

## "LIFE'S A BEACH"--"LIFE'S A PARTY": PUTTING METAPHOR TO WORK IN THE COUNSELING SESSION

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*ABSTRACT: The metaphors we use to describe our life-situations structure our experience and our problems and their solutions, either keeping us stuck or leading to breakthroughs in thinking and feeling. This article explores how counselors can tune into client metaphors, assess their functionality, and introduce new, more serviceable metaphors. Practical picture-making activities with clients focus on metaphorical images to clarify new ways of looking at old problems.*

*Key words: metaphor, counseling, image, self-portrait*

### INTRODUCTION

Most of us are familiar with the term *metaphor* from a bygone literature or poetry appreciation class. So, when poets say, "The moon was a ghostly galleon..." or "My heart is a singing bird...", we know that they are speaking metaphorically.

But in an age of growing child/youth problems and shrinking professional resources, why spend time considering something as "literary" as metaphor? What does this kind of language have to do with counseling children and youth? And why are metaphors important to the counselor working with young people in emotional pain?

The intent of this discussion is to deepen our appreciation of the importance of counselors having to a) tune into client metaphors, b) encourage clients to express their metaphors graphically and explore their meanings, c) assess the functionality of client metaphors, and d) introduce metaphors of our own to assist clients in seeing something in a new, more constructive way. We'll see the clinical use of metaphor as an important intervention skill that can greatly enhance our counseling efficiency and effectiveness.

### *What Is a Metaphor?*

A dictionary tells us that a metaphor is "a figure of speech in which an expression is used to refer to something that it does not literally denote in order to suggest a similarity" (Dictionary.com, 1997). What does this mean?

First, it is saying that to use metaphor is to use *non-literal* language. Remember the song "Love is a Rose"? It is not literally true that love is a rose. Taken literally, this statement is flatly false: love is an *emotion*, not a rose! But, second, when we say, "love is a rose", we may be saying something

very true in a non-literal, i.e. poetic sense. How? Because we use metaphor to *compare* one thing with another: we compare love to a rose in order to say something important about love.

When we say metaphorically that love is a rose, we are not, of course, implying that love and roses are comparable in *every* way--just *some* ways. We are not suggesting that love can be bought in a florist's shop or that it will last longer if immersed in water. But it is usually intuitively clear what the relevant comparison is: that, like a rose, love may be very beautiful and delicate, but it may also deliver acute pain.

When we express this truth using the metaphor rather than the literal language, we are saying it more *powerfully* than we can using the literal language. The use of metaphor adds a certain *clarity*, a certain *strength* to our description because it *crystallizes* it into a concise, compelling *image*.

### **Why Is Metaphor Important In Counseling?**

I hear metaphor used all the time in my counseling work with children and youth.

"I'm at the end of my rope."  
 "I'm a sack of broken eggs."  
 "I'm going over the edge of the cliff."  
 "That memory is a spike through my heart."  
 "He ate me up and spat me out."  
 "Dad really went off the rails last night."  
 "Now I'm in deep doo-doo!"  
 "There goes the family down the toilet!"  
 "Life's a bitch."  
 "Life's a party!"

Each one of these metaphorical expressions creates a vivid image, doesn't it? These metaphorical images are important to us as counselors in four ways.

*Metaphorical images reflect experience.* The metaphors I use, whether consciously or unconsciously, to describe myself and my problems, *reflect* my personal experience. My experience gives rise to my metaphors.

So, to tune into and respond to my client's metaphors is to cut to the "nitty-gritty", to get at the *core* of her experience. To focus on the metaphor is to avoid getting bogged down at the verbal level. Some children are either unwilling or unable to talk articulately about themselves or their problems, and give us vague responses; others frustrate the counseling process by defensively engaging in endless irrelevant talk, avoiding what most needs to be addressed. Our focus on the child's metaphor allows us to move from abstract verbal description to more concrete *visual* depiction, resulting in a clearer and more practical statement of the client's experience.

