

PHOTOTHERAPY

Photography as a Verb

*Don't ask me how I felt.
The photograph is the equivalent of how I felt.
No words are going to help. But few people can liberate
themselves from verbalizing about their work;
titles act as blinders.*

—Ansel Adams

Please pardon the use of
"sexist pronouns" in this article,
but in 1975 (when this article
was printed), that is what Editors
required Authors to use!

By Judy Weiser

As youngsters my cousin and I once travelled together on a long trip. We both had inexpensive box cameras and spent an enjoyable part of the time recording our travels, often standing side-by-side at scenes of interest.

Years later, as adults, we sat and reviewed these childhood photographs and were struck by the numerous differences in even 'identical' shots.

It was not only that we saw and recorded things differently on film, but also the crucial discovery that *who we were as different people* actually guided our very *acts* of photographing: *how* we chose to shoot what we did and *why* one particular moment of time was responded to rather than another. Our old snapshots became insights into each of our different personalities that neither of us could have been equipped at that young age to explain to adults in words or concepts.

This, then, is the crux of phototherapy: photography as a verb — learning about people's inner worlds as expressed not just in the passive-verb-sense of evaluating product-print, but also (and especially) in the very active-verb-sense of learning valuable cues to behavior and perceptions by skilfully observing *how* and *why* an individual chooses to select a certain photographic solution to meet his 'requirements'.

It is a therapy technique that allows an exploration into the private worlds of those unable to articulate their emotions verbally and has special applications with children or others con-

finied to a low-verbal level for any number of reasons (recent immigrants, language disadvantaged, brain dysfunction, emotional disturbance or, as in my own application, working with the deaf).

In my work as an 'emotional therapist' with deaf children, I continually encounter children who are feeling ideas, frustrations and feelings that they *cannot* communicate to others, either because of disparities between Sign Language and English, or because (as with most children) the very concepts causing concern just simply don't have enough vocabulary developed yet to adequately label and explore these feelings. I have therefore developed this counselling technique, phototherapy, which differs a bit from other explorations in this field (such as Dr. Akeret's book, *Photoanalysis*) in that it is not as singularly concerned with 'product' (of exploring psychological content of old and recent personal photographs) as much as with 'process' — it is fascinated by the insights a properly trained observer can gather about an individual by watching non-judgmentally how the individual decides 'what-for-and-when' to trip the shutter. I emphasize 'properly trained', as there are many pitfalls one can get into with only a partial understanding of this process — like deciding what is happening because of your own projections rather than the individual's intended input. I do not use phototherapy as a total end-all, but rather as one of the many possibilities open

to gather a feeling where an individual 'is at'.

The basic philosophy of phototherapy is rooted in gestalt and existential psychology, communication theory, linguistics, social anthropology and spatial perception dynamics, to name but the most dominant resource disciplines.

In its most basic form, communication is an agreement that perceptions can truly be shared, and it is non-verbal as well as verbal. But misunderstandings can occur when the same 'reality' gives different messages to different people (especially if they don't realize this and proceed to act on what they perceive to be mutual agreement). I believe that a person thinks that what he perceives *truly exists*, and I feel the criteria for his judging such truth ('knowing') exists in him based in part on his very early conditioning as to what he will and will not accept according to the values of his society (very much structured by the nature of his linguistic categorization system and its expression). It is all so deeply ingrained that he usually cannot comprehend its subconscious and yet subjective nature, and therefore he often finds any alteration of such concepts to be somewhat threatening (and therefore 'wrong'). How he perceives his world appears to directly define it for him; his perceptions (and their biases) reflect his enculturation and affect the ways he behaves based on these assumptions. Thus when faced with relating to someone of radically different values

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or perceptual modes, he is often at a loss as to how to deal at all and this usually results in threat perception → fear → hostility. If we could only get people to be more comfortable with the idea that theirs is not the *only* way to see things (but that it is *just* as valid as any other) and feel secure in this enlarged conceptual ideology, then interpersonal communication on small or large scale could be so much easier facilitated. Language binds us, in that we are restricted to our choice of descriptions; the visual means of expression is much more encompassing (as often is the non-verbal sign language of the deaf). These types of crises in communication can arise on levels of political right down to psychiatric concern — and they have a special bearing on those for whom the usual route of verbal explanation is blocked.

