

“Everything Is a Metaphor”

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“*Darmok and Jilod at Tanagra*” Does anyone here understand this phrase? “Darmok and Jilod at Tanagra.” Obviously, we do not have a great number of serious Trekkers in the crowd—Star-Trekkers, that is. If you were a serious Star-Trekker, you would have known that phrase to be the name of an episode of *Star Trek, the Next Generation*, in which the crew of the Enterprise encounter an alien race of people with whom they were, mysteriously, unable to communicate, even with their “universal translator” devices.

Through a series of interesting and typical *Star Trek* kinds of encounters, we finally learn that the alien race uses a language which consists *solely* of metaphors. Everything that is said, is said using references to something else. Instead of saying *love*, for example, the aliens would say, “*Romeo and Juliet*.” Throughout the episode, we keep hearing the phrase “Darmok and Jilod at Tanagra” only to learn later that it refers to an incident which is the model by which these particular aliens meet with other races. But you have to know that. You have to know that “Darmok and Jilod at Tanagra” is a metaphor, not the actual thing. And until you know that, the humans and the Tanagrans will *never* get along, and in fact, they came close to going to war because they couldn’t understand each, they couldn’t communicate with each other. The only way they could speak was through speaking in metaphorical language.

Needless to say, Star Trek has once again provided us with valuable insight into the human condition. So, what *about* metaphors?

Now, at the beginning I wish to acknowledge the fact that, as Unitarian Universalists, we have an inordinate number of UUs are English majors, highly skilled in the language arts. And I wish today's sermon is not a language lesson. We are not going to split grammatical hairs today, on the precise and exact meaning of some of the words we will use.

For instances, we all know that a metaphor is, strictly speaking, a figure of speech and it is not the same thing as a simile or a metonymy or a synecdoche, (si-NEK-duh-kee), even though all four are very much related. If you want together after the service today to talk about these things, we can explain the minute differences, if you wish to explore them later. And there words like parable or allegory or analogy, and they all have something to do with saying one thing to refer to something else.

Today we will say that a metaphor is a word from the Greek *meta* (beyond” or “over”) plus *herein* (“to bring, bear or carry”). Initially, its meaning was that merely of “*carrying a burden from one place to another*.” Nowadays, we say that a metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase which literally denotes one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them.”

So we say, “time is money.” And because we say that is a true relationship, we can also say, “You're *wasting* my time. Or we can say, this gadget will *save* you time. Or, how do you *spend* your time these days? Or, you need to *budget* your time.” And this is all based on the “time is money” metaphor.

In the way we use our language, like for those future aliens, we are sometimes speaking about something which is really about something else. This can cause enormous problems when we are attempting to communicate with one another, mostly because everyone in the conversation needs to be able to understand the metaphors.

What would an alien think if they just landed.

Ideas are “food for the brain”.

Our language, like the future aliens, is loaded with metaphor, sometimes so embedded, that we forget and think we are speaking real truths and about real things. But what would an alien think, especially if he or she was not aware of the metaphor?

For instance, we might say “Ideas are food for the brain”. And so we can say, “What that person just said *left a bad taste in my mouth*. Or, there are too many facts here for me to *digest* them all. Or, I just can't *swallow* that claim. This sermon is *food* for thought....”

Some modern linguists argue that in order for humans to talk—or even to think about most anything, it is necessary to use metaphors. Metaphors are not mere rhetorical ornaments used to spice up language. Rather, our very thinking about the world—indeed, what we take the world to be, is strongly shaped by metaphorical understanding in which one thing is partially understood in terms of another.

We sometimes understand time in terms of money or ideas, in terms of food, for instance, and we do this effortlessly and without even being conscious of the *consequences* of those metaphors.

I went online and found some metaphors which are popular and we use nowadays:

We say that we will offer Wall Street a “bailout”, which is what you do when the boat is sinking and which is what’s happening, metaphorically, with our world-wide economy. We also speak of “toxic assets”, a kind of poison deposited in our common well. We say there was a “train wreck” to describe what happened at Wall Street a year ago and is to this day affecting every aspect of our lives. It was a “perfect storm” of events.

And there are the ever-popular war metaphors: We declare a “cease fire” as we argue with our neighbors agree over the way they placed their lawn ornaments or painted their house a Pepto Bismo pink. “Let’s have a truce,” we plead. And yet, “are we besieged”? Where are the “front lines” on the “war on drugs” or the “war on poverty”? What exactly constitutes that war zone and who are the “troops”?

If there’s a big health care bill going on in Congress, and if our senator decides to vote on it, the metaphor of war is that the window in her Senate office is bombarded with bricks and pipe bombs. As the cartoon on the editorial page of the *Seattle Times* only yesterday, as the bricks are going through the windows, we learn, according to the byline, that we need worry for they are only metaphors.

They can become weapons, and they do become weapons. And that’s because the metaphors actually create our human reality.

If we were to survey closely our language patterns, we might say that metaphor, then, is not just a matter of words, it is a major—perhaps the major mode of thought, the way we conceive of and understand reality.

If we are ever to understand why we think and act they way we do, we must understand the metaphors upon which our conclusions and actions are based. And since our metaphors often hide important aspects of reality, we need to know what they are. Especially, for instance, when they affect interpersonal relations and even foreign policy.

And today, of course, we wish to see the significance of our use of metaphor within the realm of the religious, that which we hold to be of greatest value and worth in our lives.

