these techniques (as long as the client is treated ethically!), nor are there any requirements about applying them in any particular sequence or combination. *There is not even any need for special skill or training in photography itself - because this is about using photos as communication, not as "art".*

PhotoTherapy is not about interpreting people's photos for them; instead, the input should always come from the client, guided by their therapist's photo-stimulated questions, while both explore the image (and its emotional impact) together. The perceptions and associated feelings each photo triggers in the client (or therapist!) will be personally unique. And since there is therefore no inherently wrong way to interpret a particular photo's meaning, no external interpretive criteria can ever be used to "objectively" evaluate or measure a client's perception of it.

Similarly, a person's reaction to a photo cannot, on its own, indicate any definite diagnostic problem or mental condition - and thus no assumptions or assessments should ever be generalized from singular responses. Instead, therapists who have been trained in PhotoTherapy techniques are taught to look for underlying patterns of responses; for repeated themes and imagery, for consistencies through time (and often generations), for unusual or symbolic content, and most of all for emotional reactions indicating inner feelings which the

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clients may or may not be consciously aware of at the time of encountering the photo-catalyst.

Making the photos, or bringing them along to the therapy session, is just the start. Once the photo can be viewed, the next step is to activate all that it brings to mind (exploring its visual messages, entering into conversations with it, asking it questions, considering the results of imagined changes or different viewpoints, and so forth). Therefore, what for photographers is usually an end-point (the finished photo) is, for PhotoTherapy purposes, just the beginning.

Thus, it is not just the visual contents of the photographs themselves that are so therapeutically important, but also everything that happens while the client is interacting with them. Memories, feelings and thoughts that emerge during the photographic dialogue, almost as “by-products” to the process, often provide additional useful information. As clients discuss the layers of meanings contained within their photographs, they also reveal a lot about themselves: their inner value system, beliefs, >>

<< attitudes and expectations that inseparably accompany their words. These nonverbal codes hold important clues about how people make sense of their world (and their place within it). Asking questions about the photograph (and to it, as if it was alive and could speak for itself) further enhances the therapeutic possibilities.

Using PhotoTherapy techniques, the therapist's primary role is to encourage and support clients' own personal discoveries while exploring and interacting with the ordinary personal and family snapshots they view, make, collect, remember, or even only imagine. Each of the five PhotoTherapy techniques is directly related to the various relationships possible between person and camera (or person and photograph) although in practice, these categories often naturally overlap:

1) Photos which have been taken or created BY the client (whether actually using a camera to make the picture, or "taking" (appropriating) other people's images through gathering "found" photos from magazines, postcards, Internet images, digital manipulation, and so forth)

2) Photos which have been taken OF the client by other people (whether posed on purpose or taken spontaneously while the person was unaware of being photographed - but where people *other* than the client have made all the decisions about timing, content, location, and so forth)

3) Self-portraits, which means any kind of photos that clients have made of THEMSELVES, either literally or metaphorically (but where in all cases they themselves had total control and power over all aspects of the image's creation)

4) Family album and other photo-biographical collections (whether of birth family or family of choice; whether formally kept in albums or more "loosely" combined into narratives by placement on walls or refrigerator doors, inside wallets or desktop frames, into computer screens or family websites, and so forth), which were put together for the purpose of documenting the personal narrative of the client's life and the background from which they developed. Such albums have a "life" apart from, and far beyond, the individual images which comprise them.

5) "Photo-Projectives" which is based on the fact that the meaning of any photo is primarily

created by its viewer during their process of viewing it (or taking or even just planning it!). A viewer's perceptions and reactions in response to looking at any kind of photographic image are actually projected by that viewer, from "inside" their own unconscious inner map of reality (which determines how they make sense of what they see). Therefore, this technique is located not in a particular kind of photograph, but rather in the less-tangible interface between a photo and its viewer (or maker), that "place" where each person forms their own unique responses to what they see (reflecting both phenomenological and existential theory).

