BOOK OF REVELATIONS

Bill Jay

This is true. I'm sitting on the porch of my cabin, pondering what and how to write about Jerry Uelsmann, about whom everything, it seems, has already been said, regretting my rashness in agreeing to this project without predicting I would be in this dilemma, when a forest-dwelling neighbor ambles up and asks what I am doing. I explain my problem. Nodding (which in any one else would have been followed by "sagely"), he utters one of the favorite maxims, as profuse as elk droppings in this neck of the woods: never squat with your spurs on.

The lesson is not lost. Of course I should have considered impediments to success before embarking on a course of action. I wish I had taken the lesson to heart (or, in deference to the above adage, to the more nether regions of my anatomy) when agreeing to this introduction. I now have scars as punishment for my foolhardiness.

Lord knows, there is enough to write about. Jerry Uelsmann is a seminal figure in recent photographic history. Every scholar, historian, critic and photographer would agree on this point, even if they were less than enchanted by the images themselves. More than any other single photographer, he changed the way the medium was practiced and evaluated. That is heady stuff, containing more than enough grist for the journalistic mill. I could, I thought, review the complex history of photographic manipulation with a special emphasis on combination printing, Jerry's forte; recount the shocking abruptness with which his images disrupted the cozy assumptions prevalent in the 1960s; reveal his astonishing mastery of craft during his darkroom endeavors; compare and contrast pre- and post-visualisation concepts; analyze the images via Jungian psychology mixed with a touch of mysticism and a pinch of surrealism; discuss the single, individualized print syndrome as an art commodity and the resultant shift from the magazine to the gallery wall as the primary venue for photographs; provide glimpses of the man and his milieu, as teacher, artist, lecturer, author and all-round good guy in the context of a full biography...

I could also inject, with a tinge of boastfulness, the fact that my association with his work stretches back over thirty years. I claim (whether it is true or not) that I was the first editor in Britain to publish a portfolio of his pictures. This was in 1969. I am pleased to report that this portfolio caused a considerable ruckus among my peers and led to a number of canceled subscriptions.

A slight diversion: I am not, you understand, suggesting that the publication of his pictures in my little magazine had any effect on his subsequent fame, such as being invited to deliver the prestigious Bertram Cox Memorial Lecture at The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain just two years later. Some writers and critics seem

to have no trouble at all in believing that their pieces of puffery are read by actual people, including a few they do not know personally. Modestly, I assert that I do not suffer from that particular delusion (although the one about licentious fairies I will not relinquish). In fact I can think of nothing I have ever written, said or published that could be shown to have had any effect on anything at all. I take some comfort in this fact. The alternative is worrying indeed: that some one I do not know is not only reading my words but taking them seriously. From there it is but a short step to fantasizing that someone is acting on my advice and admonitions, leading to the faintest of possibilities that they could, God forbid, change a person's attitudes to life or, horror, the course of photographic history. No, I leave such risky ventures to bold visionaries, like Jerry Uelsmann, or to accidents of fate, like the one which landed on Ben Fernandez.

Ben, in case you do not know him, is a fine photographer in his own right whose portfolio on the Rev. Martin Luther King is a classic of the civil rights movement. But on Ben's own admission, his greatest contribution to the medium was on the day when he changed the future of photography by performing the Heimlich maneuver on Jerry who was purportedly choking during a dinner conversation, who lived, therefore, to... Well, the rest is history. Anyway, that is Ben's story and he is sticking to it.

By now it must be evident that my own contribution to the Jerry Uelsmann story is nowhere near as dramatic. This is not false modesty. I have collected articles about Jerry since the '60s. The file is now as fat as anyone's so I feel I know enough about these images and their context to write a tome and, to mangle a cliche, familiarity breeds attempt. So I was as foolhardedly optimistic as the same old timer, already introduced, who once cried out in frustration: "I've cut this plank three times and it's still too damn short!"

