

QUADERNI by Nuova Scena Antica
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Art column: Judy Weiser (psychologist, art therapist, trainer, author, consultant)

1. INTERVIEW

Photography is of course an art, but art can also be used as therapy to help people to understand “what’s hidden behind”. Among the wide range of art-based therapy techniques, we choose to introduce **Judy Weiser’s** approach and techniques because it face human being as a whole, where the whole is much more than a summation of its parts.

What are PhotoTherapy’s main applications and benefits?

JW: A photograph, as a "whole", is **also** much more than only a summation of its individual details. For this reason, photos are perfect tools for capturing moments of time "all at once"! Yes, it is important to consider all the parts of a photograph, but its "story" (and all the emotional content the viewer connects with while looking at it) is much more than only a summation of those visual "facts" - and is also different for each person viewing it.

Using a set of techniques I developed (named **PhotoTherapy techniques**), mental health professionals can use people's personal snapshots, family photos, and also pictures taken by other people, to help them connect with feelings, thoughts, and memories that are difficult to talk about in words, and which they might not even be fully aware of, existing inside themselves.

I am both a Psychologist and Art Therapist, and I not only use my **PhotoTherapy techniques** to help my own patients - but I also travel all over the world teaching other mental health professionals (Psychologists, Art Therapists, Psychiatrists, and others) how to use them with their own patients. These techniques can also be very useful for people wanting to explore their own personal and family photos, to learn more about themselves.

Photographers and other people who are "picture-takers" but not professional photographers can use similar photo-based activities (**Therapeutic Photography**) to help themselves (or other people they want to help) improve their own personal well-being, reduce social exclusion, and create positive social change, through taking, sharing, discussing, or even exhibiting their own amateur photographs -- which often are not good enough to be formally considered as "art".

So while **Therapeutic Photography** is not "therapy" in its formal definition, these photo-based activity techniques are still definitely very "therapeutic" ("healing") - helping people to create photographs that they can then use to explain themselves to others (and to themselves too!).

It is my experience that Italy seems to have many more projects based on this kind of "**Social Action Photography**" than anywhere else in Europe; for example the several dozen projects whose participants' photos were exhibited at last year's **Perugia SocialPhotoFest** (organized by **Antonello Turchetti** of **LuceGrigia**) and discussed during their many presentations at the accompanying conference.

PhotoTherapy techniques involve a 5-part framework that is deeply interconnected. They must be separated to be individually taught, but work best in combination with each other:

- 1) **Photographs people take** or decide to keep because they are special moments to hold onto forever, show what matters most to that person.
- 2) **Photographs taken of a person**, whether posed intentionally or captured spontaneously, can show how others perceive them (perhaps differently than they see themselves).
- 3) **Self-portraits** (where the person had all the control over how the picture was made), can show other people -- and yourself also -- how you wish to be seen by others.
- 4) **Collections of Family Photographs** (whether kept online or on paper) are narratives of how that family developed over time, and what events, people, places, and moments are considered important enough to be kept forever as the "story" of that family.
- 5) Underlying all these techniques above, the fifth technique (**Photo-Projectives**) explains how the meaning of the photograph is created by the viewer while they are viewing the picture, rather than being "obvious" on the surface of the photograph itself.

These techniques do not involve teaching people how to "read" photographs like a book - instead therapists and other mental health professionals who are trained to know what kinds of questions to ask about people's photos (and interactions with these) will be able to learn a lot of helpful information from their replies.

Those using **Therapeutic Photography** techniques use the same five techniques, but in adaptations that are designed for using in non-therapy situations (where the skills of a trained therapist are not needed). People can use **Therapeutic Photography** techniques to learn more about themselves, improve insight and self-understanding by examining their own photographs more deeply and/or taking new ones to discover and explore where their life is taking them.