Like so many holistic approaches, PhotoTherapy suffers somewhat from having to be taken apart for studying in any step-by-step order, when in fact each technique is partially formed by, and overlaps, several of the others. Therefore, the most effective application of these techniques will occur when they are creatively combined because they comprise an integrally interconnected system that is far more useful as a holistic system, than in any linear summation of its parts.

EDITORIAL NOTE: Portions of this article were excerpted from Weiser's website. ©copyright Judy Weiser, one-time reproduction permission given to publish in Embody.

INFORMATION

Her book, *"PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums"*, is available from amazon.com and her DVD *"PhotoTherapy Techniques in Counseling and Therapy"*, is available from cavershambooksellers.com. More information can be found on her website at: www.phototherapy-centre.com

For information about PhotoTherapy in the UK, Weiser recommends contacting Art Psychotherapist Mark Wheeler, who has much experience using these techniques.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judy Weiser R.Psych, A.T.R., is a psychologist, art therapist, consultant, trainer and author interested in the nonverbal and visual aspects of communication and behaviour - especially regarding the "why" of taking, posing for, keeping, and looking at ordinary personal and family snapshots.

One of the earliest pioneers of "PhotoTherapy" techniques, Judy has spent over thirty years developing, teaching, and providing consulting and mentoring about these techniques - and training others to use them (including several lectures and workshops recently in England).

Director of the PhotoTherapy Centre in Vancouver, Canada (which she founded in 1982 to serve as the world's networking base and extensive resource library for these fields) and former Editor of the Journal PhotoTherapy, Judy has given over three hundred PhotoTherapy training workshops and lecture presentations in over fifty cities world-wide.

Long considered the "world authority" on PhotoTherapy, Judy currently continues to consult, lecture, mentor, and train professionals in using these techniques to improve their therapy or counselling practice. In addition to her classic book, *PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums*, and her informational website explaining the field, she has also written numerous professional journal articles and book chapters about PhotoTherapy, and produced a video/DVD about the subject.