I am still sitting here, wondering how to start an introduction to Jerry Uelsmann, staring at the page while mental images float around it in ever-morphing parodies of his images.

It suddenly occurs to me that the right course of action is clear: remove the spurs - admit defeat and quit.

I let the publisher buy lunch so I could tell him, and Jerry, my malaise. This is a fond strategy of mine. If you cannot write about a person, talk about yourself and give the bill to someone else.

The problem with this strategy is that other people are thinking too. And they are way ahead of you. I recited my litany of reasons why they do not need another article about Jerry Uelsmann, the most written about photographer in history with the possible exception of Ansel Adams. Biography - done; technique - done; symbolism/surrealism - done; post-visualisation - done; and so on. They both nodded away in agreement, so I like to believe, but it may have been boredom. "That's all true," said the publisher, faking interest, "but we don't want you to write about those things." "No," said Jerry, "just write what you want." "Yes," said the publisher, "give us a personal piece."

And I fell for it. Flattery will do that to you. (So will money, although writing about photography provides paychecks more commonly associated with sweatshops in Manila). But at this stage I felt liberated. I am not writing for posterity, I was assured, and few people would read the introduction anyway, which was encouraging to hear. But at the time I had no idea just how personal the notes would become...

So for the one or two of you who have foolishly stopped looking at the pictures and cannot decide between the lavender bedspread and the zirconium pendant on the Shopping Channel, here are a few notes on the photography of Jerry Uelsmann.

I first encountered his shocking, outrageous, heretical images in the mid-1960s. The adjectives are apt. All you young peachy-faces need to be reminded of this fact. You can haveno idea how dramatically the medium has changed since then.

Before Uelsmann we were all, metaphorically, lounging in our deck-chairs around a placid pond, straightening our ties, while earnestly debating the permissible range of photographic styles which wavered between Henri Cartier-Bresson (never crop, print straight) to the wilder shores of W. Eugene Smith (it's OK to fiddle around in the darkroom - within reason - to inject a bit of drama). Into this tranquil and, let's face it, rather stagnant pond suddenly crashed a huge tsunami on the top of which, surfing with glee, was this lanky, wild-haired, bespectacled maniac called Jerry, yelling at the top of his voice: "Trees can float in the sky! Rocks can levitate! Nude angels exist and can be photographed!" We all thought he was a fruit-cake, one of those Darma-bum beatnik weirdoes who definitely inhaled, as we floundered around wondering what had hit us.

This was especially true in England where the Uelsmann tidal wave was particularly insulting in that he was American. Before your hackles rise too far, let me remind you that this was not a good time for USA public relations. There we were all terribly, terribly earnest lefties, more interested in chucking rocks at the American Embassy (in the odd, not to say paradoxical, notion that these minor acts of vandalism would somehow stop a full-scale war in Vietnam) than in tripping out. Uelsmann's images seemed, in our serious socially concerned primness, to be so self-indulgent, even decadent. They offended by cocking a snoot at the accepted order of things, much like the anecdote of painter Jackson Pollock pissing in fireplace at the home of a rich patron during a society reception, a story which we liked to repeat as justification for thinking all things American were crass.

Jerry Uelsmann, you see, was being disrespectful to the agreed One True Path to Photographic Enlightenment: the socially concerned document. His images were revolutionary in that they depicted the artist's vision, the interior world of creation, not the exterior world of social distress. This was frightening. I could recognize the skill, panache, craft and singular vision with which they were made but I feared them because I, like others, sensed that the wall of water of which they were the harbinger, would sweep away the old order and that our cozy little pond was about to be flushed into oblivion. And that is why, against the cajoling of all my "advisers", I published Jerry's pictures. They signaled a new era had begun, whether the critics liked it or not.

Once the issue was published, in poured the angry letters, all with similar bleats about those crazy pictures (you could not deign to call them photographs) by that hippie Uelsmann fella. They surfed headlong into the slammed doors of closed minds. I was not cowed, I say with some vestige of pride. True, I was as baffled by this imagery as my peers and readers but there was something very important going on in photography and Jerry Uelsmann was pointing to it.

