

Metaphor (part 2)

A Sermon by Roger K Howe

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In first sermon on metaphor, I began the discussion with observations about how pervasive metaphor is in our lives – it is the linguistic sea in which our communications swim. I also pointed out one of the important realities about metaphor: our brains interpret metaphor as being literally true at an emotional level while our prefrontal cortex is working hard to sort out the figurative meanings contained in them. This means that serious emotions get attached to metaphor, whether on the giving or on the receiving end; it also means that serious miscommunication is possible, especially if the two parties in a communication are interpreting the metaphor differently.

So, what is a metaphor? A figure of speech in which a word or phrase that normally refers to one thing is used to refer to something else; or, I will add, a phrase otherwise referring to nothing that had to be invented to refer to something ineffable – something otherwise impossible to understand or comprehend, or speak about.

I know I'm being redundant. We sang Blue Boat Home to begin our service today after having sung it to end our service in June. To me, it is beautiful, much more soul-moving than a count of light years and velocities. Joseph Campbell already made my point about metaphoric miscommunication in our opening words. You have heard Fred's commentary and have heard Jane move a Psalm from the King James Bible to a changed metaphor in a way that makes it beautiful and meaningful to a non-believer.

In the first sermon on metaphor, I promised you a discussion of the broader issue of metaphor in our diverse world, the pitfalls and possible strategies to unexpected collaboration. Or, in other words, why all this is important to us.

Pitfall #1: People with ulterior motives may choose to use metaphors to obtain the desired emotional response. Is it any wonder that sexy women are employed to create television ads aimed at men? Or, more darkly, do you remember the Rwanda genocide in 1994? To refresh your memory: in a period of April to July, some 500,000 to 1,000,000 Tutsi tribesmen and women were murdered by both military and civilian members of the Hutu tribe – this represented about 70% of the Tutsi present in Rwanda at that time. I am reliably informed that Hutu radio in Rwanda had been systematically referring to the Tutsi as “cockroaches” for years.

Think for a moment: what is your reaction to the word “cockroach?” Does it conger up feelings of love and friendliness or a sense of disgust? For most of us, even without further images which I will not elicit for you, the feeling we get is one of disgust – an emotional reaction that can occur in the absence of a cockroach, just by thinking about one. This is the power of metaphor. What happens when

the radio asks the Hutu to “get rid of the cockroaches?” That is, apparently, exactly what Hutu radio asked of its listeners.

Success Story #1: In the late 1980s, I was involved in forming a six-member group of family docs in southern Siskiyou County. Three of us were in a smoothly functioning three-man incorporated practice. Two were in a loose partnership. One was in a solo practice. We had to write a set of bylaws for our new organization, and the solo physician seemed to be a major obstacle in that effort. He and I met weekly over breakfast for what seemed like years, trying to iron out our “differences.” Then a breakthrough came. This physician was a devotee of EST (Erhard Seminars Training), and had been attending EST meetings for years. He invited a renowned trainer to come to Mount Shasta to talk about EST to a group of the unwashed. I went. I listened. I understood that there was a vocabulary involved in EST that was based on a different set of assumptions, different stories, different interpretations from what I normally functioned with. I decided to make the leap and converse with my partner-to-be in the context of *his* metaphors rather than mine. We rapidly reached agreement on a number of contentious issues – an agreement reached without my having to yield any ground in the negotiation except talking about the same events using different vocabulary, based on a different metaphor.

OK. My partner-to-be was not Hutu radio, but his EST training had instilled in him a set of biases based on emotional reactions to a metaphoric interpretation of our proposed relationship – he was hearing what I thought was concrete language as a metaphor that pointed at something, well, something disgusting for want of a better word. When I changed to using language that did not trip his metaphoric triggers, we were able to get past that disgust to agreement.

That was 25 years ago. About 5 years ago, another business venture in which he and I and others were partners required reorganization. At that juncture, his position was, in essence, “Roger, I know you will do a good job of representing my interest in this. I am going to remain silent except in extreme provocation; I want you to know that you have my vote.” The understanding we reached earlier had lasted that long.

Pitfall #2: The Evil Empire. Think for a moment how the characterization of some nations as “the evil empire” may have changed the reaction of President Bush to the events of 9/11/2001. If he had been willing to join in dialog with representatives of Al Qaida, of the Taliban, how might the last decade and a half have played out differently? As long as our metaphors are such that we hold others at arms’ length, as different, other, and especially as “not as good as we are,” we are less likely to be able to work through our problems to a mutually beneficial conclusion. As it happened, what he did served to confirm all the worst expectations of a significant group of people with whom we don’t get along – people who operate with a different set of metaphors.

Success Story #2: I might have told the story of Gandhi, who used repressive British behavior, something that was not part of the British self-story metaphor, to set up a dissonance within the British population that led to Indian independence. Instead, let’s talk about Nelson Mandela. Jailed for his ideas about racial equality in South Africa, what did he do with his time? He learned from his jailers to speak

Afrikaans – not textbook Afrikaans, but colloquial Afrikaans. When he was released from jail and began negotiations toward an end to apartheid, he used his knowledge of Afrikaans in his negotiations, not to change the minds of his white counterparts, but to change their hearts. Their language, spoken to them by beloved parents and grandparents, constituted a metaphor of closeness, love, family. When Nelson Mandela greeted them in colloquial Afrikaans at the beginning of a negotiating session, it changed where their hearts were, and changed the substance of the conversation. Nelson Mandela was willing to make metaphoric gestures that indicated his willingness to meet the Afrikaners on their own ground, in their own idiom, in their own metaphor, in ways that changed the nature of the conversation about and the progress toward the end of apartheid in South Africa.

