

Metaphors Be with You

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First, I want you to know that the title of this morning's sermon is not totally frivolous and random. Joseph Campbell, author of the 1988 classic, *The Power of Myth*, was the master when it came to matters of myth and metaphor. Well, it turns out that George Lucas, director of the highly mythological *Star Wars* movies, was greatly influenced by Campbell. And it is in *Star Wars* that "May the Force be with you" enters our vocabulary and our consciousness. Finally, the Force is, of course, a metaphorical concept itself. As Joseph Campbell states in *The Power of Myth*, "When Ben Kenobi says, 'May the Force be with you,' he's speaking of the power and energy of life."

And so I maintain that my title (which I actually borrowed from some unknown source), while seeming whimsical, in fact has solid grounding in the theme of the day: metaphors.

So what is a metaphor? Simply defined, it is a figure of speech in which an implied comparison is made between two unlike things that actually have something important in common. It turns out that the word *metaphor* is itself a metaphor, coming from a Greek word meaning to "transfer" or "carry across." Metaphors "carry" meaning from one word, idea, or image to another.

Most of you will remember from high school English that a metaphor is like a simile, except that a simile acknowledges the comparison it's making ("An A is like a B"), whereas a metaphor states or implies a direct identity ("An A is a B.")

But metaphors are not simply a linguistic device that we learn to identify in literary works, to be forgotten and left behind when school is over. In an About.com article called "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Metaphor," Richard Norquist maintains that

Metaphors aren't merely the candy sprinkles on the doughnut of language [there's a nice metaphor, no?], not just embellishments to the music of poetry and prose. Metaphors . . . are ways of thinking – and also ways of shaping the thoughts of others.

All of us, every day, speak and write and think in metaphors. In fact, it's hard to imagine how we'd get by without them.

The "Thirteen Ways" mentioned in Norquist's title refers to some of the many categories of metaphor that have been identified by various scholarly, academic types. I won't take the time to give a comprehensive tutorial on the taxonomy of metaphor, but I'll say a bit about a few of those types, to give you some idea of the richness and complexity of metaphorical language.

A Conventional Metaphor is a familiar comparison that doesn't call attention to itself as a figure of speech. These are so common that we may not even notice that they are metaphors. One example would be life as a journey. That one is everywhere, including in advertising slogans for cars, airlines, and even perfume. It occurs in rock music, as in "Life's a journey, not a destination" from Aerosmith. Life as journey is a perennial favorite of poets, as in Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken."

Creative Metaphors are original comparisons that do call attention to themselves as figures of speech. Being unfamiliar, they tend to grab your attention and make you think a little bit. Some examples:

- "Love is the wild card of existence" (Rita Mae Brown, *In Her Day*)
- "Before I met my husband, I'd never fallen in love. I'd stepped in it a few times." (Rita Rudner)

- “Memory is a crazy woman that hoards colored rags and throws away food.” (Austin O’Malley)
- “Men’s words are bullets, that their enemies take up and make use of against them.” (George Savile, *Maxims of State*); and one of my favorites:
- “Love is a homeless guy searching for treasure in the middle of the rain and finding a bag of gold coins and slowly finding out they’re all filled with chocolate and even though he’s heartbroken, he can’t complain because he was hungry in the first place.”

That last would also qualify as an Extended Metaphor, which is one that continues, and often builds, through a series of phrases or lines of a poem.

Visual Metaphor is the representation of a person, place, thing, or idea by way of a visual image that suggests a particular association or point of similarity. This is the life-blood – there’s another good metaphor – visual metaphor is the life-blood of the advertising industry. One example: an ad for banking firm Morgan Stanley shows a man bungee jumping off a cliff. The man’s head is labeled “You” and the bungee cord is labeled “Us,” conveying the metaphorical message of safety and security provided in a time of risk.

Finally, showing that metaphors are wielded less skillfully by some than by others, there is the Mixed Metaphor, which comprises a succession of incongruous or ludicrous comparisons that just don’t really fit together well. If you’re familiar with *The New Yorker* magazine, mixed metaphors are the bread and butter of their “Block that Metaphor” department. A couple of examples:

- STEP UP TO THE PLATE AND FISH OR CUT BAIT
(headline in the *Tulsa World*, Oklahoma, reprinted in *The New Yorker*, January 10, 2000)
- Sorry, Tom Friedman, the world is no longer flat. It is upside down. . . The growing robustness of the emerging economies enables them to step up to the global plate at a time when the U.S. has to take a breather in order to put its house in order. (from *Newsweek*, reprinted in *The New Yorker*, September 7, 2009).

I think mixed metaphors are often the result of laziness, as writers string together metaphors that are so common as to have become cliché. As such they lack the very earmark of metaphor at its best: namely originality or creativity. The gifts of metaphor are, first, to add color to language - to liven it up and make it more interesting – and second, to goad us into seeing or thinking about things in a new way. Aristotle observed 2500 years ago: “Those words are most pleasant which give us new knowledge. Strange words have no meaning for us; common terms we know already. It is metaphor which gives us most of this pleasure.” In a way, then, metaphors act as a bridge between the known and the unknown.