I remember a particularly incensed photographer of the old-school, a veteran of the socially concerned, politically motivated movement (and that encompassed pretty much the whole of British photography at the time, apart from David Bailey and his Swinging Sixties fashion cohorts) who vigorously challenged the reasons why I had published this "arty crap" and dared me to justify them. I could not articulate my reasons for feeling that they were significant because I, too, arose out of the same photographic sensibilities, so over a pint of best bitter in the local pub I told him a story instead, which I clearly remember to this day.

You are like a man who aspired to be holy, I told him. He attended all the foremost monasteries and studied with all the renowned gurus of the age; he read and memorized all the sacred texts and devoted years to the observance of all the correct rituals; he labored to understand the dogma of religion and the true path to enlightenment. When he knew The Truth he began to wander the world seeking to help those suffering in ignorance.

One day he was walking the banks of a lake when he heard a voice, chanting prayers, coming from an island. But the stranger was making a mess of his devotions and his voice was off-key; he was doing it all wrong. So the Man Who Knew the Truth found a boat, rowed to the island and berated the ignorant one for his incorrectness. After days of instruction, the correct man began to row back across the lake. He had nearly reached the shore when he heard an urgent voice behind him. The ignorant man was shouting: "Come back, I've forgotten your lessons," as he was running across the water.

Jerry Uelsmann was shouting, as he walked on water, that the personal visionary was beginning to supplant the social servant as the new prophet of photography. "This changes everything," as the car commercial is fond of telling us. What it does not tell us is that change is not necessarily, or ever wholly, beneficial.

There are several important and interrelated ramifications of this shift in the role of the photographer which would forever change the appearance, language and purposes of the medium. Before I note them, however, I should add the perhaps unnecessary preamble that Jerry is not solely responsible. The shock waves beneath the seabed which produced the tsunami had been rumbling for some time. And a major factor was the growing interest in photography within academia, especially in America. By chance, the photography programs ended up in art colleges, where the medium was surrounded by and suffused with the ethos and language and critical attitudes associated with painting and printmaking. (Just imagine if this had not occurred and photography programs had

landed in colleges of sociology or communications, as some did. The medium's face would look far different than it does today.) Jerry's own teachers, to limit the history to the preceding generation, were Minor White at the Rochester Institute of Technology and Henry Holmes Smith at Indiana University. Through their own training and personal inclination, these influential educators were both staunch advocates of photographic imagery as personal, internalized and intuitive art as opposed to objective, media driven social documentation. Through their very influential teachings, and several similarly minded peers, a new restlessness was growing in the ranks of young photographers, manifested in the risque tableaux of Les Krims, the constructions of Robert Heinecken, the sewn non-silver processes of Betty Hahn, the alternative experiments of Bea Nettles, the printmaking of Robert Fichter, the dream sequences of Duane Michals, et al.

The photographic climate, in America at least, was fast changing. And at the leading edge was Jerry Uelsmann. Through consistency of vision, articulate exposition, popularity and personal charisma, he became the symbol of all that was new and different, and that would never be the same again.

It is difficult to comprehend from today's chaos the utter originality of Uelsmann's imagery thirty years ago. Today is the age of pluralism. Anything goes. There is so much individual exploration that there are no boundaries or clear definitions of what constitutes photography. Then, the medium required liberation from a straight-jacket; now, it needs some discipline. The downside of unfettered freedom is that there are no standards. Every image is justified, not by its historical lineage but by the individual's feelings. And if there are no standards, then there is no differentiation between good and bad, success and failure, worth and worthless. The irony is that Uelsmann's images are now traditional, even conservative. The bad boy radical has become today's conservative, preaching moral values in the face of undisciplined shlock. Jerry Uelsmann's images, resplendent in their beauty (and there's a word to prompt the gagging reflex!) and craftsmanship have been deluged by the trash left behind by the tidal wave of change, spewing up the flotsam of the artistic equivalent of beer cans, rotting fish and used condoms.

