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## Remembering Jo Spence: A Brief Personal and Professional Memoir...

by Judy Weiser, R.Psych., A.T.R.,  
Founder & Director, PhotoTherapy Centre<sup>1</sup>

*The previous pages have illustrated the life and writings of Jo Spence as told by herself; let me now share an "outsider's" perspective.....*

Our letters "crossed in the mail" somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean... In June, 1985, I wrote to a friend in England, asking her to help me find a woman named Jo Spence (who I heard was doing autobiographical photography as "photo-therapy" there). The same week, a letter *from* Jo arrived -- she had written me on almost the same day! It began:

"I see from a recent advertisement in one of the Psychology journals, that you are running training workshop on photo therapy. I would be grateful to receive details from you, as I may be interested to attend. For your interest, I enclose a recent article about my own work in this country. Yours sincerely, Jo Spence"

(Those who knew Jo well in those days would likely have been shocked to discover that she was actually reading "psychology journals" at all, knowing how she usually felt about psychologists!!)

I immediately replied,

"Well, you may have *thought* you were writing to a complete stranger, but the goddesses of synchronicity have been powerfully at work... your letter greatly excites me! We *must* continue our contact; we have much in common, and the sharing could be very mutually encouraging... I would love to have you come take one of my training events..."

Having mailed my reply, I was still so excited by contact from this "kindred spirit" that the following weekend, I phoned her and we talked for over an hour... Thus began our long and fascinating dialogue -- and, more importantly, a close friendship!

By the time she wrote me, Jo Spence had long been the brilliant pioneer of her kind of "photo therapy" (and unbeknownst to me was working on the first English edition of this book), while I had long been busy pioneering my own PhotoTherapy techniques for over a dozen years and was deep in the preparation of my own book. But unfortunately, our paths had never before crossed.

Jo's book appeared in 1986; I had opened the PhotoTherapy Centre in Vancouver, Canada, in 1982. Between these two events, I had traveled in England and Jo had been in Canada exhibiting her photographs -- yet no one had ever thought to tell us about each other's work...

I began using PhotoTherapy techniques in 1971, and my first article about it was published in 1975<sup>2</sup>. By 1990, I had four book chapters and numerous articles published about applying these techniques (to counsel women, youth, disabled, cross-culturally, as well as about ethics and training)<sup>3</sup>. During the same years, Jo's first explorations and a lot of her own writings were published<sup>4</sup> -- yet because this was in the "dark ages" before e-mails and Internet search engines, we each had been working independently, without any awareness of one another's work or writings.

In those early years, I was also unaware that others in North America had also been using photographs in therapy (and writing about it!<sup>5</sup>), and so I was shocked when I received an invitation to present at the first "International PhotoTherapy Symposium" in the United States, in 1979. Attending that Symposium were many of the early pioneers

of the field (though interestingly, none came from England!), and together we started the PhotoTherapy Journal (which lasted a decade) and the International PhotoTherapy Association, which sponsored several more conferences (the last of which took place in Canada in 1984).

Most were mental health professionals who had grown up with photography being a hobby and suddenly one day decided to combine the two in their work (and who also likely had been unconsciously influenced by the poetic writings by photographers like Minor White and Ralph Hattersley<sup>6</sup>). No-one there mentioned Jo Spence, and I'm sure she had never heard of us at that time, either.

In 1983 most of us major "early pioneers" wrote a chapter about our own particular way of using photography in therapy for the first book published on the subject: "PhotoTherapy in Mental Health"<sup>7</sup>. Had the Editors known of Jo, I'm sure they would have invited her to contribute. But "not knowing about Jo" is simply not the same thing as saying "she was being consciously excluded and ignored" by therapists in North America (as some critics have implied).

That book, while excellent in theoretical foundations and various illustrations of individual practices, didn't really give readers any framework for how to actually begin doing this work *themselves*. And so I decided to write a different kind of PhotoTherapy book: one that would give readers the written equivalent of a training workshop so that so that not only could therapists learn how to use this system of techniques in their own work, but also it could be useful for people who were using photography on an individual level for their own self-exploration and personal healing.

