

Beyond Milton: Discover the real magic of metaphor

By Judy Rees February 2007

Are you and your clients missing out on the true magic of metaphor? If you still think that metaphor means 'telling stories to change people', it's time to think again.

There's a whole other world of metaphor for you to explore.

Linked to latest work in cognitive linguistics, it amounts to a new way of thinking about the way people think. And it opens new realms of possibility for personal change and growth.

Why metaphor?

Try this. Take a handful of coins from your pocket, and take a look at them. Notice their different shapes, colours and weights. Notice the jangling sound they make. What do they mean to you? The price of a cup of coffee?

Now take those same coins and arrange them to represent you and your family or closest friends.

Take a moment to write down what principles you used to do this. How did you choose what coin represented what? Is the size of the coins significant? The colour? And what about the spatial arrangement?

Now imagine that, for reasons beyond your control, you have to take one of them away.

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What just happened?

Notice that you had no difficulty representing people using coins. That is, that you used the coins as a metaphor for people.

And notice that, once they had taken on that representation, taking one away had emotional significance, at least to some degree.

This simple exercise hints at a point of crucial importance.

We easily and naturally tend to think of one thing in terms of another: that is, we think in metaphor.

The metaphor revolution

Like me, you probably learned in school that metaphor was just an interesting twist in language, something the best writers used to spice up their work.

But in the last 25 years or so, the way leading experts think about metaphor has been transformed, following the revolutionary book *Metaphors We Live By*, by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson.

And their conclusion, since supported by a mass of evidence across the cognitive linguistics field, was that metaphor is at the heart of the way we think. They observed: "Metaphoric thought is unavoidable, ubiquitous, and mostly unconscious."

Metaphoric language was simply a side-effect of metaphoric thought.

It's as if we cannot think of 'things' directly, but tend to think of one thing in terms of another. We think of love in terms of warmth, time in terms of space, and so on. These findings have two important implications for change workers.

Firstly they hint at an explanation for the storytelling effect. No wonder metaphoric stories (including those told by master hypnotherapist Milton Erickson) seem to bypass the critical, conscious mind and go straight to the unconscious. They are being delivered in exactly the form the unconscious mind would prefer.

Secondly, and for me more importantly, these ideas open up new possibilities when it comes to positive influence.

What if we could access a person's unconscious, metaphoric processing, and help them become more aware of it?

What if we could use this knowledge to assist them to reach ever-deeper levels of rapport with their unconscious system, enabling them to transcend limiting beliefs and behaviours, and step up to the next level, to their true, unrestricted self?

Fortunately, we can. That's where Clean comes in.

What's inside?

Metaphors We Live By was first published in 1980. A few years later a psychotherapist called David Grove began practising in the US, working particularly with victims of trauma. And he began taking his clients' metaphors seriously.

His process was called Clean Language. Symbolic Modelling, developed by Penny Tompkins and James Lawley, codified and extended David's work - their book about the process, Metaphors in Mind, was published in 2000.

Together, these processes provide the most effective method yet discovered of exploring a person's inner, metaphoric world.

They use a set of powerful questions David devised to help prevent him from 'leading the witness' by introducing his own assumptions into a session.

These Clean Language questions were crucial in enabling him to assist his clients to fully explore and develop their unique, personal metaphoric 'landscapes', because one of the most fascinating aspects of metaphor at this level is the delicate balance between near-universal, human 'rules', and the uniqueness of each individual.

Primary and personal metaphors

The metaphors we use are far from being random. They are grounded in our embodied experience – the reality of being a person living in a body, on a planet, under gravity.

Lakoff and Johnson's latest book, *Philosophy In The Flesh*, points out that the youngest baby will quickly learn that warmth means affection, love and intimacy, that important things (like parents) are big. The toddler learns to categorise things into containers, and to walk towards the things he wants. All these shared human experiences generate a set of metaphors we all tend to share – primary metaphors.

From an NLP point of view, this knowledge makes new sense of our familiar submodalities. You may have noticed that you think of important things as larger than less important things. Funnily enough, that fits exactly with the primary metaphor 'Important is Big'.

You may think of things which occurred at different times as being in different places, perhaps on a line. That fits with the primary metaphors 'Time is Motion' and 'Linear Scales are Paths'.

For anyone used to submodality work, a short study of primary metaphors quickly reveals correlations with commonly-observed patterns, and provides a much more memorable structure than the traditional VAK lists found on many trainings. (I am indebted to Charles Faulkner for this insight.)

So, it's clear many humans share similar metaphors. But here's a trap! While we share the broad, underlying metaphor, the details are invariably different for each individual. And the devil – and the power – is in the detail.

Think of a tree.

What kind of tree is your tree?

I can safely say it will be substantially different from the one I'm thinking of. It could be any one of thousands of species. It could be imagined at any season of the year. It could be in a particular location, or imagined on its own. It could look 'real', or be like a photograph, or a cartoon. Very soon, the number of potential differences outweighs the similarities.

As we know from NLP, people tend to treat their internal world as if it's real. Experience suggests that this is even more important at a metaphoric level than it is in the everyday world.

People's metaphors, and the symbols within them, often have deep, personal significance. If someone roughly imposes their assumptions while working you're your personal metaphor, it can feel physically painful!

And that's why, to get the very best from exploring a person's metaphoric world, great care needs to be taken to 'pollute' the client's metaphoric landscape as little as possible. In Clean work, we use only the client's own words and gestures, plus David's deceptively-simple questions.

What is Clean useful for?

Many people begin exploring Clean Language simply because they become fascinated by metaphor. And the work of Lawley and Tompkins includes a structured way to use a client's own metaphors to generate perfectly-fitting, long-lasting change.

An increasing number of Clean facilitators are now using this knowledge in a huge range of fields: in one-to-one work, in education, in business, in art and creativity, in

team development, and in spiritual growth. And that's just the beginning! The possible applications of this non-directive approach are only just being discovered.

If you'd like to be part of the adventure, we'd love you to join us.

Our four-day introductory training will equip you to start exploring the metaphoric worlds of your clients and customers. You can start slowly and just attend two days to start with, but most people attend all four days in a block to get their Clean exploration off to a flying start. The next one's on 23-26 April 2007 in West London.

Special bonus

Book for our next training within seven days of downloading this article and you can claim a free, hour-long phone coaching session with a Certified Clean Facilitator.

Book online at <http://www.cleanchange.co.uk/Training/FlyingStartModules12.php> or call Clean Change Company on 08456 86 86 96

Note to non-NLPers

Please excuse the NLP jargon! Our Clean Language and Symbolic Modelling training is accessible to all, not just those trained in neuro-linguistic programming.

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