Today it is impossible to distinguish the waving from the drowning.

Also washed up as a bloated beach pollutant in the wake of this tsunami is the jetsam of pseudo-intellectual jargon.

Imagine an age, not so long ago, when the best - indeed, practically the only - writers on photography were photographers writing for fellow photographers. In those days you could understand what the writer was saying because he/she was one of you, understood your concerns, had struggled with a shared medium; the words spoke simply and directly about real-life issues which were both useful and inspiring. (Reread Photographers on Photography, an anthology edited by Nathan Lyons, if you are in any doubt on this point). Not now. Oh no. Now the writers who litter the periodicals with their incomprehensible mumbo-jumbo borrowed from third-rate French philosophers whose ideas were irrelevant to their own field, let alone photography, are not image-makers and

often boast that they do not own a camera! No wonder their utterances are mind-numbing in their irrelevancies.

I blame Jerry for this. Not personally, of course. He's probably as appalled at these wretches as anyone. You should hear him lecture. He's one of the most gifted public speakers (and writers) in the medium today - frank, witty, unpretentious, animated, brimming with enthusiasm, ideas, advice and observations on life, sex and death. (You are right, of course, to assume that I would feel obliged to praise him if only because I agreed to write the introduction to his book. But I would not have agreed unless I could genuinely praise him and, fortunately for me, all that I have just said is true.) Jerry Uelsmann is one of the most sincere, modest, thoughtful and humorous people in the medium. I think of him and of the preponderance of angels in his images and G.K.Chesterton's words leap into the air: "Angels fly because they take themselves lightly." That's Jerry.

But one of the more unfortunate residues of the wave, so beautifully surfed by Jerry and his gang, was a particular kind of bad writing. It all began when John L. Ward wrote The Criticism of Photographic Art: The Photographs of Jerry Uelsmann, a slim but very significant little book published in 1970. It was significant because it was unintelligible. Many photographers at the time, especially those in academia, were thrilled. If it is so dense as to be unreadable then, the reasoning went, it must be profound and therefore, by extension, photography must be worthy of such profundity. As the whole medium suffered from the thoroughly modern angst of low self-esteem, the reasoning was compelling. We were all so intimidated by photography's lack of art-status that we rejoiced that Ward was taking it seriously even if we did not have the faintest idea what he was talking about.

From that moment the critical sand fleas were hatched and multiplied until they are now a plague. The effect was more than a profusion of dismissible nonsense. This kind of writing seemed to go hand in hand with bad art photography, which encouraged galleries to promote it. Yes, Virginia, there is a link between words and actions. My old vicar would admonish us in his sermons: "What you dream today, you will do tomorrow," before being defrocked and banished to Australia for molesting a blond in a railway carriage. This is true, but irrelevant, except to suggest that these theorists should all be herded off to a remote island where they can torture each other and not us.

You may be thinking that this meandering tributary into the shallow pools of theory is slightly off the subject of Jerry's images. I beg to differ. It is symptomatic of the most contentious issue relating to his pictures, that of meaning.

With a straight, documentary photograph this issue of interpretation does not arise to the same degree (although, as most commentators on art-photographs are university trained, they will take every opportunity to justify the tuition bills by deconstructing everything, including ketchup bottles, an exercise in intellectualization which is as difficult to appreciate as a radio program on ballroom dancing).

But the urge to ascribe meaning to an art-photograph, especially one which is as loaded with symbolic icons as a Jerry Uelsmann picture, becomes almost irresistible. I say "almost" because there is an unalloyed pleasure in allowing Jerry's images to exist visually, not intellectually. They are first and foremost pictures, not puzzles holding cryptic clues to a "right" answer.

Rely on the readings of critical theorists, Jungian wannabees, or even on Jerry's own titles, and the pleasure of seeing is muted by the angst of analysis.

