

SELF REFLECTIONS

A JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING
SPRING 2009

VOLUME 1 ISSUE 2

What Hangs on Our Walls

Interior walls are the mirrors of human experience. From the cave paintings of Lascaux and the frescos of Rome, to the inspiring stained glass windows of European cathedrals and the abstract imagery of modern painting, we have always told our story on the walls that surround us. What hangs on our walls in home varies widely, but all images and objects that surround us tell our personal story on some level, from the details of our interests and relationships to the shadowed depths of our psyche.

The images on our walls may function as either “signs” or “symbols”, or more interestingly, as “potent images”. Images that function as “signs” on our walls are things we consciously choose to display with a clear, specific intent. For example, a family photograph documents particular people, a specific reminder of those we cherished or respected, or the painting of a seaside village may document

the sights from a memorable trip. Objects and images on our walls that are “symbols” are likewise consciously chosen, although what distinguishes them from signs is that symbols suggest meaning or evoke thoughts and feelings for



A MISTY FOREST MAY SYMBOLIZE NATURE'S MYSTERY OR OUR OWN UNCERTAINTY. "MADRONAS IN THE MORNING MIST" BY ART WOLFE ©1985

further, deeper contemplation. For example, in the photograph of madrona trees, Art Wolfe's eye not only captures the beauty of a stand of madronas, it captures elusive qualities that become symbolic. The path fading into the mist elicits a sense of solitude, timelessness and even uncertainty. Beyond an image of trees, the artist pushes the image into a symbol of nature's power and mystery, and we are drawn into considering our place in that symbolic world.

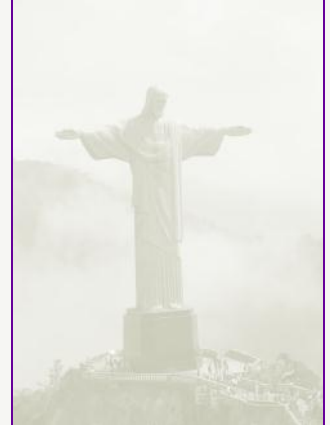
“Potent images” are images that have the power to engage the unconscious. Potent images are quite distinct from other images, even deeply symbolic images, in that they are strongly ambiguous or incomplete in some way, and invite us to complete the image or story that we believe has been started by the maker of the image. When we engage a potent image, a process of “psychic contemplation” is triggered, and the unconscious begins a creative response to what it encounters.

The process is creative in that new relationships, understanding or insights are being constructed by the unconscious in an effort to find meaning in the image. Curiously, we often complete ambiguous images with unresolved feelings and fears hidden in our own psyche, and thus begin a psychological healing process by releasing, or “projecting”, unconscious thoughts, feelings or fears into potential awareness.

(continued on page 3)

WISDOM BITS

- ◆ The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes. -Marcel Proust
- ◆ There is no security in life, only opportunity. -Mark Twain
- ◆ When the student is ready the Master appears. -Japanese Buddhist proverb



INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

<i>On Our Walls</i>	1
<i>Anxiety</i>	2
<i>Walls, cont.</i>	3
<i>My Room Your Room</i>	4

Anxiety Anxiety Anxiety Anxiety Anxiety Anxiety Anxiety Anxiety Anxiety Anxiety



As a child I always dreamed of living in the woods. I imagined an idyllic picture, fresh warm breezes, gurgling streams and dancing leaves on the maple trees. Although I now do enjoy days like this, there are other days where nature shows me a very different side. Flooding creeks, frightening winds that topple trees, snowstorms that make otherwise simple tasks difficult, these are the days that seed my anxiety. Some years ago, the wind brought down a tree onto my house. I was home, and it was a frightening experience. For some after that, I would become very anxious when the wind would blow. I would sit in the house and calculate the angle of fall for the countless trees surrounding me. Then I would attempt to sleep somewhere in my house that I believed was safe, based on those irrational calculations. The slightest breeze would trigger my anxiety, and in time it became such a problem that I decided to cut down all my trees so that I would be safe, another irrational thought. For-

