

Yanka Van der Kolk— Photographer, Image Artist, Consultant, and Performance Coach



Photo: Yanka Van der Kolk

Although our paths crossed several times, Yanka and I did not connect until we finally met through the Women Entrepreneurs of Canada organization. Since then, we have come together for various purposes, such as participating in meditation circles, working on my portraits, and on this book.

Working with Yanka is an experience in and of itself. Yanka is remarkably talented and insightful in her creation—interacting with her clients in a way that brings out the best in them. Unlike other photographers, Yanka does not focus solely on the final product, but rather on the joy involved in the process.

Before I met Yanka and her husband Henk, I disliked having my photo taken. I was timid and apprehensive about smiling. Working with the two, however, changed me entirely! Through Yanka, I discovered how to open

up and truly love my image. She taught me how to use her as my mirror and experience myself through her.

This transformation has been a crucial element in my healing process. Since then, I enjoy showing off my smile and displaying my emotions in photographs, instead of hiding away. I appreciate how much younger, livelier, and more delightful I look when I smile, not only in photos but in my daily life as well.

I believe Yanka's contribution is crucial for the healing of women. She enables women to feel and experience their true selves, embrace their inner and outer beauty, and reveal and stay connected to who they really are.

—Pirjo Friedman

They say that a picture is worth a thousand words; but I believe that in today's society it is worth millions! The power of photography can be illustrated, for example, by the Elvis and Marilyn Monroe industries that would simply not exist without it. Photography produces an eternal image that never changes. It may fade over time, but once it is created, it is what it is. Photos allow us to look back into our past, confirm our knowledge, and revive images and ideas. Without them, our entire past could be questioned, leaving us with no perfect memories, and merely with the question: "*Did we really happen?*"

I grew up as a second child in a strict Calvinist home, and for many years I continuously tried to find my place and discover who I was. Whenever I questioned my parents about their beliefs, they would say, "Who are you to question the Almighty? Do not question these things. Simply believe it." But I could not believe something that I could not imagine.

Growing up, I was taught that as human beings we are in this world, but not of this world. I was too young to grasp the philosophy behind the belief; after all, if I could see myself in photographs, how could I not be a part of this world? I tried to answer this question by examining myself in front of the mirror, despite my parents' objections, who claimed that it was vain and ungodly. I was expected to praise the Lord, not my own face. I was taught that putting oneself first and yearning to be the center of your own attention is wrong. But I could not help myself—I was fascinated by my image in the mirror, by the infinity of emotions, faces, and images I was capable of role-playing. In retrospect, this fascination has been the basis for my two careers: modeling and photography.

I met my husband, Henk, when I was nineteen, and before I knew it, we had three kids. Although I thought I was too young to be a full-time wife and

a mother, I soon discovered how much I could learn from my children. My kids exposed me to innocence, and helped me reveal the innocence within me. They made me feel alive and forgiving after many years of living with the guilt and confusion that I was taught at home. Being with my children, there was no longer confusion; I was simply one of them. I wished not to be separated from them like I was from my own parents, and for this reason, I never referred to them as children, but called them Roland, Yolanda, and Lance, and encouraged them to call me Yanka rather than Mother. Living with Henk and my children, I experienced being loved and being the center of attention for the first time, and learned that showing appreciation to ourselves is the first step of learning to love ourselves.

After several years of raising my family, I felt it was time to find a part-time job. I decided to pursue a career in modeling; however, although I convinced myself that auditioning and not getting the job was still a valuable experience, it did not change the fact that no matter how prepared I was for the audition, I never got the job. Once, I came home to my husband, frustrated that I could not become successful and almost ready to give up modeling completely. Henk asked if I believed I could do it, and I replied that I knew I could. He asked why I cared so much about what other people thought of me and expected of me. He advised me to do what I do in a way that I would enjoy the most, and not to make any assumptions about what is right and wrong, or what is anticipated of me. Henk inspired me to create my own ideas and live them. “Who cares if you don’t get the job? At least you will have fun trying!” he told me.

Following my husband’s advice, we moved into the city, hired a nanny, and freed my schedule so that I could fully prepare myself for the work ahead of me. Several months later Henk finally said, “Today you are going to pick up the telephone and make an appointment for yourself. Who do you wish to call?” I decided to call all the clients that had refused me in the past, starting with a certain large department store.

I phoned, scheduled an appointment, and several days later, I walked through their door, looking my best and full of surface confidence and conviction. I declared that if I did not get the job right then and there, I was never coming back. The girl who auditioned me examined my photographs, smiled, and said, “Well, you are getting better, kid. I would like to use you. Come back in three months once you’ve got more experience.” She was my age, yet she called me “kid.”

I stood up tall and crossed my arms. “I am not coming back.” I said, “This is your last chance. Give me a break today, and you will have a chance to be the first to discover how great I can be.” Although I was in tears by the time

I finished my speech, I managed to impress her. “You have it,” she said, “but I am not giving you a break; it was you who just gave yourself one.”

That audition led to many years of close work with this company. Although it took another couple of years, it seemed as though I became a top fashion model overnight, working with all the top models of the time. The moment of landing my first job, however, is one that I will never forget! Since then, every time that I witness someone exposing their deep emotions directly from their source, like I did that day, I observe how they are giving themselves a break. And no matter how many times I see it, it always moves me deeply.