When a metaphor is built into the practices of a culture, it can actually create truths. If I operate, for instance, by the *time-is-money* metaphor, then someone really can waste my time. Studies among the Southwest Pueblo Indians revealed that time-is-money metaphor is absent. It does not make sense there to ask, “Did you have *enough time* to do that?” Or, “don’t spend too much time on that.” You cannot use the excuse in that language, “I ran out of time.” What you can say is, “My path didn’t take me there.” Or “I couldn’t find the pathway to that.”

Obviously, when time is not understood as money, or even as a valued resource, people behave differently. Sometimes, when the Pueblo Indians, raised in tribal situations, are exploited by the dominant culture, the dominant culture declares they’re lazy, because Indians do not know how, it is said, to *budget* their time.

No wonder we have trouble communicating with the rest of the world.

It happens in all our areas of human concern, including the world of science. Is metaphorical thinking the only way we can conceive of reality? What about science? Philosophers of science have come to recognize that you can’t do science without using metaphors. Different metaphors enable you to see different things. For instance, what is electricity? One metaphor views electricity as a flow of fluid; another sees it as something like a crowd of individuals swarming like ants, trying to get through narrow gates called resistors. What is electricity? For scientists, each of these metaphors helps solve certain kinds of problems.

And now, how is it that we use metaphor in philosophical thinking and metaphysical or religious thinking? Obviously, we do use metaphors everywhere.

Interestingly, there was a time in history in which people did not use metaphors to speak of their religious experience. The use of metaphor in religious thought was *discovered*. Before that, the idea of metaphor was simply non-existent. God was not like a tree—God *was* a tree. See how that makes all the difference in how the people will affect the world. You can't clear-cut that set of trees, because those trees are the embodiment of God. And when we became more sophisticated, we said, that tree is *like* God, but not actually God.

The stories of angels and devils and good omens and bad ones were not devised to make a point. The characters and situations in the pre-literate cultures were themselves the point; the morals were the morals of the people in the stories.

It was during the time of the Greek philosophers that people began to make a distinction between what they thought to be “literally” true, as well as that which was “symbolically” true. The Greeks decided that the study of philosophy was, for that reason, a different activity from that of religion. The aim of the philosophic movement in Greek culture was to provide rational and literal theory for the understanding of the universe.

If we say that God lives on Mt. Rainier, is that literally true? Is it symbolical true? It is allegorically true.

From that time until our own time, we have wrestled with that question: What is literally true? And, what is symbolically true?

This is the sin of fundamentalism in our culture today. One of the problems of the history of religion is that believers tend to worship the metaphor instead of the thing beyond. The Buddhists say, “The finger that points to the moon, is not the moon”. The *symbol* becomes the god. I believe this is the sin of fundamentalism. The *book* is more important than the Source from which the book comes.

The first commandment of the Ten Commandments says, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me”. If I were a fundamentalist I would be shaking in my boots, for I would be putting something else in front of our God.

It is in that way that the words become weapons, just like those bricks thrown through those Senate windows, when people go on Facebook and pointing out that the crosshairs are located on their targets.

It is in this way that metaphors (which are, after all only words) can become weapons to be used against our ideological enemies. And sometimes, as in recent headlines, the words as weapons can become literal. When people start throwing bricks through the windows of certain lawmakers who voted for the health care reform legislation, the concept of “literal truth” becomes reality.

And now, according to the Facebook message, “It’s time to reload.” I’m just hoping that my house doesn’t have cross hairs on it somewhere. Is someone ready to take aim?

But let me ask you about that. What if we were in the crosshairs? Let’s say we took a powerful stand, maybe with gay rights for instance. We took a stand when we outlawed weapons on this campus, for instance.

And we got people who called our phone to threaten us. People threatened us about our stand against the first Gulf War? People called and threatened about that, and we heard the message: We are going to eliminate you, and that’s a word being bandied about today: “eliminate” you.

Are we ready to take that kind of stand today?

We’re pretty safe and secure here in this place called Shoreline Church. We are community of faith who love each other.

But as Dr. Moss said in the video today, what does the church does really have to do about reminding people of their inherent worth and dignity? Reminding people that they can be released and that “freedom should be offered” is a metaphor. These are questions we can think about and maybe even lose sleep about.

I believe the church itself is a metaphor. It is a place where people take these things seriously, that ethical living is the definition of what we do here. We love each other, we support one another; we give one another.

But we are here to honor that which is right and that which is good, all of which is summed in that metaphor we call love.

We honor that which is right and what is a good.

In that sense, everything is a metaphor for everything else. Our metaphors and sometimes grow, and sometimes wither, and sometimes come back to life in that great metaphor called.

We do that together and as individuals, and we do that to what Dr. King called, the Beloved Community of Faith.

So now it is time for you to add to this tapestry. What do you think of? What is the way by which you engage reality, conceptualize it, how do you think of it? Let your mind wander for a moment for now.

Think of the ways you have come face to face with the ineffable, the indescribable reality of existence. The more inexplicable it is, the more likely, it seems, we reach for metaphors. Like a mother or father. Like a mighty fortress. Like a still, small voice in the whirlwind. Like Mt. Olympus or Rainier, homes of the gods. Like an invincible river, on its way to the sea. Like the fathomless ocean, at once omnipotent and also quiet, deceptive, alluring.

We Unitarian Universalists are fortunate to retain the privilege and the responsibility to continue the process of imagining and re-imagining. Our metaphors constantly grow, and even though they sometimes wither, they come back to life in radically new and significant formulations.

We do that resurrection together. And I think we do that within what Dr. King called the Beloved Community of Faith. Our religion is a journey, and it is a growing thing, which breathes life into our life. Yes, wonderful and useful metaphors; for after all, *Everything Is a Metaphor for Everything*.

Our final hymn: "Faith of the Larger Liberty"