tunately, the loggers that surveyed my trees did not want to cut them down. Instead they told me that they were quite healthy, and congratulated me on my good fortune to be surrounded by such grand specimens of Northwest trees. I began to realize that my anxiety was the problem, and beneath that anxiety was the irrational belief that I could completely protect myself from nature. I began to reexamine my view of the trees, and decided that when the wind blows and the trees sway, I will practice containing my anxiety, and use the moment to reflect on how impermanent and unpredictable my life really is. A small degree of fear or worry is helpful from time to time. It focuses our attention on something that is potentially dangerous, or prods us into taking some preventative action. It is our psychological alarm system, alerting us to a potential danger, and giving us an opportunity to make corrections before we suffer. Anxiety often develops after we have experienced a severe trauma or loss. Understandably, we become vigilant and weary of experiencing such events again. But prolonged or intense anxiety on the other hand, is not helpful. Anxiety is like a hyper-sensitive alarm system. It triggers on at the slightest change in our environment, sending our mind and body into a high state of alert. Left unattended, we develop yet another layer of anxiety, a fear of the alarm going off. We are in a constant state of fight or flight, and this intense state of fear is very stressful on our body. It also makes attention to routine

tasks difficult, disrupts our sleep, and can even leave us feeling detached from reality and the immediate environment. If this condition persists, our ability to remain hyper-vigilant collapses. We surrender to the belief that we have no control at all in our life, and begin to sink into depression. When anxiety sets in, there are three ways we can diminish its effect on us. One is to notice that behind our intense fears are erroneous or irrational thoughts that need to be tested and reconsidered. As I sat out windstorms in my home fearing a crushing blow from a looming fir tree, I needed to reason my way to the fact that only one tree out of countless trees has hit my home in 29 years, and that although it could happen again, it is a rare occurrence. I also had to admit that my fears were utilizing “fuzzy geometry”; my calculations didn’t really demonstrate that each tree would fall directly onto the chair in which I sat. Recalibrating my thoughts with more accurate information went a long way to reducing the anxiety. Another way to diminish anxiety is to reaffirm what control we do have in our lives, and take specific actions to prepare ourselves against potential danger. Although we never have complete control over future events, we do have influence in what is yet to come, and the choices we make now will impact the outcome of those experiences. Preparation, practice and selective choosing are actions that lead to positive outcomes and reduced anxiety. If we are prepared, and are making

carefully considered choices, we will worry less. When spring comes at my home, I walk through the woods and take note of which trees are not healthy. I look for those that are leaning precariously. I talk to experienced people who have studied trees and discover just how sturdy these wonders of nature can be. But if weaknesses in the tree suggest it may soon fall, I take preventative action and sacrifice it to the woodstove. Taking preventative action, and learning from the wisdom of the more experienced, likewise reduces the potential for anxiety. And lastly, it helps to deepen our understanding of our true existence, shedding the illusion that things are permanent, that we can achieve and maintain perfection, and that once something is “finished” it will no longer require our attention. We are reminded from time to time and in different ways that what we assumed was certain is most certainly not. We may think we will have a job, a secure future, a comfortable home or perfect health, but this is not always so. We may work hard to acquire the perfect thing in our life, only to find it becoming tarnished or falling apart. And we may arrive exhausted at a stage of completion in our lives, only to discover that “The End” is followed by yet more stages of development. To know deeply that our lives may change radically without warning is to expect the unexpected; knowing this truth, we can focus our attention toward the joy of the moment, and having accepted the possibility of difficulties ahead, let go of the fear of what *could* be.

"Imagery is not only what the psyche sees, imagery is what the psyche creates."