I feel that photography is a field of communication long overlooked as a solution to some of these problems. It has been for too long only a personal art, only expressing to a passive audience, but not demanding from that audience any involvement or feedback. It seems possible to develop the use of still photography to a level where it can assist/replace verbal means of explanation (especially of feelings), resolution of conflicting perceptions, even full therapy on an individual level (or

group). Passive photography has long been a personal art, a statement of seeing and feeling often irreducible to verbal explanations, the sum being so much greater than its analysable parts. The gestalt of each photograph (or collection of photographs) from any given photographer is a personal statement of the essence of that person — which he himself is often unaware of — and which he certainly often has difficulty explaining in verbal terms. Photography is not an end-all technique — but it supplements far better than linear, verbal, and logical methods, especially in people whose worlds are more oriented in right hemisphere perspective dominances. (Research in hemispherical studies is showing that the left-hand side of the brain is predisposed to sequential, linear types of information whereas the right-hand side to holistic, conceptual types of information.) A photograph is in itself a right-hemisphere type of concept — a gestalt that is far more than a sum of its parts while inseparable from them; verb and noun all-at-once; and never could a verbal explanation totally fully describe one.

Photography as a therapy technique is a two-way interaction between person and surroundings. As he selects what to photograph, the individual automatically begins to define what is

relevant to him. Often he can later describe (or rather, attempt to describe) some of these reasons; often as not, he cannot — and this is why photography is so important. A selection of prints gathered from the instruction: "Go out and shoot this film on anything you choose that interests you" can demonstrate to you a tremendous amount of information about the individual holding the camera, but you must be careful not to overdraw conclusions, or assume too easily any cause and effect. Another step deeper, and you can non-directively listen to him tell you about those photos and why he felt them important enough to record (thus hopefully yielding a less filtered view of his personal 'real world'). It is a much more holistic view of his world to have him attempt to present it to you directly without the filter of language, and much less defensive than an interview process. I can conceive of endless therapeutic and enlightening uses of photography: for people trying to adapt to a new culture, for example; they can study this new culture somewhat more objectively (cameras are more polite than staring); they can analyse it later, having frozen for later analysis the things that confuse or delight them. They can pull together cohesive threads of patterns that someone might not be so able to spell out in some list. They can see the parallels to their own lives and feel more comfortable within these similarities. For people who have varying degrees of emotional or interpersonal difficulties, it helps greatly to study oneself. One's photographs are mirrors to one's self-concepts and projections. It also very often helps to see how, in the surrounding culture, emotional affect is handled, to see roles being lived, to learn about eccentricities tolerated within the range of 'acceptable'. All these things can be much easier handled by the 'safer' third-person aspect of "let's you and I talk about these photos and the ways you have chosen to shoot them". We must be careful not to develop a category system of analysis that becomes too rigid; we don't want the person to photograph in order to fit some external expectations or definitions (expressed or implied) — rather, we want to serve him by responding to his

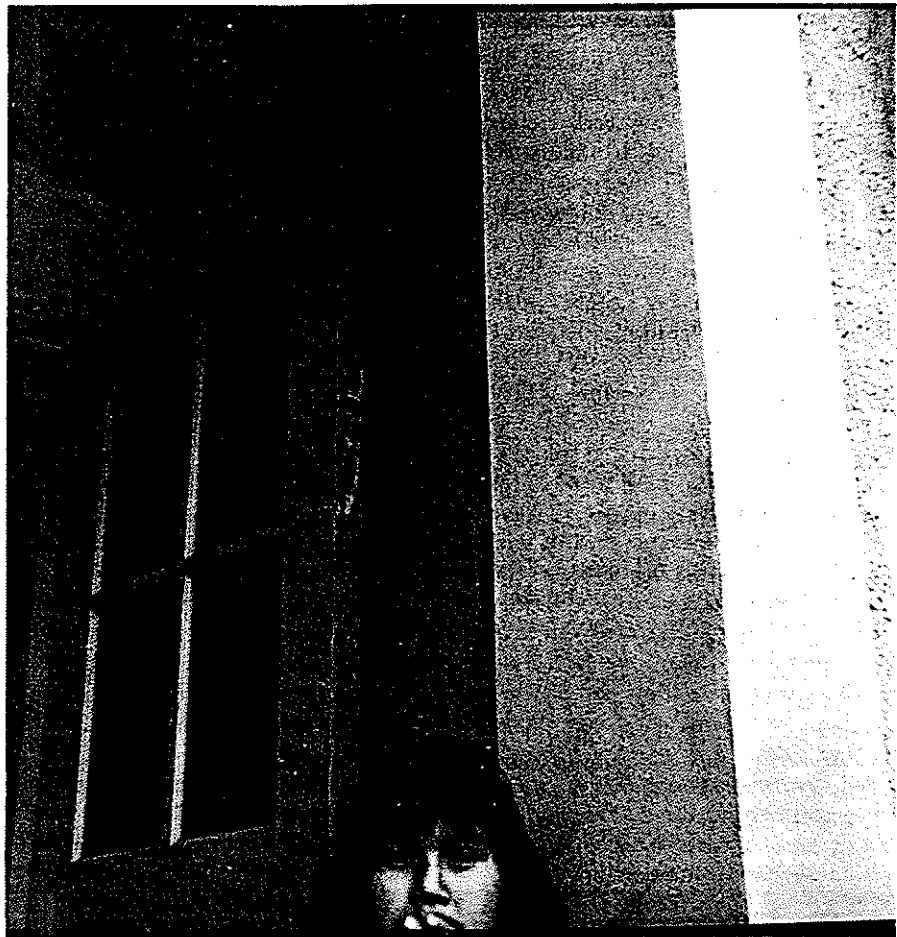
Is the nude, below, a man or a woman? What visual clues were used in making your decision? Some photographs are open to much interpretation. The various interpretations, therefore, reveal much about the viewers while the image itself serves only as a photographic Rorschach inkblot.