Tanya was a new client, a fifteen-year-old girl. I had been told little by the referral source-- that she has few friends at school, that she is failing her grade, and that she is miserable at home. I wanted to get clearer on her issues, how she sees herself in her life. So I asked her straight out: "How do you see yourself in your life right now?" But that's a pretty difficult question for many kids, and at first I heard the usual responses: "Fine" and "I don't know". She was doing her best to answer a very abstract question. And the more she struggled to talk about her life, the more abstract it all sounded and the more lost Tanya looked.

If we would like all that abstraction and all those words to gel into a concrete image which cuts to the heart of things, we can encourage her to move directly into metaphor by inviting her to create a *metaphorical self-portrait*.

I had my felt pens and drawing paper at hand. I said to her, "Tanya, this is hard stuff to talk about, isn't it? Let's maybe do some drawing instead. Can you draw a picture that says something about what life is like for you right now? But let's use an image to help us--the image of a tree. *If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?*" As the client begins to draw, I gently pose additional questions to guide her work and stimulate her imagination: Where would you be growing? Are there other trees near you? What season of the year is it? What's the soil like? Does the tree have enough water? What's the weather like around you?

In completing this picture, my client has produced a powerful metaphorical statement: "I am this tree; my life is this environment".

Once this self-portrait has been completed, I use it as a healing conversation piece--a concrete, physical image that can be placed on the table in front of us, can be handled and pointed to, and to which the client may even make additions or changes as we talk. This discussion encourages my client to reflect on the meaning of her picture. I do not presume to interpret or analyze her metaphor; instead, I assume a posture of (wise) ignorance, letting questions rather than interpretations do the work of promoting insight. "What is this tree telling us about how you see yourself right now? This sky (I point to it)--is it saying anything about what is going on around you? I notice the tree has no leaves; what is that telling us about how you're doing right now? Do you think some new leaves will be able to grow on these branches? What does this tree most need before those new leaves can begin to grow?" Encouraging the client to interpret her own metaphor is an important way of affirming both her ability and her responsibility to define her own experience. In this process, her self-image becomes more focused. She grows in clarity and understanding about her life-situation and her own powers to help change her life for the better.

*Metaphorical images inform and mediate experience.* Our metaphors do indeed flow from our experience. But the relationship between experience and metaphor also works the *other* way, in chicken-and-egg fashion: the metaphors I use also *structure my experience* of myself and my problems, situations, or relationships, and also my experience of the *solutions* available to me. My metaphor gives rise to my experience. My adoption of the

"Life's a bitch" metaphor results in a very different experience of life and a different stance toward life than does my buying into the "Life's a party" metaphor. The metaphor becomes a set of glasses through which we see what we're looking at. What we see is influenced by the tint of the glasses, and we respond accordingly.

*Client metaphors vary in functionality.* A child's metaphor may either contribute towards a solution to his problem or may be a millstone around his neck, producing ongoing pain and keeping him stuck. So I may want to *challenge* his dysfunctional metaphor, to help break its spell, and to encourage him to adopt a more functional metaphor that better leads to solutions to his problems.

I am working with a ten-year old boy, Tommy, who has been referred by his teacher at school because he's being teased outside at recess and lunch hour. As he slouches dejectedly and his eyes stare at his shoes, I ask him what the problem is. He says, "They keep picking on me. They'll never quit." I go for the metaphor. I ask him if he can draw me a picture of what happens when he gets teased. I suggest, "If you were an animal in this picture, what kind of animal would you be? And what kind of animals would *they* be?"

He draws a picture of a poor little dog being mercilessly attacked by a pack of huge wolves. The wolves have big drops of blood dripping from their teeth. What a powerful metaphor! Since it comes spontaneously out of his imagination and he becomes emotionally involved in drawing it, we have good reason to believe that this metaphor captures his core experience of the relationship between himself and his tormentors.

Yes, but how *functional* is this metaphor? Well, notice first how *hopeless* the situation looks to him from within the metaphor. As the little dog in the picture, there is nothing he can do to stop them or to help himself. There is no one else in the picture he can appeal to for help. The wolves have all the power, and he has no control over the situation. We could say that the metaphor he has adopted to express his experience reflects his pain, but it also *sets him up* for a lot of pain. The wolves-and-puppy metaphor is dysfunctional in that it disposes him to feel helpless and hopeless to the point where he has given up even trying to help himself. As long as *this* metaphor informs his experience of his situation, he'll likely remain stuck.

