



Katy Swafford

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Katy Swafford, PhD has worked in Eidetic Imagery for 20 Years. She has trained with the founder, Akhter Ahsen, PhD intensively and her practice is focused on developing applications for this comprehensive method. Dr. Swafford conducts training in Eidetic Imagery and is working to introduce this somatically based theory into academic environments as well. Eidetic Imagery is a comprehensive model of consciousness in which images of nature, development, and mythology come together in the body. The somatic or “S” factor of an Eidetic Image, (Image – Somatic Response- Meaning) makes Eidetic Imagery a Body Psychotherapy with the image as the sensory entry point. Through the Eidetic Image, universal qualities of mind become a thick, rich, physical experience - mythic mind and physical body are together. Akhter Ahsen (recipient of USABP’s Pioneer Award) is truly a Pioneer in the field of consciousness, never leaving the body in the universal fullness of mind.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Relational Implicit* project (<http://relationalimplicit.com>).

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge Prengel: This is a conversation with Katy Swafford. Hi Katy.

Katy Swafford: Hi.

S P: So we’re going to be talking today about Akhter Ahsen and about Eidetic imagery.

K S: Good. I’m very pleased to be talking about Akhter Ahsen and his work in Eidetic imagery. It’s a method that I have discovered after 30 years of being a therapist and find to be very effective, very fast, and an affective way of working with clients.

S P: So we’re going to talk maybe most of this conversation you and I are having will be on the method itself, its underpinnings and how it works in a clinical setting but maybe since USABP gave Akhter one of it’s pioneer awards, maybe just a few words about Akhter Ahsen’s life and his work.

K S: Good. Akhter was born in Kashmir, educated in India and came to the United States. He first lived in Philadelphia and he currently lives in New York, in Yonkers, and he has developed this theory from science and from mythology. He’s both an experimental psychologist and a mythologist. Joseph Campbell wrote the foreword to his, one of his first books *Manhunt in the Desert*, and since the beginning, he’s published over thirty books. The most recent ones being *The Quantum Image*, and one on autism, and one on memory and Alzheimer’s. So his work spans a good deal of time and it comes, he originated it from science and his study of mythology, not only the one he was exposed to and raised in, but Viking mythology, and Greek mythology and is looking for the common threads of the different mythologies and religions that describe the human experience, in a way of the universal mind.

S P: Yeah, so maybe the universal mind, images, you know so what's the link, what's it about these images.

K S: The Eidetic image is personal, the image that an individual experiences is projected from their own consciousness, it's from their own mind. So it's personal, but it is also a reflection of their potentials as human beings of, and that's where mythology comes in, that's the, mythology is the universal mind. It's the broader, the greater reality, and then we all have our personal experience of that in our physical lives.

S P: So this image is not just an abstract image, it's something, it's a, it's related to both mind and body.

K S: That's correct. It is, and it's not the content of the image that is important but the action of it, the process of it. Akhter talks about it as a structural image, and that structure is ISM: the image, the somatic response, and then the meaning. So it's not the content of the image, it's not you see an image and try to figure out what it means. You see the image and immediately become aware of the physical connection, the body response that is created by the image. So the link between what's seen and what's felt is the core of, of the Eidetic image.

S P: Right, so in other words, in ordinary language when we think of image it's like a snapshot, it's something that's in we're divorce from reality, it's a representation. And far from that, in the Eidetic image, there is built in, the connection with the feeling and the body's sense of what happened, together with the meaning.

K S: Right, and the body connection is the central part of this. Those are, and the purpose is, of the work is to develop the body connection and the image moving along together, that's the flow of consciousness. A, in this work, a symptom arises because there's a gap, between what's seen and what's felt, so you may have, you may see an image, and then you have a thought about it, and then your body response is to the thought rather than the image, and that's the process of how the method works. In that way, the, when you ask a person to see an image, the instructions are very ambiguous, they're very general, and so the person's own mind comes up with their version of the image, and if they're describing what they see related to the image, then you can expect the, that to be information about themselves, kind of flows, comes to the surface and things move along and progress along normally. If the image is stuck, it's because their consciousness is stuck, and they are stuck. There's a connection between the symptom that somebody may have come in with, their complaint or their problem that they want to work on in therapy and you say well, let's look and see, so you look, you have them project an image, and you can see the symptom in that image.

