

**Metaphors 201**  
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In a service last fall, I spoke to you about metaphors. I reminded you what a metaphor is; namely, a figure of speech in which an implied comparison is made between two unlike things that actually have something important in common. I talked about how widely we use metaphors as a way of thinking and talking about and understanding the world around us. Metaphors help us understand new ideas and concepts by making connections with things we are already familiar with. They help us to stretch and expand and enrich our picture of reality. They can point us beyond our ordinary, everyday view of things. They can help us get outside the box.

In that earlier service, I did talk some about how metaphors are useful, and perhaps even necessary, in dealing with religious concepts and experience. I mentioned numerous metaphors that have been used in describing or defining “God”: Creator, Judge, Nourisher, Father, etc. And I spoke of various metaphors for the experience of spiritual growth: a journey, awakening, and so on.

But after that service, someone suggested that I might elaborate a bit more on the explicitly religious use of metaphor. And so I will take this opportunity this morning to do that. In particular, I’m going to spend some time looking at the metaphorical underpinnings of a theological framework which most of us do not embrace: the Holy Trinity of Christianity. If you listened carefully to the Choir this morning, you may have detected an explicitly Trinitarian message. That was for illustrative purposes only, and does not necessarily reflect the theology of management.

Later, I’ll discuss some metaphors that might resonate more deeply with our Unitarian Universalist approach to religion: the interdependent web of existence, the spiritual journey, and the idea that we hold the world in our hands.

My purpose in looking at these two very different contexts is to point out two ways in which an awareness and understanding of metaphor can be helpful. The first is in understanding and appreciating where someone else is coming from in their particular religious formulations, even if they are very different from our own. And the second is in understanding and articulating our own religious experience, and building a coherent world view or story that can describe the totality of that experience.

But first I’d like to make a few general points about the use and potential dangers of metaphorical thinking. First, I remind you of the caution expressed by Joseph Campbell, when he wrote: “Every religion is true one way or another. It is true when understood metaphorically. But when it gets stuck in its own metaphors, interpreting them as facts, then you are in trouble.” In other words, we must remember that the function of metaphors is to point at something indirectly for which there may be no direct access. But to confuse the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself, or to confuse the map with the territory it describes, is to miss the point.

And I would say that the danger isn’t only in getting stuck in your own metaphors and taking them too literally. There is also a danger in sticking someone else in *their* metaphors, whether they’re stuck in them or not. In other words, interpreting someone’s metaphorical explanation of their religious understanding as if they mean every word literally is really unfair to them.

On a related point, I call your attention to something Sam Keen said in our reading this morning: “inspired language [i.e., authentic spiritual language] is shy and reserved. It witnesses rather than preaches.” It describes experience rather than prescribing belief. My biggest problem with fundamentalist, literalist believers of whatever variety, is not so much with the content of their understanding, but with their insistence that my life and experience must somehow be forced to fit the same exact mold. I’m happy to hear your perspective, but please don’t preach it as the only way to think.

Another thing I’d like to mention is that there are a number of concepts related to metaphors: symbols, myths, parables, allegories, and so on. I may blur the boundaries between them, but that’s because they operate quite similarly. All have to do with using language on the surface to point indirectly at deeper truths that may have no explicit point of reference. They attempt to enhance understanding by making meaningful connections between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

How many of you have read William Paul Young’s book, *The Shack*? The book is an evangelical Christian novel that showed up about three years ago, and it has spent most of the last two years on the *New York Times* best-seller list. As Timothy Beal tells us in his article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* called “Theology for Everyone,”

*The Shack* is the fictional story of Mack, a nice family guy with a seminary background whose faith falls apart when his 7-year-old daughter is kidnapped and murdered in an old shack in the Oregon woods. Four years later, he returns to the shack to confront God, face to face – or rather, face to faces. Mack meets God in three persons, as the Trinity.

One of the surprising things about this book is that, within the context of evangelical, trinitarian Christianity, it explores some remarkably progressive theological ideas. First is its nontraditional, nonbiblical metaphorical models of God. Second is its representation of the Trinity as a nonhierarchical communion of radically inter-related elements. And third is its theology of universal salvation.

The book, through Mack’s conversations with Papa, Jesus and Sarayu (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), reinforces the idea that theological language is fundamentally metaphorical. Papa makes the point most forcefully by appearing to Mack as a large, affectionate African-American woman. She tells him:

For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me ‘Papa’ is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning. . . to reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather with a flowing beard, like Gandalf, would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes.

There’s that idea, again, of not getting stuck in a particular metaphor. It parallels the views of Sally McFague in her book, *Metaphorical Theology*, in which she encourages a critical stance toward inherited language, resisting models of God such as “father” that have become dead metaphors of patriarchal idolatry. She encourages the embrace of new divine metaphors such as “friend” and “mother”, that may resonate more deeply with people’s actual perceived needs and their experiences of help and comfort from what ever source they find it.

In *The Shack*, the author's metaphorical models of God reinforce this idea, as the affectionate Papa, the clumsy Jewish handyman Jesus, and the petite Asian woman Sarayu, who has a green thumb and loves fractals, seem particularly well-equipped to give Mack what he needs and to guide him along a healing path.