But perhaps I can introduce him to a more functional metaphor, one which can lead to a sense of hope that there is *something* he can do to cope with this situation--one that will give him some new sense of empowerment and choice. I remember hearing earlier that he had gone fishing with his uncle awhile back and had enjoyed it. So I pick up my felt pens and begin to draw, and to tell him a story.

BT: (counselor) Here's a dock, and here's a fisherman who likes to fish off the end of this dock..." (I draw the dock, the fisherman, and the surface of the water onto the page.) Now,

what does the fisherman want to do?

Tommy: He wants to catch fish.

BT: Right! And how does the fisherman feel when he catches a fish? Why does he try to catch them?

Tommy: Well, he feels proud of himself, and real smart, and he has a lot of fun catching them. It makes him feel good.

BT: And how will he try to catch fish?

Tommy: With his fishing rod.

BT: Can you draw him holding his rod? (Child draws the rod into the picture.) And how does this rod (I point to it) catch fish?

Tommy: Well, it's got a hook on the end of the line.

BT: And what does the fisherman need to do to get the fish to swallow the hook?

Tommy: He needs some bait.

(I lead Tommy to draw the bait on the hook and the fish nearby.)

Now, the crucial question:

BT: Does this fish have to take the bait?

Tommy: (thinks for a minute) Well...no, not really.

BT: And if the fish doesn't take the bait, will the fisherman catch the fish?

Tommy: ...Well...no.

BT: OK, so what can the fish do instead of taking the bait?

Tommy: Well, I guess he could just swim away.

BT: But notice how the fisherman is bigger than the fish. Can the fish swim away even though he is smaller?

Tommy: Yes, of course he can.

BT: And if the fish never takes the bait, what will happen to the fisherman?

Tommy: Well, I guess he'll give up on that fish or that lake, and try to catch fish somewhere else.

BT: So the fisherman only keeps trying to catch the fish if he thinks the fish will take the bait!

Tommy: Right.

By this time, most kids are intuitively "getting" the metaphor. Now I want to help Tommy explicitly understand the relevance of this new metaphor, and to help him in adopting the new metaphor that is far less hopeless and offers some possibility of choice and power to Tommy in dealing with the teasing.

BT: Well, Tommy, how can we make this story work for you?

Tommy: I...uh...I'm not quite sure.

BT: Well, the fisherman tries to catch the fish, right? What do

- these kids want when they tease you? What are they trying to get out of the situation?
- Tommy: Well, to get me mad, to make me cry, to get me in trouble when I go after them.
- BT: So that's how they "catch" you, right?
- Tommy: Right.
- BT: And what do they use for bait to catch you? What is it that they dangle in front of your nose? Let's make a list of all the things they say or do that count as bait when they go fishing for you.
- Tommy: Well, they call me fatty, and make fun of me. They make jokes about my glasses, and they have this stupid little rhyme they say about my name, and it makes me mad and I start to cry. Then they laugh at me more and I get so mad I start to swear at them. Somehow I'm the one who ends up getting in trouble, not them. Usually for swearing at them.
- BT: And when they get this response out of you, how do you think they feel about themselves?
- Tommy: Well, I guess they feel just like the fisherman when he catches a fish. They feel real proud of themselves, and more powerful than me. Big and strong--in control of me. They feel like they've won, and I feel like a total loser!
- BT: So they're trying to "get" you, because then they'll feel just like you do when you catch a fish...like you won. But, OK, let's think about something for a minute here. When you're feeling really good about yourself inside, do you enjoy making other people miserable?
- Tommy: No.
- BT: Isn't it true that it's when we feel really lousy inside that we get a kick out of ruining someone else's day with put-downs?
- Tommy: Yeah, I guess so.
- BT: So maybe these kids have a special need to feel powerful and in control of your feelings by teasing you--because they feel kind of lousy inside. You know what I mean? Because maybe they're feeling bad about themselves inside because of their lives, and they try to cover their own feelings up by trying to make someone else more miserable than they are.
- Tommy: Yeah, Jarrett (a tormentor) has been a lot meaner to me since his parents split up.
- BT: OK, but here's the deal...Do you have to bite at the hook? Do you have to take the bait?
- Tommy: No, I guess I have a choice.
- BT: Well, what can you do instead?
- Tommy: Well, maybe I can just swim away, not give them what they're looking for. Then if they don't catch any fish with me, maybe they'll give up and try some other fishing hole.