It was while exploring this second kind of potential readership, that I began to hear

about people who were using photography *as* therapy for themselves (without being a therapy client in any formal sense). And this is what led me to discover the existence of Jo Spence and to desperately try to find her. Luckily we connected early enough that I was able to properly reference her work in my 1993 book ("PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums"<sup>8</sup>).

The point of all this "historical contexting" above<sup>9</sup>, is that in a truly objective sense, neither I *nor* Jo Spence solely "invented" PhotoTherapy. What is more important is that each of us *thought* we did -- because we were working in isolation. We were each unknowingly part of a collectively-building wave of interest in the powerful magical process that happens when people encounter their photographs not as "finished products" but rather as only the beginnings points for further explorations...

My kind of "PhotoTherapy" was clearly not the same as the "photo therapy" that Jo had been doing and writing about, and in fact, outside the U.K. her work would likely have been called "Autobiographical Photography" or "Therapeutic Photography" instead. Yet our work was informed by the same theoretical foundations and assumptions about the naturally-healing process of confronting oneself (and one's life) photographically.

We had each been doing very closely related, yet strikingly different work: both of us using photographs as emotional communications, "mirrors with memory", bridges into feelings in ways that words alone could not match -- me as a therapist using photo-based dialogues to help my clients, and Jo doing work on herself (and collaboratively with others).

The simplest way I can summarize our differences<sup>10</sup> is that Jo was a photographer who long used photography *as* personal therapy for herself, or collaboratively with

others, but not as part of any larger formal therapeutic setting. And I am a psychologist and art therapist who has long used photography *in* therapy work with my clients, using photo-based techniques as adjunctive tools *during* my counselling sessions with them. Jo worked primarily with photos (and photographic reconstructions) of her own life and related self-portraits and family-reconstructed imagery, while in my work, photographs of my own life story are irrelevant because it is not *my* story being worked on in these sessions -- it is my client's.

Jo used the camera like a weapon, like a probe, like a mirror of herself that could come alive to share secrets, tell stories, shout truths, and point to understanding -- and she took joy in sharing these techniques with others, often working collaboratively and interactively. I have also long used the camera (and people's own ordinary snapshots and family photos) as an activist tool -- but in my case it was for the purposes of helping other people take back their personal power and begin to more fully live their lives. I don't work collaboratively with my clients (other than sometimes serving as a human cable release).

Instead, I serve as a "holder of safe space" while my clients do their own exploring under my planned guidance and active intervention, using photographs as their focus of attention, in order to catalyze feelings and evoke memories, and help bring to consciousness long-buried or well-protected information. And after this we then also deeply and thoroughly discuss the images they viewed or created -- and explore what was triggered emotionally during the process of encountering them. We then discuss all this at a cognitive, conscious, and verbal level in order to point us toward further dialogue and the next photographic "assignment" that would fit with their goals for our therapeutic

goals.

To me, a collaborator is not the same as a therapist (in the formal professionally-trained sense of the word), although it may still be very therapeutic for those involved. As a formally-trained therapist, I believe that insight and catharsis are necessary, yes -- but that these alone are not sufficient processes for "good therapy" to have happened, because there *must* also be a cognitive framing of the experience during the session so that it can be built upon to use in further sessions.

For this reason, in my "PhotoTherapy" work, the "therapy" part of the name is as important as the "photo" part; this is why I spell it with two capital letters instead of one (to give both halves equal emphasis). Since all the previous pages of this book have very well described the many facets of Jo's work, I will not repeat a summary now -- but instead will just briefly describe my own work below, in order to establish my claim that *our work is not "oppositional, but rather simply just the two ends of one exciting "continuum of photo-based healing practices":*

In my work as a therapist, my clients' own personal snapshots and family photos (and their interactions with these) become useful catalysts for therapeutic communication and change during our therapeutic sessions. I use my clients' own ordinary snapshots and family albums as powerful non-verbal bridges into the unconscious processes that are influencing their life, but which are very difficult to talk about in words (or examine from an external perspective). When my clients encounter the feelings, thoughts, and memories their own photos evoke in them, they are usually able to then better understand, express, and resolve their problems -- and begin to explore the underlying feelings and background reasons involved.