S P: So, so the image work, how does it fit in the context of therapy? Is there something where in a way from day one, every session there is working on an image? Is there something where, you know, how does it come into the process of therapy?

K S: That depends some on the experience and the expectation of the client, for the clients who come knowing a little about Eidetics, I may start from day one.

S P: So in some cases, if people are already familiar with the process you start right away with imagery, but in other cases not necessarily.

K S: Not necessarily, it depends on if they're in a crisis. Some of my therapy looks pretty traditional in terms of, you know, understanding the problem and that, I nearly always do an image though, in part of the intake, right at the last I, the Running Stream image is one of my favorites as an introductory one that's very short, and it just gives a snapshot of consciousness, of their, how they are feeling and what they see.

S P: What is it like, this running stream?

K S: It's like, it's, with four sentences the, I'll tell you, the instructions are to "see yourself as the running stream". And I give a few minutes, part of a minute or two for them to develop that image. "See the running stream that you are". "Now see an obstacle in the distance, and see how you run through the obstacle, and any difficulty it presents, and now notice what it's like downstream". And that's it, and then we talk about it, and they tell me what their stream looked like, if they have, if they're new at it sometimes I do a little guiding the image of just calling their attention to notice the temperature of the stream, the banks, what, is it a sunny day or not. There's no, I don't make any interpretation about the content, but the feeling, and the, I feel the image with them as they tell me what they see, they may say that it's a bright sunny day and I see a bright sunny day with them, and they say the water is cool and its fast moving and its going over the rapids and rapids and I see that happening. So it's an, the process is an empathy process, and I connect physically as well with their experience.

S P: Yeah, so I hear that definitely as opposed to interpretation, right away it's working at the level of images and through the sensations of these images.

K S: Yes, through the sensations. Actually the images are - in terms of sensation, perception, cognition, conation – which is kind of the flow, our understanding of conscious process. These images are at that first level of sensation, they are a sensation because they move straight into the body, and the connection between what you see and what you feel is the hallmark of this. And I'm constantly asking the person, as for instance, "as you approach the obstacle how did you feel? As the obstacle got closer how did your feeling change? And then how did you run through it?" And then you know, they may describe "I split into two parts, and I went around" and I may ask how it felt as you split and how it felt as you actually went around, in great detail. I had one student, I was doing this in a class and when I said, (there's another part of the image actually) "to see your parents in front and you're the running stream"; and it was at that moment she burst out laughing and I asked her, after we were through with the image what she saw and she says, "I saw my mother, and I headed in the opposite direction, its just like backwater going upstream". And then she says, "that's exactly my experience of my relationship with my mother!" So the symptom shows up, and the person's process shows up. If they're in a lot of turmoil they may see rapids, if they're feeling really stuck they may say that the stream is sluggish and warm and kind of yucky feeling, and that's what's going on in their mind, in their, that's what their experience currently of their life is. So it's an excellent diagnostic.

S P: Yeah. So, so really we're not talking about, again, image in a classic, in a everyday sense of the world, but a sense of a process of interacting with life.

K S: Exactly, and the body process, the experiential process is the core. And that's what makes it really a body psychotherapy rather than a cognitive one.

S P: So you described this first stream imagery. How else do you work with imagery say, in the process of therapy? How does it come up?

K S: Any time there's a set place or problem that you want to know more about, that's a time to do an image so that you can really see what's going on with the person. What you see in the image is, what comes out of the image are things they can't just tell you, or if they tell you they don't have the solution for it, they can just tell you how stuck they are with it, what a problem it is. When you see it in the image, you can work directly with it in the image. For instance, if they see an obstacle in the running stream image and it's so big, you can do maneuvers within the image, "see it again only change the temperature", "see it again pay attention to this part of the image or another", so there's operations and maneuvers that you do within the image.

S P: Right, so in a way already in that process you have a different relationship with the situation because it's not something you experience passively but you have some degree of control in terms of changing the angle or re-experiencing, changing variables.

K S: And just by repeating the image, over and over again many times is, the mind will find its own way through it and you'll have a release. So one of the first maneuvers is to project the image again and again.

S P: So Katy let's talk a little bit about that image because the first time you talked about image, you essentially guided people through a short process, but in the course of the process, say for instance when they're stuck, what kind of, do you ask them if they have a spontaneous image, you guide them in any way to find something?