Now we're cooking! Tommy is even starting to grin a bit as we move into some role-playing in which he practices ignoring the bait--the put-downs that used to set him off. At first I notice him wincing a bit as I deliver some of his tormentors' lines. But soon we are both laughing as I voice the put-down lines in as yucky a way as I can, and he is now immune to them. In one session he's come a long way in being desensitized to the old put-downs, and starting to feel confident that things will soon be different at school.

But, before we close, I want to empower the new, more functional metaphor, further to "cement" it into place. I invite Tommy to draw the picture of the fisherman and the fish again, but this time there's several fishermen and baited hooks. In this new picture, the fish is just swimming away, proudly saying to himself, "I know how to handle these fisher-guys. I don't have to take their silly bait." And, before our visit is over, I invite him to take his picture and fold it up into a tight little packet.

BT: OK, Tommy, let's let this folded picture be your secret weapon. How about if you keep this picture in a front pocket of your jeans? When these guys bug you at recess or lunch hour this week, you can put your hand in your pocket and hold onto the folded picture. No one will know what you're doing. Feeling the picture in your pocket will remind you that this fish is a friend who can help you do what you want to do: stay cool, don't show anger or tears, don't give them the satisfaction they're looking for, and just "swim away". When they get it that you're too smart to take their bait, they'll give up on you and look for somewhere else to fish. In fact, Tommy, my guess is that there'll be times this week when you start to feel just as successful and proud as this fish in your picture, knowing that you can *handle* these guys. You might even have some *fun* with this! (And, sure enough, he *did*!)

*Working through an issue with metaphor is often safer.* Metaphorical language is usually more emotionally potent and forceful than literal language, and young people are likely to get much more emotionally involved in portraying their core metaphors pictorially than when they speak literally. It may seem paradoxical, then, to also suggest that working in metaphor will likely be emotionally *safer* for most children. Why safer? Because through metaphor we can say so much without having to say anything. This is especially true for children who have been seriously traumatized through abuse.

Children who have survived sexual abuse, for example, often feel intense shame or embarrassment at having to tell someone what has happened to them. Children who have suffered family violence at home are often terrified to talk because they have been forbidden to say what has happened to them and threatened with punishment if they do. As

these problem areas are so very painful to discuss, the client will likely be quite resistant to going near them on the literal, verbal level, and considerable time may elapse before the child is ready to talk about them literally.

But metaphor allows young people to tell without telling. If we encourage them, they will express their issue through metaphor much sooner than they will make a literal disclosure. And they don't have to talk explicitly about the nature of their problem before they can begin to feel the *relief* of sharing it with an empathic adult. With metaphor, they can begin to feel that they are moving toward solutions even before they have brought themselves to acknowledge the problem.

Raymond is a seven-year old with curly black hair referred to me by a school counselor. My intake information indicated that his parents had been fighting viciously in front of him for some time, and that his father had finally left the family. Raymond was going to be living not with his mother, but with a foster parent. But Raymond could talk about none of this. In response to questions like, "How are you doing?" he would just fall silent and turn away. So, I backed way off on the questions and involved Raymond in some drawing. In his second session with me, Raymond spontaneously started drawing a large sinking ocean liner. The bow was already well under water, and the stern end was up in the air. He silently drew little people falling off the upturned ship. I sensed his despondency, and I quietly asked him, "Raymond, would it be OK if I drew something into the picture?" He glumly nodded his head. I picked up my felt pens. I drew a lifeboat heading away from the sinking ship. A tall man with a beard was pulling on the oars. Then, sitting in the back of the boat, facing the man, I drew a little boy with black hair. Raymond looked at the picture, and his eyes welled with tears. He put out his hand and touched mine, and I took his hand. Neither one of us said anything about the meaning of the picture. But the metaphor had done its work; a bond had solidified between us, and some healing had begun.

### References

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