My clients' personal snapshots are like "footprints of their life" that mark where they have been emotionally, as well as physically -- and also sometimes signaling where their life might be heading, even when they may not know this yet themselves! In the particular language of those whose Art is "doing therapy well", rather than "photography", it could be said that personal photographs serve as powerful symbolic self-constructs, emotional catalysts, metaphoric transitional objects, visual traces of family systems dynamics and representations of personal/family narratives. In this sense, clients' photos permit a much deeper form of "in-sight" to emerge than if using only the more traditional "talk therapy" alone.

But my clients don't just show me their photographs in our sessions. They not only view and interact with existing photos (theirs, my own, or those appropriated from other sources), but they also take, pose for, actively reconstruct, visually sculpt, or create new ones -- as well as remember or imagine, or hypnotically encounter those unable to be directly held in their hand. They also dialogue with, and re-work or re-sculpt, old family photographs, sometimes combining this process with video replay or art therapy processes.

They talk with photos, ask them questions, probe them for their secrets, discover their messages, explore what might be missing or needing change in them, use them as masks to speak through, or as the focus for further reworking as narratives, collages, animation, art creations, or journaling. Many times they use their photos to represent themselves when they are powerless to speak directly *for* themselves.

PhotoTherapy the way I "frame" it, consists of an interrelated system of five basic techniques (with, of course, numerous permutations and combinations) that simply reflect

one of the following kinds of photographs (or photographic encounters)<sup>11</sup>. Of course, like the five fingers of a hand, these do not really function independently in real life applications, but I must artificially separate them for the purpose of teaching and discussion:

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 captured spontaneously unaware),

3) *Self-portraits*, which means any kind of photos that clients have made of themselves, either literally or metaphorically (but in all cases, these are photos of clients where they themselves had *full* 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 picture frames, into computer screens, hand-held devices, family websites, and so forth), and, finally...

5) *"Photo-Projectives"*, which make use of the fact that the meaning of any photo is primarily created by its viewer *during* their process of perceiving it. A viewer's perceptions and reactions in response to looking at any kind of photographic image are actually projected onto that photo *by* its viewer, from inside their own inner map of reality (which determines how they make sense of what they see and also determines

their expectations of themselves and others). Therefore, this particular technique, which actually underlies all the other techniques, 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 phenomenologically forms their own unique responses to what they see (thus defining its very existence).

Jo and I agreed on many aspects of PhotoTherapy practice (whichever way it was spelled!) -- the most important of which, I think, is that our work is about "photography as symbolic emotional communication", rather than "photography as art" -- photography as an active agent of change and self-exploration rather than as something to be passively viewed on a wall. And therefore, both of us made a point of stressing that using these techniques requires no prior experience with cameras, nor any knowledge about photographic art -- and in fact such prior training would often get in the way of spontaneous emotional expression.

What was different between us, was our backgrounds that led us to our chosen work. Jo's background has been well explained in previous pages. In my case, I was a teenage photo-hobbyist and then fine-art photographer who had several exhibitions during the same time that I was doing my University and later Postgraduate training to become a professional therapist.

In North America, one must be formally trained and professionally licensed to do therapy (and it is actually a crime to advertise oneself as a "therapist" if not formally licensed to be one!). However, in the U.K. it was, until recently<sup>12</sup>, perfectly acceptable to say one's work is therapy and that one is therefore a therapist -- even if never having been academically trained as such... And so, when Jo wrote me to say she was a

"Phototherapist" (because there was nothing wrong in calling herself a therapist in England at that time), I naturally (and erroneously!) assumed she *was* a therapist in the way I knew that word (i.e., a psychologist, social worker, art therapist, or other similar "mental health professional"). This might sound like a trivial matter, but it had serious import for our understanding of each other, and that while we both were calling our practices "therapy", we were using two very different interpretations of that word...