freely chosen photography in ways which enhance sensitivities. Such photographs should be analysed rather than defined; we must be careful in establishing a methodology of photographic therapy not to establish a fixed language.

It has become apparent to me in my work with the deaf that they very often do not 'see' the same thing I do when we analyse some scene or interaction. Their definitions of 'what happened' in a situation are often different from mine. I am beginning to formulate a general hypothesis based on my experiences that, if borne out by further evidence, might prove to be very revealing about the nature of cognitive mapping as guided by linguistic (pre-conscious) influences. It appears that the child raised communicating in Ameslan, the natural deaf sign language (and who therefore learns English as a second language) forms his definitions and perceptual ordering systems quite differently than those of us raised on an early diet of English/Western culture, and this could have many interesting implications.

The use of photography as self/cultural expression and learning tool is a very generalized concept, but one which opens up an entirely different world of communicating to those unreachable by other methods, especially with children. All the work I propose can be undertaken easily with a simple Instamatic camera and the use of a commercial or drugstore print service. However, learning more advanced darkroom or camera skills is an open possibility and within the realm of therapy if it should be desired. Darkroom skills themselves can greatly enhance value orientations such as self-initiated responsibility; cause and effect; action toward consequence; freedom with responsibility; consistency of pattern; concepts of time and spatial relationships and mathematics/measurement; and basic experimental design/control for variables. Simple darkroom techniques can be introduced to primary school age children with little difficulty. There is, additionally, the learning of aesthetic concerns and the potential rewards of such emphases on quality. And as a side benefit, the person is learning a skill for possible future hobby or employment should that become relevant.



This portrait (reproduced full frame) was taken by a deaf child. The subject's mouth is of little consequence to the young photographer as is remarkably obvious in this tale-telling documentation. Photographs can be employed to graphically articulate emotional or perceptual problems that might otherwise develop undetected.

But these are all complex verbal explanations. To give you a feeling for the process at work, I have selected a case study to share with you, although the identification has been slightly altered to assure the child's privacy. Debbie is a nine year old Indian girl who has been living in a Vancouver (white) foster home since she was brought here at age three because she was deaf, emotionally disturbed, and in need of special medical care and education. She has already been through more pain and confusion than most of us will ever face. She was born deaf, and her parents had no way of coping with the intricate consequences. She was badly burned before age two in a fire which left her in need of numerous skin grafts and lengthy hospital confinements. Placed in a hospital, she was left there for many months — scared, confused, restrained in bed, and in severe pain; and unable, because

of her deafness, to communicate anything with anyone, or be at all comforted by the unfamiliar strangers. Her mother rarely could come to visit her, and Debbie's response on those occasions understandably was usually total rejection, brought on by her pain of perceived abandonment. The emotional trauma was so severe that Debbie would not trust/relate to anyone for years, and even today is extremely cautious with demonstrating her feelings or forming relationships. She is capable of very basic primary verbal communication to express her slowly growing enthusiasm which still stays largely locked up, but with practice will be capable within the next few years of large advances in her ability to communicate with the hearing culture.

Debbie is still a very emotionally complicated child — in so many mar-

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ginal statuses that she is often confused by their differing realities. She has trouble with showing proper emotional affect in a situation, and often misreads the verbal and non-verbal cues people give her. She has trouble with people understanding her messages and their intent, and does not know how to fit into the hearing world without sticking out as 'somehow different'. These things must be caught soon before adolescence complicates them further.

Because of her increasing ability in speech and speech reading, she is leaving the deaf world behind and trying to move into the hearing. This crossroads gives a rare chance to have her perceptions rigorously examined for insights from-the-inside into the constructs of each culture as viewed by this child with one foot on each side. A better informant we can rarely find. But, of course, how can she tell us things when her language is so primary?

