

THE HEALING POWER OF METAPHOR: ENERGY FROM AN UNSEEN WORLD

By Julie Mariouw

“A book must be the axe for a frozen sea inside us,” wrote Franz Kafka in a letter to Oskar Pollak. In using this metaphor — comparing a book to an axe — Kafka tells us more in one sentence than if he had gone on for pages. We see an image, we feel the impact in our bodies, we understand what he is trying to say. Such is the power of metaphor.

The dictionary definition of metaphor is “a figure of speech that describes an object or action in a way that isn’t literally true, but helps explain an idea or make a comparison...metaphor states that one thing *is* another.” But metaphor is so much more than that. In *I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor*, James Geary tells us that metaphor is “derived from the Greek roots *meta* (over, across, or beyond) and *phor* (to carry), the literal meaning of metaphor is ‘to carry across.’”

We writers seem to be endlessly drawn to metaphor. This is, in part, because metaphor has such power to heal — emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Metaphor reaches into the lightning of our subconscious, pulls out power and wisdom, then makes an opening for these things to flow into our writing. It sweeps over a page and rearranges words before they have even been written.

Let's say I give an assignment in a workshop to write a metaphor about the body (which I've been known to do!). For example, "My body is a pitcher." Immediately my mind begins to compare and contrast beneath the surface. Metaphor is a road map, a trail for the universe to follow into the everyday world. Energy pours through it and down onto the page. Just like a pitcher! So you can see how the very creation of that metaphor influenced my writing instantaneously and came pouring out of the words before my rational mind had time to plan. Metaphor brings freshness to writing.

And metaphor opens individual words, too. Words are living things, carrying an embedded history and personality that has developed over thousands of years. Whether we realize it or not, we have set ideas about these words, and metaphor gets underneath our set ideas. It takes apart the components of words and rearranges them. Metaphor enlarges words, and then the words enlarge us.

Metaphor tells us that one thing IS another. But how can that literally be true? It can't, of course. But then again, can it? Perhaps these are just possibilities we are not yet aware of, even with our big human brains. Perhaps we knew about metaphor before we got so smart, and now we are just frustrated enough with our too-busy, self-directed lives to be willing to search for something larger and wiser than ourselves.

So how does metaphor heal? I believe that a big part of any illness is constriction. People have set ideas that they carry with them from childhood, and these set ideas are often harmful to people's health because they constrict them, keeping people stuck in unproductive patterns. To heal, we need to change some of our default settings.

Metaphor does this. Before we are aware of what's happening, a metaphor has rearranged things within us so that we have no choice but to see the world differently. It's as if the metaphor gets under or through our fear. Constriction to freedom — that is the work of metaphor.

And metaphor speeds up the healing process. How? By combining two unlike things, metaphor creates a vortex, or a prism that focuses light and energy on an injured area and creates supercharged healing. This happens beyond our conscious awareness, so there is no possibility of blocking it. Therefore, once we notice the healing, it has already been accomplished.

We humans are energy beings, and I think of the energy inside us as water. Inside my own body, there are blocks of ice that correspond to each childhood trauma I have experienced. How might a metaphor tackle these? Well, metaphor doesn't do so in a prescribed, linear way. When I write I feel metaphor randomly touch one place and then another. Gradually my energy moves, frozen pieces of trauma begin to dissolve, flow is restored. But I have to be willing to write about these stuck places over and over again.

So how can the average person — perhaps not a writer — benefit from the healing power of metaphor? I recommend writing daily for 5-15 minutes. This writing can be journaling, fiction, anything that is comfortable. We are not concerned, here, with the quality of the writing as much as the *practice* of writing. Think of it like daily physical exercise; you have to get your body moving in order to benefit from its effects. The same goes for writing — it's the doing of it that counts.

Type out a list of random nouns, whatever comes to mind. The only way you can mess this up is if you try to control the process. Print out the list and cut it into pieces. Then put these pieces in a container. Every day, choose two random nouns and write them at the top of a page. Write the word “is” between your two words, effectively making a metaphor. Now write. Write as quickly as you can. Don’t cross anything out. Don’t be concerned with spelling or grammar. Just follow the metaphor wherever it leads. At first this might be difficult, and you will feel a strong urge to control, but as you continue this practice you will notice yourself beginning to let go.

I guarantee, then, that unexpected things will happen. New connections will be made within your brain and body. You will feel a flow of energy breaking through stuck places. And even though you may not understand what is happening, you will definitely benefit from the process. Be patient and believe — the power of metaphor is at work!

Julie Mariouw is a published author, trained Amherst Writers & Artist workshop leader, english teacher, and owner of *Wellspring Writing Workshops LLC*, through which she offers creative writing workshops in the Ann Arbor area. Julie helps people bypass their internal critics, go directly to feelings & memories, and tap into the healing power of writing.

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