As I wrote in my book: "Photographs are footprints of our minds, mirrors of our lives, reflections from our hearts, frozen memories that we can hold in silent stillness in our hands -- forever if we wish. They document not only where we have been, but also point the way to where we might perhaps be heading, whether or not we realize this yet ourselves". This makes them very powerful tools for helping people heal and improve well-being, whether in formal therapy sessions or in photo-based therapeutic activity, because these techniques are very much more than just "creating photographic art": they are also a way to communicate without words, and beyond words, about things difficult to express in words -- whether or not the photograph itself would be considered "art"...

Nonverbal languages and emotional contents: what's the main difference between your approach and other psychological techniques?

JW: PhotoTherapy techniques use photographs to help people connect with thoughts, memories, feelings, and other aspects of themselves that live at very deep levels inside them. These things are not easy to access and discuss in words, because they are stored at sensory levels where words don't "live". Words can only translate inner experience as if an outside observer of that process, rather than re-experiencing it directly and immediately - and yet most psychological therapy techniques involve only talking with the patient.

Therapies based on information stored through our senses have been developed.—**PhotoTherapy techniques** are similar to those used in Art Therapy, but involve photographic imagery instead of drawings or painting. But it is very important to know that **PhotoTherapy techniques** can also be easily used by any trained therapist, using any kind of approach or modality, even if they have no knowledge of Art Therapy at all. So to answer your question, finally: **PhotoTherapy** uses photographs as the focusing point for inner exploration and accessing parts of the self that are not easily accessible by a verbal-only approach.

Photography fixes the time but time cannot be fixed, it's like keeping something alive forever. What does the unconscious hide behind a personal snapshot or a family album?

JW: Your question sounds like something I wrote in my book:

"A photograph is simultaneously a realistic illusion and an illusory reality, a moment captured from within time, yet never able to be fully captured in its pure form when stilled as an artifact of time. We use the film to stop time, which cannot be stopped. These aspects are crucial for an understanding of why (and how) PhotoTherapy works: it permits the complex examination of a frozen slice of time fixed forever onto film as 'fact', and yet at the same time brings forth an appreciation of the endless variety of realities that it visually-symbolic presents differently to each viewer."

Viewing a photograph brings you back to the moment it was taken and you are there inside it, participating in that experience as if your eyes were the lens of the camera itself. Your mind does not realize you are looking at a piece of paper or computer screen. Instead you are immediately put into the picture as if that moment in the photograph was happening right **now**: you are **there** viewing it in three dimensions and with all the accompanying sounds, smells and other sensory information as the moment originally happened, even if it was taken many decades ago.

A photo has the ability to transport us in time and to let us consider alternative realities, even if neither of these is possible in real life. But, you ask: "What does the unconscious hide behind a personal snapshot or a family album?", and I must answer that I have absolutely no way to know this -- because I cannot know fully what is hidden inside the unconscious of any person which is the reason that it is named the "UNconscious"! However, I can tell you that in the unconscious lives the power of that photograph, the reasons it is taken or kept, and that **if you ask the right kinds of questions**, you will be able to discover a lot more about the person while they think they are telling you about the photograph itself!

What are the origins of your interest in PhotoTherapy? Where does it spread from?

JW: Like many people I started taking photos as a teenager, just to be able to keep a special moment of time "alive" forever. On our holiday trips, my family and I all photographed the same places and relatives, but when we were later sharing our photos with each other, I realized that our reasons for taking them (the "story" that photo told) was very different for each of us. We "saw" the same photo differently even if we had both been there at the time it was taken.

Later some of my "more artistic" photographs were chosen for exhibition in a gallery, and I enjoyed being there to observe people chatting about my photos when they didn't know I was the photographer. The reason I took the photo was often not evident to them and I began to realize that they viewed the person or place in the photograph through the "filters" of their **own** past experiences: the person or place reminded them of someone or someplace they had been in the past although they did not seem to realize that they were projecting their own stories and feelings onto the surface of my photograph. And I was fascinated!