And so, when we began to mutually clarify all these differences between us (some of which we were not even conscious of when we first began corresponding), our dialogue led to nearly a decade of detailed discussions<sup>13</sup> about various concepts that selectively and jointly informed and influenced our field(s) and our own lives, as well.

In 1991, Jo was my house guest for several days. We appeared together as part of a discussion panel at the Emily Carr College of Art<sup>14</sup> and spent hours sharing our work with each other. We even did several "live" sessions at the PhotoTherapy Centre, in which we "lived" our similarities and differences by *doing* our work with each other as well as well as entering into long hours of intensive philosophical probings and ponderings about our work and where it might be leading.

We concluded that the world could easily encompass both our kinds of PhotoTherapy, without this meaning that we were enemies or our practices mutually exclusive. In fact, we came to the "logical" conclusion that we simply needed to find a way to remove the distance that separated us (we lived literally diagonally across the planet from each other) and begin to partner our practices:

We figured that people wanting to explore themselves and find some answers to things that had been troubling them, should begin by going to see Jo first, for several

sessions, and then come to my office with their photos -- and ideally also bringing Jo (and her perceptions) along too. There the person would begin their own sessions with me, using both the photos they had already done with Jo, along with the new ones that I would assign them to make or bring in from collections at home.

Jo and I laughingly decided this practice would bear the name "'J & J PhotoTherapy", so that there would be no prioritizing implied between us. But of course it was only an impossible fantasy at that time, and she passed away a year later (about the time that we were supposed to teach together for the first time in May 1992 in London. I still taught that workshop but there was a "hole" in it where Jo was supposed to be -- because she was in Hospice instead).

When she realized she was dying, Jo did several things: she wrote out clear instructions to her Archivist about what she wanted done (and more importantly *not* done!) re: her work and her photos, warning about people who might try to later write her out of the historical record or otherwise "invisiblize" her -- and at the same time she sent me dozens of her slides, photographs, and articles to keep on file at the PhotoTherapy Centre, so I could keep her work alive through sharing it with others.

In many ways, my dialogue with Jo has continued ever since: I always mention her in my teaching and writing, and I try to continue to nurture her flame so that it can keep enlightening the world. Our work was different, yes, but in the "heart" of healing, it is all based on the same thing: when someone gets a "better picture" of themselves internally, they can open previously-locked doors to their pain and find the path that will lead to their healing...

And now that the technology exists which could have made our "J & J Partnership"

truly possible (via web-cams and video-conferencing), I miss her even more....

Her work and writing changed the history and very *face* of photography -- and were she still alive, what an amazing partnership we could have created; what an wonderful relationship could have continued to grow. Jo Spence was a close friend and I miss her deeply. I still keep her photograph close to my heart...

FINAL NOTE: All articles and chapters published by Judy Weiser may be downloaded as pdf's (for free), from the "PhotoTherapy Techniques" website at: <http://www.phototherapy-centre.com>

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AUTHOR NOTE:

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END NOTES:

<sup>2</sup> Weiser, Judy. "PhotoTherapy: Photography as a Verb". *The B.C. Photographer*, 1975, 2, 33-36.

<sup>3</sup> More than meets the eye: Using ordinary snapshots as tools for therapy. In: Laidlaw, T.; Malmo, C.; & Associates (Eds.), *Healing voices: Feminist approaches to therapy with women* (pp. 83-117). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990.

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"See what I mean?" Photography as nonverbal communication in cross-cultural psychology. In: Poyatos, F. (Ed.), *Cross-cultural perspectives in nonverbal communication* (pp. 245-290). Toronto: Hogrefe, 1988.