Walls (continued from page 1)

Potent images activates aspects of ourselves that we have yet to understand, integrate, accept, or come to grips with. The wisdom of psyche lets us know there is something we need to address, and its way of speaking is to create an image in our environment, a potential reflection of that issue, and wait for us to stumble upon it. Rather than being a projection in the classical sense, of "disowning" feelings, the conversation with imagery in our homes celebrates healing. Unconsciously, we chose the image that best suits what we want to project upon it, and as we live with the image in home, we engage it, allowing it to be completed by what resides in the shadows of our psyche. As we repeatedly project onto the image, it is animated with our psyche, and when we view the image, we see not just what is there, but what we are providing to complete the story of the image in a way that is helpful to us.

A good example of a potent image is another photograph by Art Wolfe entitled "Spiritual Journey". On one level, it is a striking composition of color and form, yet the story of the image is incomplete and ambiguous. We do not know if it is a man or woman. It is unclear whether the person is coming or going, or whether the sun is rising or setting. The image quickly evokes more profound themes of our human experience, and although these themes are universal symbols that most viewers would resonate with, such as the solitary journey

through life, the image draws even deeper into the soul. The artist not only leaves us with many unanswered questions, the power of the ambiguous image speaks to the core of our human experience. The image transcends its immediate beauty, and with uncomfortable intimacy, asks us to face our deepest existential fear, that of our mortality. We see ourselves, a hooded mysterious figure crossing the



THE AMBIGUOUS OR INCOMPLETE "STORY" OF AN IMAGE INVITES THE UNCONSCIOUS TO COMPLETE IT WITH ITS OWN EXPERIENCE, THUS INTEGRATING THAT WHICH WE FEAR.
"SPIRITUAL JOURNEY" BY ART WOLFE ©2001

river, possibly as the sun is setting, not certain to return. The boat, although apparently still seaworthy, has the texture of old dried bones lying in the desert sand. Possibly the vessel is not strong enough to make it to the other shore. And yet, the sun may be rising. We may be a journey toward fresh opportunity. Like the figure in the boat, we may be stripped of old baggage, and unencumbered, we point ourselves into the light

of new, yet uncertain opportunity. We just don't know, the questions are unanswerable, and that is the potency and power of the image.

When we project into our home, our psyche unconsciously chooses an image of something we need to learn or integrate into our life experience. Consciously, we may have some sense that the image around us is important, or

we may keep collecting the same image, or repeating the same pattern, all the while having no idea what it means. These images frequently show themselves as odd, out of place, repeated throughout home, even obsessively at times. Potent images may be particular objects, collections of objects, patterns of color, arrangements in the home, and even curious omissions of objects and images that are unexplainable. It is an elegant

strategy by the psyche, unconsciously collecting information about something we are afraid to see, placing it around us so that we might become accustomed to it and then waiting patiently until we notice the pattern and begin to ask questions about it. The process is deeply creative. Our life experiences are often buried in our psychological closets because we cannot find a way to wear them in our daily lives, we cannot make these experiences fit. By unknowingly taking them from the closet and placing them elsewhere in our psychological homes, we "discover" them again, and because so much mystery surrounds what we have brought out into the light, we are drawn to make sense of it, and give it a place in our conscious lives.

Imagery is not only what the psyche sees, imagery is what the psyche creates. The more significant the issue, the more cryptic and elusive the image, and the longer we may need to have it in our home. We need time, first to discover the image, and then to gather the courage to ask the image why it is there. And in time, to hear what it is telling us. If we begin the conversation and engage the image, gleaned all that we can from it, it may someday become a rich symbol of that exploration. And we may keep the image, a lifelong companion, there to inspire us and remind us of our journey, and of what matters.