Perhaps the prevalent fallacy among viewers of photographic art is that there is a meaning hidden below surface appearances which can only be seen and understood by The Expert. This means, of course, that if you do not understand what is going on, then you must be ignorant and an outsider of the inner circle of initiates. This is intimidating, and clever. Because a self-appointed priesthood (academics, critics, theorists) can elevate themselves as the sole guardians of the medium's secrets. Most of you, like me, live in constant hope that one day a chance remark, a line in a critical essay, a conversation with a so-called expert will provide you with a magic key which will unlock those esoteric images and allow you full participation in the process of critical understanding. With a cry of Eureka! you will fling wide the doors of perception and discover, at last, The Meaning.

The bad news: that is never going to happen to you.
The good news: nor is it going to happen to anyone else, least of all to the expert.

Making a photograph is as difficult as finding a particularly frisky cat in a dark room. Making a great photograph is as chancy as trying to catch a frisky cat in a black room in which there is no cat.

Making a complex art photograph with a singular explicable meaning is akin to catching a frisky cat in a dark room in which there is no cat but some joker is yelling: "I've got it!"

So by all means read the Jungians and art-theorists who interpret Uelsmann's images. But keep in mind my favorite all-purpose bumper sticker: They're lying. Well, not so much lying as presuming that their own tentative gropings through the murky labyrinths of their own minds have some connection to objective truths. So they utter their analyses as fact. (OK, that is lying...) When it comes to interpreting created images arising from the infinitely complex beings of the artist there are no truths. It would be like peeling away the layers of an onion in order to reveal the real essence of onion without understanding that the onion is its layers.

What this means in terms of appreciating Jerry Uelsmann's images is simple to state but complex in result, and a far more thrilling process of discovery that reading what someone else is experiencing when delayering the Uelsmann-onion.

First and foremost the viewer, you, must acknowledge that art is visual and that the act of looking is not an efficient medium for the expression of ideas. Ideas need words. So

relax, and enjoy the visual experience for its own sake. You are looking at pictures not cuneiform texts.

Second, accept the fact that the human mind will want to reduce visual, non-verbal feelings into a conscious narrative. Let it. But don't be fooled. This will be your truth, not any one else's truth, but no less valid for that. This process can produce personal awareness, an expanding of consciousness, using the Uelsmann image as a catalyst for self-knowledge. The danger is that this new awakening is so revelatory that the presumption is that the same revelation has relevance to others.

A critic like William Parker may, and does, obsess about Uelsmann's "ritual hierosgamos" and Uelsmann himself may, and does, emphasize the "anima," but all that leaves me befuddled. I look at the same image and experience, as if you should care, the exquisite pang of a specific lost love conjured up, magically, across the gulf of several decades because of some unknowable association between image and the unfathomable, arbitrary synapse-firing which it triggered. I cannot explain this process or, God forbid, generalize it to provide a meaning for others. Each open-minded viewer will explore self through inevitably personal paths beginning with single images. Just don't rely on the critic to provide correct responses. Including me.

Now I am not so sure about general meanings.

When Jerry first sent me a huge batch of proof prints from which the final plates would be selected, he referred to them as being "dark", having portents of death, of "Approaching the Shadow". Well, that's Jerry's current thing, I surmised, but I would not pay it too much heed as I have my own agenda. Then I reached this point in writing the introduction and I had a heart attack. (No joke). Suddenly issues of mortality, drastically reduced life expectancy, doctors' dire prognoses, signing medical directives about when to pull the plug, and so on, catapulted me into an entirely new relationship with life and death issues. Now, everything was seen and interpreted from the standpoint of "the fragile and mysterious quality of life itself." Does this mean that I was now aware of the issues residing in the images of which I was previously unaware; or does it mean that a personal experience has suddenly shunted me into a similar relationship with the images which is also occupied by Jerry, perhaps for very different reasons? I would bet on the latter - but, as the great philosopher once said: "Who knows?"