K S: The image has the solution in it. I'm thinking of, and so I don't, (I'm trying to just figure the way to say), the guiding is really toward the structure, the guiding is toward changing one of the physical properties of the image like, make it, see as cold, or introduce a mythic quality such as the wind.

S P: Let's say you're in a session, and you're noticing that the client is stuck. How do you introduce the call for any image at that moment?

K S: I sometimes will just say, "let's look and see". You've described this problem, and you had this situation, "let's look at it through the image" and lets look at it this way and then I just blurt it out, just start. Maybe, "see yourself as a running stream" and they may take a minute to settle in, and I may say that part again so I may repeat it as they kind of go in. But the thing is there's no, there's really no interpretation of the content of the image. It doesn't matter if they see green trees or whatever, unless it means something to them, and so there's, you don't need to do much introducing. Sometimes there's a little intro about, this is, "this will give us some new information", and then launch into it. There are images of nature, images of development, and images of mythic nature. The images of nature give directly the body response, and the running stream is really all three of these because the, you have the physical properties of the stream and the water and your body experience, but there's also a mythic quality to that image. William James talked about the stream of consciousness, and Akhter adds to that that consciousness is not only a flowing running stream, its not only a flowing stream, it's a running stream. And he has a quote from a poet, if you can't stop the mountain stream; if you try, it will cut through the mountain and open, cut through the rocks and open the heart of the mountain. The Grand Canyon was made like that, so there's a universal, or mythic, a bigger, a greater reality to the flow of consciousness; that is the flow of

conscious in that running stream image. And then part of the image, like described with the woman, you can introduce the developmental, get some developmental information, introduce that by this simple instruction. To see your parents in front and you are the running stream, see your father in front, your mother in front, and you are the running stream. And that will bring up the, the quality, the nature of the relationship with parents. People will say things like “my father is not looking at me, he’s there but he’s not looking at me, and I just go past him and he never notices me”. Well, guess what happens in their life. It’s a projective process, so the image that gets projected, just like other projective tests and, shows you what’s going on.

S P: Yes and I hear that this projection as within the context of something that is a powerful metaphor, an archetypal image, something that in a way connects with the flow of life, the sense of something much larger than simply any projection.

K S: It does. Exactly. The, because we live our natural lives our both biological, our current experience, but the, also our spiritual life is, our life is much like everyone’s life, and like it has been for centuries, and so there’s, we also have a mythic destiny.

S P: You mention the three components of the image including the somatic but also the meaning part.

K S: The meaning emerges. There is a, you come to understand it, like you know “oh yeah, that’s how my father is, he doesn’t see me” and “oh yeah, that means these feelings I have”, people will start talking about memories, they’ll start talking about thoughts and situations in their history. But after they’ve projected the image, those things are integrated and connected, whereas if you just ask them what was your relationship with your father? They might say oh it was really distant and he didn’t pay much attention to me, but they wouldn’t be having the body contact with that statement, they wouldn’t have the experience of it. After they’ve seen it in the image, you have an entirely different conversation about their situation.

S P: Yeah, so in a way throughout the therapy there is a therapeutic aspect per se, but there is also in a way a training of connecting the sensation connecting the meaning and through the intermediary of the image which is central in the way the mind functions.

K S: Yeah, it’s really, that speaks to that it’s really the body process and opening experience and counting on experience and removing obstacles, things that limit your experience, that’s where development comes in. There’s a whole set, there’s a test, a set of thirty developmental images that give you a complete picture of development; of traumas in development, of strengths in the relationships between the client and mother, the client and father, and mother and father together. So you get these thirty snapshots of, of the dynamic in the history growing up in the family.

S P: So what’s one of them for instance, say in a clinical situation, can you?

K S: Yeah. The first one, and I use these first two images routinely, if we want to do a full developmental picture we do all thirty of them. But the first one is about the house, and the instruction is to “see your parents in the house where you spent most of the time with them, the house that gives you the feeling of a home. Where do you see them and what are they doing?” And that’s the content of the image, and then in the intake, I ask people where they were born and what houses they’ve lived in and what ages up to when they went off to college or so, because it turns out