Well, we have been going at it photographically. Armed with her Instamatic and I with my 35mm (for camaraderie and comparisons when desired), we have been going out exploring the world around her, through *her* eyes and then through the examination of her prints. Sometimes we match hers with mine of the same scene, which helps her to understand graphically the concepts of selective perception, ethnocentrism and differing 'overlays' for describing — things that I would have no way of *telling* her in any words (or even in sign language) because she simply is not yet into much abstract thinking. We have gone through numerous exercises geared for her showing me her world as she perceives it, and other exercises dealing with exploring specific topics such as sex roles, emotional affect, etc. These range from photographing things and people we encounter, to having her pose (or tell me how to 'properly' pose) into 'appropriate' faces and body postures to fit titles we have written on cards (titles such as 'happy', 'mother', 'nervous', etc.). The way she selects to demonstrate such things is rich in information about her inner self, and are things we could never arrive at through conversation.

Having her make a photographic record of her visit home to her village

reserve last summer served numerous purposes: she came back with a tangible identity she could refer back to at any time and show to people who never before could comprehend her past and family relationships. She began to tie together her present life with her roots. Her snapshots offered frozen moments with her family in which she could study, in manageable amounts, what she thought about them and her relationship to them. She has begun to comprehend places existing concurrently in time and what her structure is in relation to each.

Having her make a photo book for us to send to her parents of "what my week is like down here in Vancouver" again met many goals — she has begun to deal with time and continuity concepts better, and is becoming more comfortable with consistencies of cycles of time. She could show her Indian parents with pride what she did in the city, and then they could easier write to her about things she could communicate about, better bridging the gaps between their worlds. But best of all, it gave Debbie more of a grasp on who she is, and she is growing to see her own responsibilities in the process of events. She can work on changing the parts she didn't like by analysing them and their implications to her.

New experiences are photographed and added to the "Debbie Book", and we have begun a special section for moods, whereby she could add to any page an indication of her feelings toward each photograph. She is growing better centered, and is gaining constructive outlets for her emotions, better able to hold onto her multi-contexts without as much confusion.

These are but a few examples; there are many more. These are all special lessons in two-way interactive communication — an attempt to notice cultural consensus as to what is being expressed, and how to notice it 'correctly' — and I am constantly learning how she perceives and judges such things (and her, me). If the photographs she takes show 'cultural errors' in perception, these can be noted and discussed. A person of any age will be much less defensive discussing a neutral object such as a photograph, while leaving himself somewhat protected until he feels comfortable enough to

open up further. But the learning does inexorably take place as perceptions are molded (*if* that is the desire; and one should be *very* careful about this!), possibly through more directed assignments. Photographs of Debbie are helping her to get an external correlation of her self-image. As she simplifies by placing a frame around things, she can slow the busy world around her down into manageable segments, stilling them for deeper analysis. She is honing her concentration and sensitivities by practicing seeing the usual things in unusual ways, expanding her creativity by tying her photographs together for some visual story or fantasy.

With Debbie I have gone a step further into rewarding her curiosities with lessons in darkroom techniques, because I have become increasingly aware that this child has artistic talent beyond our therapeutic exercises. She is extremely quick to pick up the basics of printing (she definitely is *not* retarded, as was first believed) and has regular sessions of darkroom instruction apart from our shooting days. Her pride in her new skill is beautiful — the added confidence is spreading to her school tasks, and she understands better and better such concepts as delayed gratification and causality, and responsibility for consequence now that she has been through them tangibly yet simply in the darkroom.

We have far to go yet and much to tell each other. But I look forward to this pursuit, as I believe very strongly in the success of the methods. Debbie is beginning to feel for the first time in her life that communication with the hearing world is within her grasp. □

The potential of phototherapy is endless and exciting. *Photographer* magazine would like to hear from any individual or group interested in any aspect of this type of exploration. Undoubtedly, many concerned individuals are already exploring various applications of this technique within their own areas of study. We would particularly appreciate hearing from those so involved. A sufficient response could provide the basis for a resource book of information and case studies in phototherapy. Please send your enquiries/information to Judy Weiser, PhotoTherapy Centre, 1300 Richards St. (#205), Vancouver, Canada, V6B 3G6; 604-689-9709.

Email: jweiser@phototherapy-centre.com

Website: www.phototherapy-centre.com

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Editor and Publisher
Gary Wilcox

Associate Editors
Denes Devenyi
Trevor Martin

Contributing Editors
Vickie Jensen
Randy Thomas
Peter Wollheim

Business and Things
Monique Wilcox



The eighty-foot halibut seiner Phyllis Cormack, twice called upon to support Greenpeace ecological activities on the high seas. Her first call to action was to help protest American underground nuclear tests on Amchitka. This past summer she saw duty with the Greenpeace V anti-whaling expedition, documented in crewman/photographer Rex Weyler's portfolio.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE

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