

Sermon

Metaphor

Roger K Howe – 2014-06-15

Metaphor. A figure of speech. Something we may have learned about in high school or college English classes. Something we rubbed against or bumped our noses on when studying English poetry. What is it doing in church on Sunday morning?

Good question. Until about 2013, I would have been counted among the skeptics regarding the importance of metaphor; metaphor was something interesting or challenging to learn about along the way in my education, but not of much importance; I once nearly flunked an English Poetry project because my interpretation of a metaphor was different from that of my instructor; metaphor is something fancy that high flown authors of ornate poetry use to make their message more obscure or fancier. Metaphor is not something for a UU Church.

Then my eyes were opened; dawn burst upon me in a rush of information; I did a 180. Metaphor became my pet. Let me describe my journey to metaphoric epiphany, starting with some attempt to define metaphor.

Let's start by being clear about what a metaphor is: I define "metaphor" as a figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily denotes one thing is used to designate another. As in "my eyes were opened," "dawn burst upon me," "a rush of information," "I did a 180," and "metaphor became my pet." I used all of these about three or four sentences ago, and I daresay none of you had any difficulty in understanding what I was saying any more than you would have if I had indicated that it was raining cats and dogs. But by using these metaphors, I was intending to point to something beyond, something more exciting than, something more meaningful than a simple declaratory sentence, such as "there are 5280 feet in a mile."

Emily Plum, in defining metaphor in her marvelous poem "A Short History of the word 'Metaphor,'" writes this:

"A figure of speech: tall, relentless,
with his dark beard lined up against the sun,
his long eyes a soft valley I once stood in
and wept; a word applied to something to which
it is not literally applicable:

food to thought,
tall grasses to your mouth or visa versa,
a sigh heard only in sleep to the curve
of a face long looked away or reverse,
the stem of a flower to that thick
wandering ventricle of my heart
with its ceaseless pumping, and thank God.”

This metaphoric definition of metaphor wanders between picturesque, emotionally provoking and incomprehensible, but always in metaphor. This raises the issue of an interesting test for metaphor: the question “what did he/she mean by that?” If this question is obviously stupid, then it wasn’t a metaphor, but if the question makes sense, it may well be that it was a metaphor and we just missed its subtle meaning.

What happened to awaken me to the importance of metaphor? Three things. First, I listened to a set of lectures from the Teaching Company entitled “On Being Human;” one of the lectures was on metaphor. Second, I watched an old movie called “Galaxy Quest” again – if there is a Star Trek fan in the pews this morning who has not seen it, I recommend it with vigor. Third, I attended a seminar at the Western Regional UU Conference about religion and poetry, in which a major thesis was that both are metaphoric and therefore both speak to the same human needs. My mind bent, folded on itself, and set out on a new path.

And so, today, I am going to talk about metaphor, the verbal elephant in the room. Since kindergarten, we have been swimming in a sea of metaphor, oblivious. My words may open the eyes of a few of you; some will see the light dimly, get to first base; a few may find it a home run. I hope to unlock the magic of this communication form. In a few moments, we’ll get down to the nitty-gritty, delve in the nuts and bolts of metaphor, explore from A to Z. But first, let’s put it on the back burner for a moment, take a step back, and analyze these several sentences I have just uttered.

Did I sound crazy to any of you? Was my prose overblown, overly artsy; did you perceive it to be highly metaphoric? Let’s look some of the phrases I used.

“The verbal elephant in the room.” Do you really think there is an elephant in the room?

“Since kindergarten, we have been swimming in a sea of metaphor...” Kindergarten, literally, is a piece of land in which one plants the seeds to grow children. And tell me more, please, about this sea we have been swimming in.

“My words may open the eyes of a few of you...” Are your eyes closed? And how would words do that? “...some will see the light dimly...” I don’t know that anything I say could be considered to be electromagnetic radiation. “...get to first base...” Are we playing baseball? “...hit a home run...” More baseball? “...unlock the magic...” I would hardly classify a form of speech as magic, and certainly not magic needing unlocking.

“Nitty-gritty” “nuts and bolts” “A to Z” “back burner” “take a step back” – metaphor, metaphor, metaphor, metaphor, metaphor.

To say we are swimming in a sea of metaphor is not a bad metaphoric way of summing up the situation, and this was part of the point of that lecture that I listened to on my way to the seminar in San Jose. There is metaphor in our nursery rhymes, if one cares to look for it, as we saw with “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” earlier, in a piece I wrote in about 1982. And we use metaphor consciously or unconsciously every time we open our mouths to speak.

Our chalice lighting today was written in metaphoric language.

We sang a song to “Dear Weaver of our lives’ design whose patterns all obey...” which is a wonderful metaphor for something others might call “fate.”

We heard a very moving poem by Mary Oliver that started with “I thought the earth remembered me, she took me back so tenderly, arranging her dark skirts, her pockets full of lichens and seeds.” And ended with “By morning I had vanished at least a dozen times into something better.”

We sang “To see the world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wildflower.” All of this is metaphoric, and more compelling because of that.

There are several things about metaphors I should point out on our way to understanding the power of metaphor.

First: Metaphors are abstract symbols that are read by most of our body and our brain as if they were literal truth. This accounts for their impact, but also for their ability to confuse or confound not only our thinking but also our ability to communicate. They have their impact precisely because the words used describe something else.

Second: Metaphors are highly useful in talking about the ineffable – the indescribable or unknowable. This is why religious language is frequently metaphoric. But so is the language used to describe much of modern physics and astrophysics.