I began to take a tape recorder to the exhibition and interview people, asking them open-ended questions such as "What do you think of this photo?", "What would it say if it could speak?", "Why do you think the photographer took it?", "What is the story of this photo?", "How does it make you feel?", etc. - and realized I was in the middle of a cultural study about how people's differences influenced what they understood about the world and other people who live in it.

And I also soon realized that I could use these photo-exploring techniques to learn more about the people I was counseling as a therapist - helping me to see their world "inside their eyes" and perhaps gain a better understanding of the reasons they were having problems in their lives...

The more I explored this, the more formalized my framework for application became. When asked to write my first article about my work using photos to help therapy clients I was asked, "What do you call this work?", I had to suddenly create a name and chose "**PhotoTherapy techniques**". That article, published in 1975 (titled "*PhotoTherapy: Photography as a Verb*"), was the first use of the name **PhotoTherapy** in the title of a published article anywhere in the world.

Within a few years I found other people doing similar work, and we began to meet for conferences and began a journal and started networking (as could best be done in those days before computers!). I have been using these techniques (and teaching others how to use them) for nearly 40 years now, and they **still** excite me and continue to open up new possibilities in the age of digital technologies.

Thank you, Judy.

(interview with Judy Weiser on 05.12.2013)

ZOOM ON JUDY WEISER

2. YOUR BEST QUALITIES

Enthusiasm for life and interest in other people. Generous with my time mentoring people.

3. YOUR WORST FAULT

Agreeing to do more things than I have time to finish (like this article!)

4. FUTURE PROJECTS

The **PhotoTherapy and Archiving Project** -- organizing all the archival materials held at my **PhotoTherapy Centre** in Canada, so that can be donated to a place where they can remain accessible at no cost (both online and in person) into the future after I am no longer living.

5. JUDY WEISER'S BIO

Judy Weiser is a psychologist, art therapist, consultant, trainer, and author -- and one of the earliest pioneers of PhotoTherapy techniques. Founder and Director of the **PhotoTherapy Centre** in Vancouver (Canada), she is considered the world authority on the techniques of PhotoTherapy and Therapeutic Photography. Former Editor of the journal **Phototherapy**, Judy authored the classic text [PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums](#) (now in 3rd printing, with Italian and Korean translations appearing soon), as well as numerous professional articles, book chapters, and a video/DVD on these subjects -- all of which (except her book) can be downloaded for free from her website.

She also created and maintains the primary informational resource and networking website for the field ([PhotoTherapy Techniques in Counseling and Therapy](#)) as well as the related Facebook Group for [PhotoTherapy, Therapeutic Photography, Photo Art Therapy, and VideoTherapy](#). She is also on the Editorial Board for the Italian Journal **PsicoArt: Rivista on line di arte e psicologia** and the Canadian **Art Therapy Association Journal**, and serves as International Consultant for the **Center for Visual Therapies** (U.S.), the **Institute for Psychology and Photography** (Mexico), **PSYFoto/PSYForte** (Russia), and **VideoReport & LaDamaSognatrice Produzioni Audiovisive** (Italy).

Having spent over 35 years using PhotoTherapy techniques in her private practice as a therapist with socially/culturally marginalized or otherwise-excluded populations (including many years helping street-involved addicted/abused youth and adults), she then began her current work consulting, lecturing, and teaching workshops and intensive trainings all over the world, including Directing the **Certificate Program in PhotoTherapy Techniques** for Southwestern College in Santa Fe, New Mexico (USA).

6. PHOTOS

All photographs in this article are ©Copyright to Judy Weiser and may not be re-used without her permission.

7. LINK TO YOUR WEBSITE

More info at: www.phototherapy-centre.com

Judy Weiser can be contacted at: jweiser@phototherapy-centre.com

8. YOUR BOOK IN ITALIAN

The Italian translation of Judy Weiser's book **PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums** (photo of original English cover is below) will be available in Autumn, 2013, from the website of Franco/Angeli Publishers.