And why can't God as a single entity provide that guidance? It turns out that the Trinity, with its nonhierarchical communion of love provides a model for relationship and community among humans. This is not a brand new idea. One of my favorite words encountered during my time in seminary was "perichoresis", a concept developed by German theologian Jurgen Moltmann and others.

Perichoresis, which might be literally translated as "dancing together", refers to a dynamic, intersubjective circle of interrelationship. It points to an ongoing "exchange of love" among the persons of the Trinity as an archetype for all social relations and organizations. But don't forget that this is a metaphor! Its importance lies not in the literal existence of three people up in the sky somewhere, but rather in the possibilities it expresses for healthy, enriching human interactions here on earth. Life is a dance, in which we let our bodies learn to bend; in which we learn to follow, learn to lead, as round and round we go again. Let it be a dance.

My point here is that, if we can keep in mind the metaphorical nature of religious language, then statements or assertions using that language might serve not to stop conversation dead in its tracks, but rather to facilitate rich conversation, in which the deeper implications of the language are unpacked and clarified. For me, the motivation for discussing God, or Ultimate Reality, or whatever you want to call it, is not to understand God, but rather to better understand myself and the world I live in. And I think I have something to learn even from at least some evangelical, Trinitarian Christians – as long as they're not too stuck in their own metaphors.

On the other hand, as a spiritual humanist Unitarian Universalist – and not a Christian – I have my own set of metaphors that speak to me most meaningfully. While the perichoretic trinity provides one model of relationship and community, I am drawn more to the metaphor of the interdependent web of all existence, which has roots in the scientific insights of physics and biology, but also in the ancient myths of many cultures.

The nineteenth-century astronomer Maria Mitchell [a Massachusetts Unitarian] wrote,

And yet, small as is our whole system compared with the infinitude of creation, brief as is our life compared with the cycles of time, we are so tethered to all by the beautiful dependencies of law, that not only the sparrow's fall is felt to the outermost bound, but the vibrations set in motion by the words that we utter reach through all space and the tremor is felt through all time.

The Native American idea of an interconnected web of life was captured both by numerous myths and by words like those of Chief Seattle to the U. S. Government: "All things are connected like the blood which unites one family" and "We did not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

The Hindu/Buddhist myth of Indra's Net also provides an allegory of the interdependent nature of the universe. This net, said to exist in Indra's palace in heaven, extends infinitely in all directions. At each node of the net where threads cross there is a perfectly clear gem that reflects all the other gems in the net. As each gem reflects every other one, so are you affected by every other system in the universe.

The interdependent web as a metaphor for reality works so well for me because it is compatible with my actual experience, and it gives me a comprehensive framework within which to look at and make sense of the world of my observation and experience. But let me point out that this, too, is a metaphor that one can get stuck in.

When I was new to Unitarian Universalism, I was taking an Adult Education class on our seven principles. When it came to the seventh principle, about the interdependent web, there was one woman who was very concerned with finding out whether this web was an actual physical entity, and if so what was it made of? She was missing the point just as much as the person worrying about whether God is white or black, male or female.

Another religious or spiritual metaphor that I find helpful is that of the Journey. But for me the journey is open-ended, and not defined by any particular specific map. It's a journey of exploration, through what, for me, are new and interesting landscapes. I welcome the pointing fingers of others along the way toward points of interest they've encountered. But ultimately it's up to me to find my own way to my own landmarks. I also welcome the opportunity to compare notes with others on similar journeys. We can be helpful to one another in suggesting possibilities that we might not consider or encounter on our own.

There's one final metaphor that I'd like to mention, which is fairly closely related to that of the interdependent web, and which is illustrated on the cover of today's order of service. That's the image suggesting that the world is in our hands. We may be merely strands in the web of life, but our actions have the potential to bring great benefit or great harm to the world. It's in our hands.

Another criterion on which to judge the value of a particular metaphor - beyond its ability to help us understand and bring meaning to our world - is how it can affect our behavior, our actions. Believing that the world is in my hands motivates me to find ways of accepting that responsibility and acting accordingly.

With that in mind, I'd like to share with you about a brand new, Unitarian Universalist initiative, related to Earth Day. I think it also responds to our recognition that we hold the earth in our collective hands. It's called "40/40/40": 40 Years of Earth Day, 40 Days of Commitment, 39 nearby UUs . . . and you. Here's a brief description of the program:

UUs across the continent are expanding this Earth Day, April 22, 2010 (Earth Day's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary) to last 40 days, from Sunday April 18 to Thursday May 27. How? By committing to consistent daily actions (one or more) over the 40 days for the sake of the Earth and environmental justice. When 40 people in one congregation make 40-day commitments, that congregation receives special recognition.

If you're interested in learning more about this, there are handouts in the Social Room introducing the program, and providing a list of sample actions to take during the 40 days (and hopefully beyond). Then, in coming weeks, there will be a sign-up for those willing to make the commitment. I think we can garner at least forty - what do you think?

Well, you can see that I've moved from the abstraction of metaphors to the immediate reality of concrete action. And that, I believe, is the key to a healthy and beneficial use of metaphor. The ability to tie your metaphors (metaphorically speaking) to your real life as you live it day by day. May the metaphors of your choosing be helpful guides along the way of your metaphorical journey.