Modern poet, Shalom Freedman expresses his appreciation of this gift in his brief poem, “The Metaphor of Poetry”:

The metaphor of poetry
Meets the mysteries of the soul
And wakes us in words
To worlds of wonder.

I particularly like the way metaphor can enrich our perspectives with respect to really big concepts; say, Life or God. Listen to these metaphors for life, and notice how, taken together, they convey the richness and multidimensionality of this basic concept.

- Life is a three-ring circus.
- Life is a minefield.
- Life is a roller coaster.
- Life is a puzzle.
- Life is a symphony.
- Life is a dance.
- Life is a carousel (sometimes you're up, sometimes you're down, and sometimes you just go round and round).
- Life is a game of cards (you have to play the hand you're dealt).
- Life is a race.
- Life is a marathon.
- Life is a battle.
- Life is a grindstone. Whether it grinds us down or polishes us up depends on us.
Thomas L. Holdcroft
- "Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard from no more – it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." *William Shakespeare*
- Life is a metaphor (a metaphor for what?)

And how about metaphors for God? Here is a case where without metaphor, there is really nothing to be said. The concept of God, in its fullness, simply has no visible referent to which we can point and say, "There is God." If there is something corresponding to what we're talking about when we use the term, God, it just can't be contained within our finite language. And so there have been attempts to approach the infiniteness of the concept by the use of metaphors – many metaphors – each of which may capture some small hint of what we conceive as Ultimate Reality.

For instance, Islam does so by explicitly positing 99 names for God. None of them captures the full essence, but again, taken all together, they may afford a glimpse into infinity. I won't list all 99 names, but a few of them are: Most Merciful, Guardian, Almighty, Creator, Ever Forgiving, Ever Providing, All Seeing, Judge, Nourisher, Giver of Life, Bringer of Death, The First, The Last, The Guide. Joseph Campbell states the case more simply and succinctly when he asserts that "God is a metaphor for that which transcends all levels of intellectual thought. It's as simple as that."

In the area of religion and spirituality, it's not only in dealing with slippery concepts that metaphor becomes necessary, but also in dealing with slippery experience, as was discussed in our reading this morning. As in the case of "God", there are also numerous classical metaphors for spiritual growth or transformation. Some of those are:

- Waking up from dream to reality
- Moving from darkness or blindness to enlightenment
- From fragmentation to wholeness
- From imprisonment to liberation
- Arriving at the journey's destination
- Returning home from exile

- From death to rebirth – resurrection

These images, these metaphors, provide some tools for expressing and sharing experiences that go beyond the mundane, everyday, objectively verifiable kind. Michael Dowd, whose book *Thank God for Evolution* some of us have been discussing during the Lifespan Learning Hour, distinguishes between *day experience* and *language* and *night experience* and *language*. *Day experience* has to do with “facts, the objectively real, that which is publicly and measurably true.” And we talk about it with *day language* – normal everyday discourse. *Night experience* is that which we might call spiritual or even mystical. It is certainly personal and subjective. It must be communicated through *night language*: grand metaphors, poetry, and vibrant images.”

Such experience is subjectively real and emotionally true. But expressing it effectively demands care and creativity. We use metaphors to point the way to a deeper understanding that is beyond words. And yet, words are the tools we have to express ourselves, and it gets tricky because we all relate to words in slightly different ways.

An important gift for effective communication on matters of religion and spirituality is being aware of when we are in those realms that require night language – metaphor – and not treating that language as if it were objectively factual. Joseph Campbell again has something of value to say here. “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.” He’s talking about treating night language as if it were day language. He’s talking about confusing the finger pointing at the moon with the moon itself. Confusing the map with the territory it describes. Confusing the recipe in the cookbook with the delicious meal on the table.

Making those errors is a form of what religious folks call idolatry. That is, taking as Ultimate something that is less than ultimate. Mistaking the pointer for that being pointed at. It’s the kind of attitude that led religious writer J. B. Phillips to declare in a book title fifty years ago: “Your God Is Too Small.” It’s the attitude that led Lao Tzu to state in the *Tao te Ching* over 2500 years ago:

The tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named
Is not the eternal Name.

By this day and age, we should understand both the gifts and the limitations of language. The possibility of language – particularly through image and metaphor – to point us on a path of discovery and ever-growing comprehension and appreciation of our life and our world. The *impossibility* of language to encompass and encapsulate in neat little packages every aspect of reality and experience. Theologian Sallie McFague closes her book, *Metaphorical Theology*, and I close my remarks this morning, like this:

The last word as well as the first word in theology is surrounded by silence. We know with Simone Weil that when we try to speak of God there is nothing which resembles what we can conceive when we say that word.

Blessed be. Amen. And don’t get stuck in your metaphors.