David Paul Eck, MA
Mental Health Counselor
Psychoenvironmental
Consultation

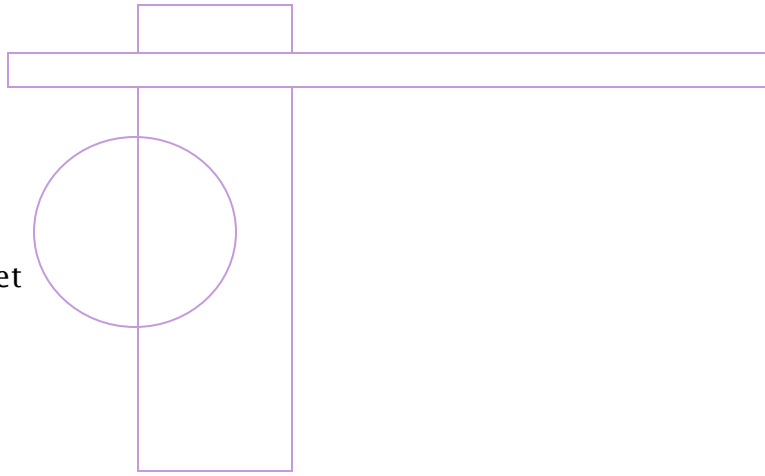
46302 SE Mount Si Rd
North Bend, WA 98045
davidpauleck@comcast.net
Office: 425.888.1457



DAVE ECK HAS BEEN A MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELOR IN THE SNOQUALMIE VALLEY FOR 15 YEARS. HE HAS A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN FINE ARTS AND A MASTERS DEGREE IN PSYCHOLOGY. DAVID CONTINUES TO PURSUE HIS INTEREST IN DESIGN AND FINE ART, WITH A PARTICULAR INTEREST IN HOW HOME ENVIRONMENTS ARE SHAPED BY THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THEIR INHABITANTS.



©2009 All images and writing by David Paul Eck unless otherwise noted. All rights reserved
*Art Wolfe images printed with permission



IF YOU FIND "SELF REFLECTIONS" INTERESTING, I AM HAPPY TO PUT YOU ON MY MAILING LIST. EMAIL ME OR WRITE TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS. *THIS JOURNAL IS AVAILABLE AT NO COST, BUT DONATIONS ARE GRATEFULLY ACCEPTED*

A Room For Me, A Room for You, A Room for Us

When one lives alone, the home environment reflects one's identity quite easily. When there is a couple in a home however, things become more complex. The home now resonates with the imagery of *three* identities: two individuals and one couple. And when children enter the picture, finding self in home becomes even more complex. There are the identities of each person, that of the "romantic couple", that of parents, and that of the family as a unit.

The demands of relationship *require* considerable compromise of individual needs, but can also risk constraining critical and necessary attention to self. Likewise, the demands of parenthood require considerable attention toward the developmental needs of children, yet in the process, these demands may diminish time and energy needed for both the nurturing of self and the marital relationship. When a couple enters into relationship, they do not cease being individuals, nor does a couple cease being romantic partners when they have children. It is important that each of these identities

continue to have some form so that each identity can be freely expressed. Taking appropriate time for self or romantic time away from children may appear selfish, but managed thoughtfully it *helps* both a marital relationship and the well being of the children. By remembering that we never cease being individuals even in relationship helps us honor each other's uniqueness, and for children, learning these multiple roles encourages respect for others and models healthy boundary setting.

One way to practice this in home is to have "private" spaces that are set aside for each person, a space only for parents, and a communal space that is flexible and creative. Individual spaces allow retreat for self introspection, and may reflect the personal interests and dreams of that person. Parents may set aside a room that is "off-limits" to children, usually their bedroom, providing privacy for intimacy and conversation. The couple's room might also contain remembrances of their history together, and of imagery that they have jointly

chosen. The communal space honors the entire family, and reflects the diversity of personalities and aspirations of each person. It is also a place that is highly creative, where ideas and passionate conversation can flourish. Communal spaces also need to be flexible, allowing opportunity to share music, art and play in the context of a larger community of caring family. A higher tolerance for mess-making usually accompanies communal spaces. Creativity and play are necessarily messy, and having a designated space for this encourages us to try new things and experience the potential risk of failure.

In each room we practice setting boundaries by not violating another's space, and honor what they choose to do within it. And in return, we learn the value of having privacy, during which we can practice the often uncomfortable process of looking inward. And even in communal spaces, we practice the expansion of boundaries, where everyone has the opportunity for expression and the exposure to a diversity of viewpoints and experience.