PhotoTherapy: Using snapshots and photo-interactions in therapy with youth. In: Schaefer, C. (Ed.), *Innovative interventions in child and adolescent therapy* (pp. 339-376). New York: Wiley, 1988.

Ethical considerations in PhotoTherapy training and practice. *Phototherapy, 1986, 5:1*, 12-17.

Training and teaching Photo and Video Therapy: Central themes, core knowledge, and important considerations. *Phototherapy, 1985, 4:4*, 9-16.

Using photographs in therapy with people who are 'different'. In: Krauss, D. A. and Fryrear, J. L. (Eds.), *Phototherapy in mental health* (pp. 174-199). Springfield, IL: Charles Thomas Press, 1983.

\* Weiser publications after 1990 can be found at:

<http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/biography.htm>

<sup>4</sup> According to Jo's Archivist, Terry Dennett, Jo's first experience with what she later called "phototherapy" was her "Faces" Group in 1979 (inspired by Keith Kennardy's earlier "Group Camera" experiments); her "Cinderella" Thesis was completed in 1982; and her first published interview about using her camera in cancer work was dated July, 1983.

Dennett adds, "It was later in 1983 that she met Rosy Martin and together they coined what they thought was a new term: "phototherapy" and I believe she didn't actually begin calling her work "phototherapy" in publications, until approximately 1984 or 1985".  
[Terry Dennett; Private e-mail communication; Feb 21, 2004]

<sup>5</sup> More than fifty articles (and several Theses and Dissertations) about using photography in therapy practice had been published prior to 1982, the year the PhotoTherapy Centre opened. For a copy of that list, contact the Author of this Chapter or see: [http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/student\\_proj.htm](http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/student_proj.htm)

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<sup>6</sup> Hattersley, Ralph. *Discover Yourself Through Photography*. New York, NY: Association Press / Morgan and Morgan (1971/1976);

White, Minor. What is meant by 'reading' photographs. *Aperture*, 1957, 5:2, 48-50;

White, Minor. Varieties of responses to photographs. *Aperture*, 1962, 10:3, 116-128.

<sup>7</sup> Krauss, David A., and Fryrear, Jerry L., Eds. *Phototherapy in Mental Health*. Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1983.

<sup>8</sup> Now in second printing (1999) this book can be order from MMB Distributors; for more information see: <http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/bookvid.htm>

<sup>9</sup> For more about the historical and chronological development of this field, please see: <http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/history.htm>

<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed comparison of PhotoTherapy with both Art Therapy and Therapeutic Photography (also known as Autobiographical Photography), see: <http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/comparisons.htm>

<sup>11</sup> For more information about these five individual techniques, please see: [http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/five\\_techniques.htm](http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/five_techniques.htm) or the book "PhotoTherapy Techniques" which contains an entire chapter for each one of them.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the website for the British Art Therapy Association (at: <http://www.baat.org/training.html>) explains that the "Health Professions Council", which now regulates all mental health professionals, now requires that anyone wanting to work as an art therapist must now possess the post-graduate Diploma in Art Therapy or Art Psychotherapy. These rules are based on protecting people from damage by others who are not fully trained, and therefore no one is permitted to call themselves an Art Therapist if they do not have the above credentials. I have been told that this law is similar for all other mental health professions now, as well.

<sup>13</sup> There exist over 200 single-spaced typed pages of letters between us, although our many long phone conversations were unfortunately not recorded. Copies of these are on file at both the PhotoTherapy Centre Library and the Jo Spence Memorial Archives, and are available for further study (by appointment only). For more information, contact either: Judy Weiser at: [jweiser@phototherapy-centre.com](mailto:jweiser@phototherapy-centre.com) or Terry Dennett at:

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<sup>14</sup> That evening's Panel was videotaped and copies can be found in the Library of the PhotoTherapy Centre, as well as the Jo Spence Archives; for contact information see previous note.