Would we be so daring?

Pitfall #3: In the movie “Galaxy Quest,” to which I referred in June, there is an interesting scene I will now describe. The aliens have been receiving television broadcasts from Earth for some time, which they refer to as “The Historical Documents.” From their review of the historical documents regarding the adventures of the starship NSEA Protector, they have managed to construct the ship, but are unsure how to make best use of it. They come to Earth and recruit the crew they have seen in the historical documents to come and lead them in a confrontation with Saris, who is the bad guy. They have no idea that they are recruiting a group of actors who have no actual experience with space or spaceships. There comes a moment when this crew of actors attempts to disabuse the aliens of the notion that everything they saw on the television could be correct. One crew member says to the aliens, “But surely you don’t think that Gilligan’s Island was a true story?” The reply is an immediate posture of sadness and the words “Oh, those poor people,” from all of the aliens present.

This is the ultimate failure to understand the nature of metaphor. The aliens have interpreted the metaphor of entertainment as a statement of history – it has enabled them to construct the spaceship the producers of the show only dreamed of, but it has not enabled them to make use of it, and they are relying on the guidance of actors who know less of their ship than they do.

Success Story #3: Well, one good Star Trek story deserves another. There is an episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation called “Darmok.” The crew of the Enterprise are confronted by an alien race whose communications are enigmatic even after passing through the universal translator. The aliens utter such undecipherable statements, offered in the genuine spirit of communication, as these: “The River Tamarc in winter;” “Shaka when the walls fell;” “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra;” “Temba, his arms wide;” and “Uzani, his army with fist open.” As you may now anticipate, these are metaphoric references to the mytho-history of the aliens, a mytho-history totally unknown to the captain and crew of the Enterprise. The captain, on the planet with the alien captain, has no choice but to work on understanding the metaphors, and manages to grasp some half dozen or so before the alien captain is killed, and he is rescued to an Enterprise under attack and about to succumb to the firepower of the alien ship. He opens a communication channel and utters some appropriate metaphors to indicate that their captain was dead at the hands of the energy entity, but that he has the captain’s log, which they

transport. With appropriate metaphor, “Temba, his arms wide,” he offers back the knife the captain gave to him, and is refused with a polite, “Temba, at rest.” But the moment of exultation on the alien ship comes as the Enterprise captain communicates in metaphor, and the alien first officer exclaims, “Sekath, his eyes uncovered!” This is the victory of communication both races had hoped for.

And what of us? We are not likely soon to be on deep space missions, nor are we likely to be negotiating an end to apartheid as the oppressed race. But we meet people with metaphor all the time, and some attention to our communication may still be beneficial, even if not so earth-shattering.

It helps if we start from a point of humility, realizing that we communicate in metaphor too – it is not a “weakness” of the “other.” There is no other, there are only people here, all of whom use metaphor. We think science allows us to communicate in concrete. The reality is that our inability to comprehend, to fully understand, the true nature of the very small, the very large and the very old – that inability forces us to use metaphor. If you don’t think that the expression “the big bang” is a metaphor, I challenge you to explain to me in concrete expressions what it means to compress a universe that is currently at least 14 billion light years in radius into a grain of sand – how does that feel? How does it get that way? What is the grain of sand composed of?

How would it be if instead of talking to a fundamentalist Christian or Moslem about the irrationality of taking their metaphor of creation as literal truth, we wonder about our own taking of our metaphor of creation as literal truth? Where does that leave us? Maybe in the position of having a conversation with the fundamentalist that goes, “Gee, we have a different metaphor for the same event, which we call the “big bang. How interesting.” Now, can we get past our interpretation of creation myth metaphors and on to things that really matter? Maybe we can talk about things like respect for the worth and dignity of every individual person; or the fundamental validity of democracy, and what we think the consequences of acting on that belief might be; or striving to live in deep respect and reverence for the interdependent web of which we all are a part. This, we may find, can, or perhaps should, be interpreted as being a metaphor, a metaphor for which the religious fundamentalist may have a matching belief or a matching aspiration expressed in another metaphor. Maybe, just maybe, we can find in there the seed of communication that can work to open a dialog that can lead to real progress.

Nelson Mandela taught us it is not necessary to change people’s minds, only to change their hearts. So long as we insist on holding up other people’s metaphors as being untrue when interpreted as statements of fact within the framework of our own metaphors, we cannot change their hearts. Only when we are willing to meet in the acceptance of metaphor as metaphor, whether it is ours or theirs, only then can we change hearts and get past differences that don’t matter to similarities that do matter. After all, what difference does it make which creation myth you or I believe in? What matters, as our seven principles point out, is how we aspire to act in relation to one another and the world. And on that, we may find there is more agreement than we might have expected.

But it takes courage. Courage to accept the metaphor of another person as being a beautiful and meaningful thing even when it is not the same as our metaphor, and to accept that our factual, concrete rendition of almost anything is more beautiful, softer and more acceptable if we look at it as a beautiful metaphor for a reality that is, at some basic level, ineffable.

I challenge you, the next time you pick up the seven UU Principles, read them as metaphor; read them as a call to action. They are not intended to be a statement of beliefs and they are certainly not intended to be regarded as concrete statements of the nature of reality. They are aspirational, inspirational, metaphoric. Maybe this is what Fred was talking about when he indicated we might be overlooking metaphors we currently have in place.

But we may come back to that another day, too.

For now, let it be enough that we sit softly on our seats, in the quiet, to think about our own personal metaphors, to soften their edges, to let go of their concreteness, to open ourselves to the possibility that someone else's beliefs, taken as metaphor, may be just as beautiful as ours.

