

Metaphorical Thinking

Our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories.

-- Mary C. Bateson

For many of us, the joy of metaphor was squashed by a fourth-grade English teacher who kept harping (and grading us!) on the difference between metaphor and simile. Well, we're adults now, and we can start to think about more important stuff. We think by making connections, linking one thing to another in a way that reveals to us the essence of each. Walk through the following to get a sense of how to use this technique:

Step 1: Relax. Have fun.

Step 2: Is your life most like an ocean, a kaleidoscope, a fine wine, or jig-saw puzzle with too many pieces and no picture to guide you? Pick one and think about how it's like your life.

Step 3: Think about this quote: "You don't see something until you have the right metaphor to let you perceive it." -- Thomas Kuhn, developer of the concept of the paradigm shift

Step 4: Pick any two objects in the room around you and start to think about one by thinking about the qualities of the other. Suppose you looked at a book and your telephone and wanted to know more about your telephone by thinking about the qualities of the book. The book is made of paper covered with ink. After using the book, it is easily disposed of but sometimes it takes on great value because of its content or rareness. We could go on but let's stop there. If you were trying to improve the phone, would these qualities suggest any improvements such as disposable phones, phones designed or autographed by celebrities, replaceable phone "covers?" Not very original ideas but probably different from what we would have thought of if we just focused on the phone.

Now you pick two objects and see what you come up with.

Step 5: Think of a situation you would like to change and pick one of the images below as a metaphor for how you feel about the situation. Think through the qualities of the metaphor you picked and see how it relates to your situation. See if it brings you any new insights by thinking of it this way.



Step 6: Whenever you come to a new situation, ask "What is this like?" See if you can find a connection that will help you think deeper about the situation.

Step 7: Whenever you start a new project, think of a metaphor for the outcome you would like to achieve. This is especially powerful when a group can come up with an energizing metaphor. Find an image that captures the sense of the metaphor and put it up where everyone can see it.

Step 8: Relax. Have fun. Be a cloud dancing across the sky. Let the stress of the day shimmer away like a rainbow in the sun. Wrap yourself in a warm metaphor and catch a basketful of thunderbolt ideas that might light up your life like a neon lottery ticket.

Well, anyway, you get the idea ... metaphors *can be fun*.