

The power of metaphor in therapy

Opinion

The use of metaphor is such a powerful source for personal change in therapy; I admit this is a strong statement to make, how then can that be true? I will endeavour to evidence this claim in this article, and like a metaphor used by a client in a session this will change from one meaning to another, and give flesh to this claim.

Let's look at what is a metaphor 'a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action that it does not literally denote in order to imply a resemblance, for example he is a lion in battle' Collins Concise Dictionary (1999). Okay what can using metaphor do to help a client in a therapy session? When a client is struggling to give meaning to a feeling or personal experience and cannot easily put this into words, by conceptualising their struggle to make sense of feelings and personal experience the use of a metaphor can help them make sense of their struggle enabling them to own a meaning or feeling that previously they were unable to feel or consider. Now using a metaphor a client can alter its meaning through exploring it with the therapist and through this exploration transform the metaphor thus the feelings applied to it can change, it's almost as if a metaphor can take on a life of its own and become something bigger than just being a metaphor.

The power of metaphor in therapy in my experience is that once a client expresses their experiences through metaphor, the metaphor becomes limitless as to what meaning or feeling they own through their use of metaphor. I believe very much in the power of a metaphor to heal, what may start of as a metaphor that the client conceptualises to make sense and to understand them, can through the client experiencing it and processing its meaning evolve into a metaphor for change and through change to heal. The limitlessness ability of a metaphor is the essence of the journey a client can make to understand them. What may start as a very dark and painful metaphor can evolve through the client accepting its darkness and through this acceptance, which in itself can be a very painful process, to a light and hopeful metaphor for personal renewal that can prevail from what was once a dark and painful place. Certainly there can be differences in how metaphor is used in therapy between therapists, with some not countenancing introducing a metaphor to their client, rather only working with metaphor if their client introduces their own. My approach is that if I feel it is in the clients frame of reference and I have a strong sense that a metaphor could open up my client to feelings and experiences they may be struggling to articulate I will offer them a

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Lee Allen

Person Centred Counsellor and Psychotherapist, UK

Correspondence: Lee Allen, Person Centred Counsellor and Psychotherapist, Kenilworth, Warwickshire, UK, Tel 01926-511951, Email leallencounsellor@outlook.com

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metaphor that I believe could fit their struggle and hope they might want to take ownership of that metaphor, or the metaphor helps them to conceptualise their own metaphor. In my experience by offering my client a metaphor they might not adopt the metaphor or transform the metaphor to their own metaphor and I could deduce on reflection that I have pushed too hard on their perceptual field, yet later in therapy they might start to express themselves through metaphor, either through referencing a metaphor I offered and expanding on it thus making it very much their own or they offer their own metaphor that fits more precisely with their internal struggle. Really I feel using metaphor can be a very organic process, and am not afraid to take a risk in offering a metaphor to my client, because to be honest a metaphor could take my client in many directions and can open up their experience and to any psychological pain they may be experiencing in the moment when a metaphor becomes real and live in the therapy room.

However I am not saying that every client needs to use metaphor, and that metaphor is the great panacea of therapy, it is just another aspect of therapy, and in particular it forms only part of the therapy I offer to my clients. I can remember during my training my then tutor was very encouraged by my willingness to use metaphor and my willingness to encourage my clients to articulate their own. Even now some fifteen years on, I am still amazed by the power of metaphor, and hope this brief article stimulates some further discussion on the use of metaphor for other therapists.

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