

## Media review

## Humanity online

Portraits of the human spirit:  
lessons in living

Joel Walker MD

www.portraitsofthehumanspirit.com

For almost 3 decades Joel Walker has worked both as psychiatrist and photographer. He uses photographs as “photo therapy” in some of his work with patients. Walker has published extensively about this subject and has mounted numerous interactive photo exhibitions internationally.

One of his recent accomplishments is an online book and multimedia project entitled *Portraits of the Human Spirit: Lessons in Living*. It features black and white photographs of 7 exceptional individuals who live lives full of passion and strength, despite an array of personal challenges. Captions for the photos are abbreviated versions of the subjects’ stories, told in their own words. The Web-based presentation is really about 8 people, as Walker also shares his own remarkable story of

overcoming a major lifelong learning disability.

Walker got to know the 7 individuals through his workplace and as a photographer. With his camera he creates 2-dimensional artifacts of these encounters. The Web exhibition is one way he shares these stories of a former Olympic gold medal sprinter, a cardiovascular surgeon, a woman with bipolar disease and an elderly horse trainer. Walker has experienced first-hand the power of their narratives — how lives may be transformed and enriched by struggle. He also sees potential value for the viewer who looks at these portraits and reads their stories.

If only the aesthetic and didactic impulses at the heart of *Portraits of the Human Spirit* came alive on the Web page. Sadly, they don’t. On my notebook computer the black and white images are small, grainy and lack the visual drama of larger, more conventionally exhibited images. The repetitive click-pause-load, which is an unavoidable part of the electronic viewing experience, renders the site visit a little

tedious. The medium, in this case, mutes the message and diminishes the beauty. I wonder if short audio–video clips might help restore the touching humanity of his subjects.

Thirty years ago US writer Susan Sontag wrote a critique of photography simply titled, *On Photography*. In this series of essays she states:

Whatever the moral claims made on behalf of photography, its main effect is to convert the world into a department store or museum-without-walls in which every subject is depreciated into an article of consumption, promoted into an item for aesthetic appreciation.<sup>1</sup>

Sontag oversimplifies the “main effect” of photography. Her claim however, has a prescient ring to it, anticipating these days of ubiquitous photo and story sharing on Web albums and blogs.

The casual visitor to Walker’s Web site likely comes to it in the midst of Internet browsing, emailing and assorted multitasking. Unlike Walker, the viewer has no fundamental connection to these people. The detached “engagement” of viewer and subject, which characterizes life in the World Wide Web, depreciates the individuals featured and erodes the significance of their achievements.

We need to see exceptional people and to listen to their stories. We hope, like Joel Walker, to meet, get to know and be inspired by some gifted people in our own lives. To paraphrase Christian writer St. Paul, it is better to meet them face to face than through a glass darkly. However, we need a livelier alternative to viewing the human spirit digitally downsized for the little screen.

## Vincent Hanlon MD

Family physician  
Lethbridge, Alta.

## REFERENCE

1. Sontag S. *On photography*. New York: Doubleday; 1977. p. 110.

DOI:10.1503/cmaj.070897



Joel Walker

“Clarence was in his eighties when he set out to teach me ‘everything he knew.’ He was a horse trainer, with an incredible zest for life.” — Joel Walker, *Portraits of the Human Spirit: Lessons in Living*