that the atmosphere in the home is crucial to the development of the child, and the relationships with each of the parents affect the image that's projected. They may say, "I see my father in the living room and he's reading the paper", and I say "and how do you feel when you see him, when you see this image", (that's the important link) and they'll say "I feel kind of anxious because I don't, I know I shouldn't bother him" and you've got a snapshot there, that's what happened in their home. And I've also had people find strengths with mother as the nurturer often shows up in the kitchen and if she doesn't, somebody should be taking care of business in the kitchen you know? I had one client kind of laugh and she said "I saw my mother in the kitchen, with a little apron on and she was cooking" and she laughs and she said "my mother never cooked and I never saw her in that apron!" On the other hand, her mother did nurture her and take care of her and did her job as a mother, and so the image showed up in a traditional kind of sense even though the historical reality was that the mother wasn't much of a cook. That didn't affect the kind of mythic reality that her mother had, she had a good mother and her mother nurtured her and took care of her so when she projected the image, her mother showed up in the kitchen.

S P: Yeah, so that image again is not a snapshot but a structure of the relationship.

K S: Yes it is, that's exactly right. It shows the structure of the relationship, it's not a memory. She wouldn't have had a memory of that.

S P: So since, it's interesting, so it's not the memory, so does this image evolve over time as people digest their relationship or the.

K S: Yes, absolutely. They may have, for instance, it may be mother is in the kitchen but I'm standing outside and I feel separate from her, because it, and that will happen when there's conflict in the relationship, like I shouldn't approach mother or she's not available to me and I'm not in the kitchen with her. And then as you work through the developmental glitches in consciousness, you'll look back and say "oh yeah, mother's cooking and I'm in the kitchen and I'm playing with my toy", the image changes as the blocks are removed. It shows you the blocks and once they're released it shows you that they're gone. So it's very much a dynamic process, and you can check in at any time and see how things are going.

S P: Yeah, so you can revisit the same situation yeah.

K S: Yeah, and then some of the work kind of associated with that is to do the house projections and then there's some mythic work with the tiger as the "blessed beast of our nature" and working with the tiger imagery, the mythic, at a mythic level. Then, when you return to the house with the tiger, you've changed the feeling state of the person, they've surfaced or developed resources that they're unaware of. It's another of the concepts that we're born with a whole array of potentials, some of those get developed and others are not stimulated, they're not really developed, but because of what's going on in our lives as we grow up. And you get to a point where you need the ones - you've developed the parts of yourself to handle the traumas like your kid brother being born and moving and all those things that happened in childhood - but the ones you need are the ones that you didn't develop, self-confidence, and security and those things. So you can develop those by connecting to the greater reality, at the mythic level, and then go back to the house with the tiger. They'll say some for instance is "oh my mother looks up and says hi". There was a change in the person's consciousness, and the image of mother who had been aloof and distant previously,

changed.

S P: Yeah, so that in a way some parts that we haven't had a chance to develop, we can develop by working with the archetypes.

K S: You absolutely can. And Akhter talks about that these as archetypal images but they're, he says there's thousands of archetypal images you couldn't even count them, they are all archetypal. All of the mythic images, and as you, they connect with doing some of the work with the tigers just you "see an empty space to the right and a little in front, and a tiger comes out of that space and you look at the tiger. See how it breathes and see the light that comes out of it's eyes and recognize this is really you", and people will say "I knew it was me right from the first minute. It's a six hundred pound tiger and I'm not scared". So they recognize the quality of the being that it connects with their own being, it is them.

S P: Yeah, Yeah, so, so as I'm listening to you in what you say and your tone of voice, I also hear a sense of the therapy session being an invitation in part to also go to another kind of time and space, and in that mythological time and space different from ordinary reality and an enrichment that comes from inhabiting that space.

K S: Yes, it's actually eternity, it's timeless. And clients often comment on "this feels like I've always been here" or "feels like, like I've gone back to my ancestors time" or to, "time doesn't have a limit".

S P: Yeah, in contrast to maybe the crisis in our life where we feel like we are in a tight spot, we're in a corner, we're in a bind and all that sense of limitation.

K S: Yes, very pressured. One of the qualities of this work is a relaxation of that tight bind of time and pressures from current world to that there's plenty of time, and that there's, that I am in a process and time is not a factor, time is not a problem.

S P: Yeah, so is this a good place maybe to end?

K S: Actually, the one thing I might add is that this process is a pleasure for the therapist, that it doesn't create burn out or vicarious traumatization because the therapist moves through the image with the client through empathy and I find it very stimulating and releasing and thoroughly, thoroughly satisfying work.

S P: Thanks Katy.

 *This conversation was transcribed by Sahar Kazemini..*

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