It would serve dramatic purposes so well if I could now a) describe the sudden life-attitude shift caused by my brush with death, b) relate in clear prose how this gave me new and deeper insights into these images, and c) give you these same insights under the guise of generally applicable truths. Such a tale of Pauline conversion followed by a missionary zeal appeals to my perceived role as teacher.

But I am not going to tell you what I learned.

True, my life did change and true, I found the images in this book to be resonant with insights and talismans of mortality and spirituality. But I do not believe these personal revelations are relevant to any one else. (But, hey, two out of three ain't bad!).

But if I cannot describe the actual "truths" revealed I can, perhaps, touch on the process by which they emerged. During my convalescence and an urge to finish this appraisal I spent a lot of time relooking at the images in "Approaching the Shadow" (even the title became resonant with personal implications). They acted like stained glass windows in a medieval church. Imagine a peasant whose life was a back-breaking toil for survival six days a week who has entered a church for a communal ritual which eschews everydayness and elevates towards issues of the spirit. A stained glass window, resplendant with unearthly color, would act as a powerful aid in focusing the heart and mind on the infinite away from the mundane. We all need such visual aids, even today. The photographs of Jerry Uelsmann, crystal balls of silver, were available and uniquely suited to my needs at that time.

A documentary photograph has an unparalleled ability to reveal what reality looked like at a specific moment in time; a Uelsmann photograph has an unparalleled ability to prompt what the heart of the viewer needs to feel at that particular moment. Some things have got to be seen to be believed; some things have got to be believed to be seen.

And it is too easy to become enamored by profundities. The seemingly silly is equally intriguing and perhaps just as meaningful. There is one of Jerry's pictures which unfailingly reminds me of a letter from a worried reader to a newspaper: "... the other night I was flexing my muscles in front of a mirror before going to bed and I noticed that the shadows it formed bore an uncanny resemblance to the face of Christ in the Turin Shroud. This has put the fear of God into me..."

This association between the Jerry Uelsmann image and an unlikely dust-mote of trivia in my own mental waste-basket is, on the face of it, absurd. But it is no less true than the bigger, broader issues of life and death. The implications of visual images are rarely logical. What Uelsmann's images accomplish, more so than the work of any other artist (photographic or otherwise) is the dream state of mind while the viewer is actually awake. That is what is weird, and why his images are so usefully employed by all manner of spiritualists, psychics and psychologists when looking for illustrations for articles, but the weirdness exists only if one accepts the myth that meaning exists "out there," actually visibly evident in the picture, or provided by an authority.

The lesson is clear. Meaning is always personal and is then applied to the image. It does not reside in the image itself. A person goes to a doctor and says: Doctor, I hurt all over but I have no idea what is wrong with me. I touch my head and it hurts. I touch my chest and it hurts. I touch my leg and it hurts. What's wrong with me? The doctor does a swift examination and says: Your finger's broken.

Sometimes the obvious needs pointing out. So here is my answer to the most productive way of looking at Jerry Uelsmann's images.

Look at each image in this book and wonder how he made it, marvel at his mastery of craft, think of why he might have decided to place this element there, that element here. Indulge yourself in technical, rational, conscious stuff because it is going to occur anyway at some time or another and you might as well get it out of the way.

Then forget it.

Now you are ready to start enjoying the images for their own sake. Sling the hammock, make sure the beverage of choice is within easy reach, lay back and browse with the book perched between navel and knees. And let the good associations roll, meditate and muse, allow the images to spark the synapses, wallow in memories of family, lost loves, mysterious, secret places deep in the recesses of your mind, ponder the ineffable, consider creation, and what lies beyond the tunnel of light. Revelations will occur.

Just don't tell me about them.

* Jerry Uelsmann asked me to write the introduction to his book, **Approaching the Shadow** (2000). A few months earlier I had been diagnosed with heart failure and had not been given much hope of survival, hence the personal remarks in the text, which seemed appropriate to the book's theme. I wrote too much. The introduction was published in an edited version. This is the full text.