Through my career as a model I learned to remain true to myself. As a model, you are the image, the art form. The expressions and personality that you manage to bring out are what create you professionally. This is why it is imperative to be connected and give back to yourself, and not only to others. Throughout my career, I used the mirror role-playing game that I enjoyed as a child. Every time before I appeared in front of a camera, I would confront myself in front of the mirror, and role play, role play, role play! I would try the role on and experiment with it in a hundred different ways. I would conclude by saying to myself, “You are beautiful; that is your gift—appreciate it!” Appreciating my gift of beauty enabled me to love myself without feeling vain. Only after performing this little ritual would I be ready and confident for the job.

My fascination with my current profession began long before my experimentation with modeling. When I was ten years old, my father’s employer bought me a Brownie camera, and since then I have been photographing everything in sight: ice on the trees, the sun in a cow’s eyes, my own reflection in the mirror. I discovered the miracle of extending my reality—once the sun was down and the ice melted; I still had their photos and the excitement of the moment. I began experimenting with self-portraits, role-playing different attitudes and capturing them on film. Photography became my second mirror, my great love, and later, my career.

When I photograph someone, the process is a play of that person’s emotions, physical qualities, and mostly how the person feels about those qualities. Light also plays a role, as well as the eye of the photographer. Anyone who is part of that creation needs to take responsibility for the end result. The photo is created out of true collaboration and the experiencing of each other in true harmony.

I view photography as the art of one’s face. It is a powerful idea of yourself—a complete experience of yourself and the sharing of your genuine

emotions. Photography allows you to role-play your image—your real feelings and emotions—so that you can experiment and see what they look like, thus achieving greater freedom and flexibility in how you present yourself to the public. Photography allows us to see our emotions ourselves—something we seldom get to see. I believe that celebrities have such a strong connection with the camera because they can actually see into the light—the light of their own imagination. While knowledge is wonderful, imagination is sublime, and it allows for endless creativity. We are attracted to the images of these celebrity actors and models, to the exhibition of their emotions. We are constantly comparing ourselves to these “stars.” How can we not be? They are brilliant images!

One of the things I found most fascinating with photography was discovering what makes other people beautiful. I believe it is important for a person to reveal this element, since it reflects on what actually fascinates us about ourselves. Through photography, I could experience and appreciate how and why people have the ability to shine through with their eyes.

Displaying emotions is not only about how other people see you, but rather it is about how you see yourself. Some people tell me I am very confident. Maybe they are, too, but where do I look for it? You must find a way to express your confidence openly. You need to see it when you look into your own eyes. Only then will you have the power to show it to the world. If you cannot see it when you look at yourself, others will not see it either. You might as well put up a sign saying, “Confidence inside” or “It’s in my socks.” This life-long quest for our own confidence is a living process.

When you wish to feel beautiful and love yourself, you must reach to the source of your self, your soul, which is reflected in your eyes. If your heart is closed, your eyes will appear frozen and blank in the photo. However, an honest connection with the camera will reveal one’s inner beauty. A powerful photograph is one where your true self is reflected through your eyes—the “windows of our soul.” The camera cannot lie—you can dress up, apply make-up, and make a face, but you will not escape the image of your soul that emerges. That is the miracle of a photograph.

The first few times Pirjo and I met, we did not connect straightaway. Although Pirjo was always friendly, and I am a social person myself, I was slightly intimidated by her eyes, which were cool, somewhat distant and reserved. I could not easily read her and her emotions simply by looking in her eyes. It was not until Pirjo contacted me in one of my seminars and we began to work together on her portraits that she learned to express herself through her eyes and let her inner self shine through.

The search for identity is embedded deep within us. I am convinced that every human being needs to be visible to herself. You do not need to wait for the public to make you visible by gaining success, acceptance, and recognition. In fact, you can begin the process with the privacy of your own mirror. I often teach my clients the mirror role-playing game. I call it “the case before the mirror,” and it is as effective as it is simple! All you need to do when you wake up is go to the mirror and look for yourself—for your freedom. When you see your face, greet it and say, “Oh, there you are!” Your schedule for that day is completely irrelevant, whether you are going through your ordinary daily routine or expecting something fresh and exciting to occur, the second you confront your own eyes, you turn on your energy. Tell yourself, “I love who I am. I love my face. I am beautiful. I am excited!” Tell yourself whatever comes to your mind—whatever makes you feel good. Connect with your soul; with whatever you are feeling that morning. If you are not in a particularly happy mood, embrace the “child” in you and inquire, “My dear, what happened? What is the matter?” Use what I like to call “the eyes of love.” Look at yourself with the patience of a parent, with trusting eyes of kindness and forgiveness.

Seeing yourself every morning is a powerful tool that teaches you not to be afraid of confronting your emotions. Do not be afraid of being who you are in any situation. Do not be afraid to stand alone. You do not have to be liked in order to be real and relevant. In our society many are trying too hard to be liked. We strive to consume, wear, eat, and look like admired symbols, symbols of power and greatness, symbols of what our society values as a standard for beauty. Our standard for beauty, however, is something that only we can explore through our own experience of ourselves. Trust your passions since they arise from yourself. Once you can do that, you can begin to laugh, shout, show your energy freely, and to use your courage and curiosity. Be the child within you; become yourself. In the mirror you can find harmony with your soul energy once again.

Today’s society allows me to pursue my photography career for the rest of my life, as our society is becoming more and more visible, and we can no longer hide from our own self-image. I feel lucky to be a part of a happy business that I love, and that allows me to assist people in seeing how beautiful they are through their own eyes.

—*Yanka Van der Kolk*

You can learn more about Yanka Van der Kolk at: www.yanka.ca