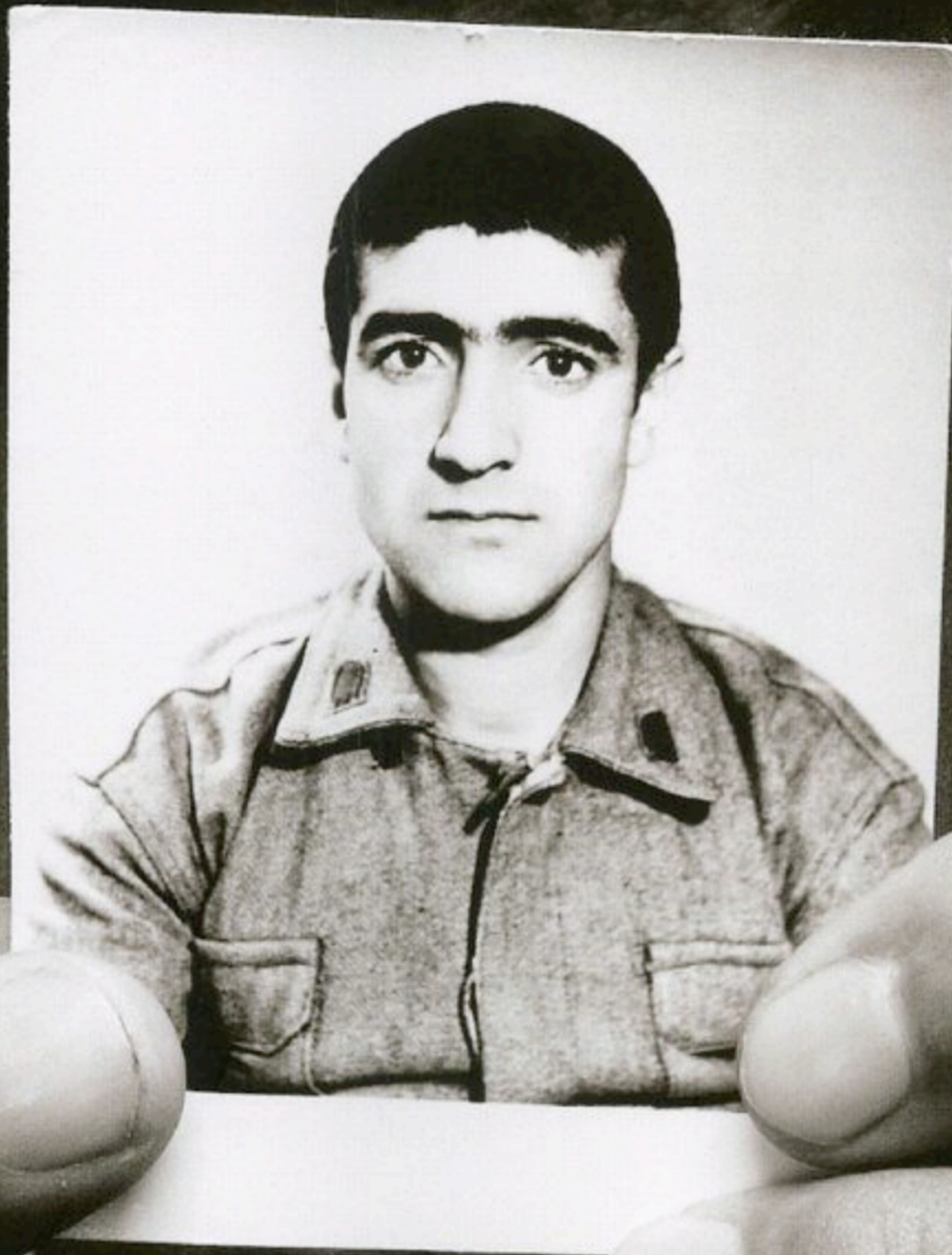
Judy has also been featured in many popular-media publications, including: Life Magazine, Digital Photographer, Elle Magazine (U.K.), The Point (Scottish Association for Mental Health), Natural Health, The British Journal of Photography, and many others. She has also discussed and demonstrated PhotoTherapy in a variety of radio and television interviews in several countries (including BBC Scotland and BBC Derby) - as well as featured in-depth in many national television specials. Also an occasional Consultant for Kodak (regarding the use of photos to help people heal from traumatic events and in strengthening relationships), she can be reached at: JWeiser@phototherapy-centre.com

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The Bo-Tau Technique

HOW WE
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A BREAK TO AUSTRIA

focus on
PhotoTherapy
THE BIGGER PICTURE

WELCOME NOTE



I recently visited the serene and tranquil island of Hawaii. In this very exotic part of the world, I discovered that the Hawaiians use a very gentle philosophy towards each other, encompassing mind, body and spirit in their rituals. In Hawaii, a very tolerant and healthy respect for other cultures and philosophies is wholly apparent. They focus on therapies in the same manner and Hawaiian massage is

becoming increasingly popular in Britain. Rosalie Samet was taught Hawaiian massage in the country of origin and is now a master practitioner and trainer based in the UK, she imparts her expertise on the subject on page 28. Having personally experienced a first aid emergency situation, I began to think about how many of us, would know how to react in such a situation. With this in mind, coupled with recent changes made by the HSE, which came into effect on 1st October, I have included information on first aid training in this issue.

As the festive period is just around the corner, I am urging therapists to give the gift of massage, by volunteering a few hours of time to offer free massage treatments to senior citizens in care homes nationwide. The organisers 'Touch a Heart', are a charitable project who desperately need your help (details on page 16). I trust you all enjoyed CAM this year, who reported record attendances. I sincerely hope to see faces old and new at Holistic Health in April and Scottish Beauty in May next year. Finally, It gives me great joy to alert readers to the fantastic competition we are running to win an amazing break to one of the most beautiful regions in Austria. This opportunity isn't one to be missed and I wish you all the very best of luck. All that's left to say now at the end of another wonderful year, is Happy Christmas, Al-Hijara, Hanukkah, Yule and Losar.

Kush Kumar, Chairman

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