Third: We ignore the power of metaphor at our peril in a diverse world. A better understanding of the metaphors used by others with whom we disagree, or with whom we have difficulty communicating, may assist in communication, mutual comprehension, empathy and may lead to unexpected collaboration.

This is heavy duty spiritual work we are talking about. It belongs here and it belongs in your life. Let's continue walking on this path.

First: Metaphors are abstract symbols that are read by most of our body and our brain as if they were literal truth.

The course I listened to on the way to San Jose last year spent half an hour of a six-hour course talking about metaphor. The lecturer, a neuroscientist who spends his time trying to figure out what the brain is up to, points out that the integrative parts of the brain – the parts that assemble sensations into pain and work to make sense of the pain for us, or the parts that evaluate smells and tastes and decide that something is too disgusting to eat, or others – react to metaphor in exactly the same way they react to stimuli reaching the brain through sensory nerve pathways. If we poke your finger with a needle, various sensory pathways in your nervous system kick into action, as does an integrative center of the brain that deals with pain. If you watch your loved one getting poked with a needle, your sensory pathways are quiet, but your integrative center lights up in just the same way, and you “feel” your loved one's pain.

A number of interesting experiments demonstrate this transference works for physical stimuli – for instance, if you are holding a cup of hot coffee, you will tend to perceive the stranger you are talking with as having a warm personality, but if you are holding iced tea, you are more likely to see that person as being cold and unapproachable. By the way, I suggest we not serve iced tea at coffee hour.

This transference also works for ideas. People who have just read an essay about the dangers of invasive microorganisms are much more likely to have a negative reaction to immigration when offered an essay on that subject than people who had just finished reading an article on architecture. Our brains take input in one form and apply it to another process in another form even though in one case it is concrete and in the other symbolic.

But, of course, this is why metaphors are used – because they have impact not only on the intellect, but also on the emotions. It can be high impact stuff. When I say “some of you will hit

a home run,” I know that baseball is pretty well ingrained for all of us – many of us in this room have hit literal home runs, and most of us have wanted to at one time or another. My offer to you of hitting a home run is an enticement to come along and to experience that same sense of accomplishment in a totally different venue – that of understanding metaphors instead of that of baseball.

But I don’t imagine I’d have nearly the same response in a group of Englishmen, where I might need to choose a metaphor from cricket instead.

Metaphors have their impact precisely because they refer to something in terms of something else; once they become the standard expression, they lose the quality of metaphor. Why don’t we see “kindergarten” as being a metaphor? Because it has lost the quality of metaphor-ness in becoming standard jargon – the name for a particular kind of schooling. But you can bet that when the term was coined, it had a much different impact. When we say that it is raining cats and dogs, no one panics because of how heavy the rain is – there really aren’t animals falling out of the sky – but that’s because this metaphor has been so used that it bears less impact. If I told you it was Niagara Falls outside, you might feel somewhat differently about it.

Second: Metaphors are highly useful in talking about the ineffable – the indescribable or unknowable.

How can you describe something for which there are no words? How can you talk about god, or eternity, or what happens after we die, except in terms of metaphor? In science it is one thing to be able to reduce things to mathematical statements – which are the ultimate in concrete statements of abstraction. But it is another thing completely to translate the symbols into something other than metaphor.

What do I mean? Numbers are abstract concepts. Five is an abstraction. If you look in the dictionary, you will find that the word five is a noun but it is also an adjective. As a noun it means nothing. It’s only an abstraction. It’s a metaphor, but it isn’t a very interesting metaphor. As an adjective, it provides useful information about the noun it modifies: “five miles” is different from “nine miles” though both are “miles.”

But let’s take number a little farther – a lot of miles – how far is a light year? It is the distance light, which is awfully speedy stuff, goes in a year – just to let you know, it is 59 followed by 11 zeroes – 5.9 quadrillion miles. And the nearest star to Earth, other than the sun, which is about 8 light minutes away, is over four light years away, and many of those we see in our night sky are upwards of 50 light years away and are very close neighbors in cosmic terms.

We are so far from being able to understand this at the same level that we understand “There are 5280 feet in a mile” that the only way to make sense of the size of the universe is to use metaphor. In science, that metaphor is light years.

In a few moments, we’ll sing the following words:

“Sun my sail and moon my rudder as I ply the starry sea, leaning over the edge in wonder, casting questions into the deep. Drifting here with my ship’s companions, all we kindred pilgrim souls, making our way by the lights of the heavens, in our beautiful blue boat home.”

This is surely just another metaphor for all those light years, but it is certainly a more beautiful, a more stirring one. As our opening words indicated, it makes a difference which metaphor you choose.

Please rise and join me in singing My Blue Boat Home.

CLOSING WORDS:

This church is dedicated to the proposition that behind all our differences, beneath all our diversity, there is a unity that makes us one and binds us forever together, in spite of time and death and the space between the stars. Let us pause in silent witness to that unity and in witness to the fact that it takes metaphors just to talk about it.

One minute pause.

Today we have gathered to worship, to hold up the things that are of value to us. We began an exploration of the importance of metaphor in our spiritual lives by defining metaphor, by recognizing that the impact of metaphor lies in the fact that we receive the metaphor simultaneously as being symbolic and as being factual. And we looked at how the ineffable, whether it is religious or scientific, requires metaphor for expression. I promised you more about some larger issues about the impact of metaphor in a diverse world, and I pointed at the importance of choosing metaphors well. Alas, there was not time for everything today, but I have written another service to complete this one; maybe we can gather on another Sunday to complete these ideas.

In the meantime, may you take with you a sense of a new door opened, or an opening widened, and a new awareness that can flavor your life with a new joy.