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A PICTURE IS WORTH A 1000 WORDS;

A METAPHOR IS WORTH A 1000 PICTURES

An essay presented to the Chit Chat Club of San Francisco

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Agatha Christie's detective hero Hercule Poirot describes the unforgivable investigative error—overlooking the obvious. There are moments when we are astonished, horrified, overjoyed, or furious when the overlooked thoughts or memories that fall into place make sense of such seemingly unrelated information. For example, children may momentarily or permanently cross the liminal boundary between childhood and adulthood when the pieces of an overlooked puzzle fit together.

Russ, a middle-aged architect recalled such a childhood loss of innocence in such a painful moment of growth.

Each year at Halloween all the students put on a costume and the teachers tried to figure out who was who. The student who was not identified would get a prize. I was in the third grade. My heart just wanted to win. I remember going with my mother to get a lion costume. I said: "I have the best costume in the world! No one's ever going to figure out." I was in the locker room at school putting my costume on for the contest. The kid next to me said: "Everybody's going to know who you are, Rusty. You take one step, and it's going to be totally obvious who you are." Something clicked way inside of me. It was like my whole universe caved in. For the first time, I realized everybody was pretending. Everybody was lying. My mother was lying, the teachers were lying, the kids at school were lying. They all pretended that nobody was going to figure out who I was. I had had polio. I limped. To me, having polio was like wearing glasses. I couldn't see myself limping, so I never even dreamed of that as an issue. All of that happened five minutes before I was to walk out there. When it was my turn, I stepped out on the field and walked in front of the teachers. I had this mask on and I cried...And I could just cry and cry because I had this lion's mask on. I could just cry and cry and cry. I remember it like it was yesterday. I didn't feel badly because I limped. It was because people were lying to me. Ah, it hurt. My whole world lied (Biederman, 1991).

Did this story trigger a comparable moment of lost innocence when something held sacred was swept away by a comment that accidentally slipped out? Perhaps you remembered seeing a parent, teacher, or respected adult in a compromising situation

or commit some petty thoughtless act that made you realize that an adult was not the perfect human being you believed him to be. Did you think of an individual who whispered some secret kept from you? It is easier to recall when we were lied to or protected from the truth by hearing a story that triggers our memories than it is to dredge up such an incident on command.

My psychology textbook, Flash of Insight: Metaphor and Narrative in Therapy (Pearce, 1996), explicates the power metaphors to influence people; conversely, minds frequently wander during the expository sections of essays and homilies. Over the years, people recall metaphors utilized in a sermon or an address, even if later they could not recall the message or context.

Marc Cruciger could have not provided a better set up for my remarks tonight. His sweet reminiscence last month chronicled a coming of age in a family that loved a cherished pet. The magic of that essay, worthy of space in *The New Yorker*, lay in its conveyance—a metaphor that is more than a tale of a boy and his dog in an exotic distant land. It evoked innocent childhood love of a cherished pet, birth order, parental sternness melting before tearful pleadings of a little girl, sibling jealousies—metaphors that reminded me of Muriel Ruykeser’s insightful comment, “The world is not made of atoms. It is made of stories.”

The word *metaphor* itself is a metaphor, coming from the Greek meaning to “transfer” or “carry across.” Metaphors “carry” meaning from one word, image or idea to another. Aristotle offered the first recorded discussion of metaphor as an explicit subject matter. He believed metaphorical thinking to be a sign of genius, an intuitive perception of the similarity of dissimilars. As a curious aside, the Athens transit system is called the Metaphor.

Metaphors tell what something is like, not what it is, in an attempt to describe the indescribable. It is utilized here in an expansive way to include narratives, aphorisms, stories, maxims, myths and so forth because they all proceed from the known to the unknown, an unconscious link between two unlike things.

A good metaphor is like a good detective story. The solution should not be apparent in advance to maintain the reader’s interest, yet it should seem plausible after the fact to maintain the reader’s interest...Consider the simile, ‘An essay is like a fish.’ At first, the statement is puzzling. An essay is not expected to be fishy, slippery, or wet. The puzzle is resolved when we recall that (like a fish) an essay has a head and a body, and it occasionally ends with a flip of the tail” (Tversky, 2004).

Metaphors speak to us because all of us have experience with stories, one of our earliest childhood experiences. We are entertained and put to bed with stories and as we drift off to the Land of Nod, we take the characters and feelings into dreamland where we process and ruminate over them again and again until we make sense out of them. Of course, to a listener or reader, a story can be just a story and

nothing more, even though it always is a great deal more. Why do morbidly Grimm Fairytales (no pun intended) attract the heart and minds of children?

Bruno Bettelheim called the processing of such tales, *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), the title of his groundbreaking book. Bettelheim made the case that metaphors are necessary for children to be introduced to a means for maturing and for understanding themselves and their ever-expanding world. Such metaphors convey problem-solving messages to the unconscious and conscious mind by dealing with the concerns that preoccupy the mind. A child can return to these narratives over and over, each time enlarging previous understanding of the metaphor.

Nevertheless, there is a tension between intention and outcome because we have no control over how metaphors will be received and understood. Once shared, metaphors take on a life of their own. The teller or writer loses control and the interpretation can be quite distant from the author's intention. "Sequel," a poem by Sara Henderson Hay (1963), is an example that focuses on the reality that a dream fulfilled may not necessarily have the intended outcome.

And there, in the Beast's place, stood a handsome Prince!
Dashing and elegant from head to toes.
So they were married, thus the story goes,
And lived thenceforth in great magnificence,
And in the public eye. She christened ships,
Cut ribbons, sponsored Fairs of Arts and Sciences;
He opened Parliament, made speeches, went on trips...
In short, it was the happiest of alliances.

But watching him glitter, listening to him talk,
Sometimes the Princess grew perversely sad
And thought of the good Beast, who used to walk
Beside her in the garden, and who had
Such gentle eyes, and such a loving arm
To shield her from the briars, and keep her warm.

I remember that when my children were young, they loved to have me aloud read *Rotten Island* by William Steig (1984), a free-for-all land where every creature was as rotten as possible; a paradise for all flora and fauna that kicked, bit, scratched, and played nasty tricks; even plants grew barbed wire, until one especially rotten day, something truly awful happened that "spoiled" Rotten Island forever: out of a gravel bed on the scorched earth, a mysterious beautiful flower began to grow. What do you imagine was the enthusiastic appeal to my children?

I have found that good advice is not always useful because it assumes that people are rational. Most of us cannot be rational when it comes to emotional issues because something inside us, over which we have little or no control, takes over and in an instant, old angers surge, tempers flare, jealousies resurface and childhood hurts cause us to ache anew. Therapists call this transference—the unearthing of relationships that need to be re-lived in order to give them a new and better destiny by imbuing new relationships with the significance of previously powerful

relationships with family members or other significant characters. In Freudian terms, it consists of impulses and feelings, both positive and negative, transferred from original objects to new objects.

Whereas emotional baggage may cause outright rejection of sound advice, a metaphor may resonate deeply, enabling a listener to think about life's victories and difficulties without becoming defensive, because to some, a story is just a story, but to others, it is a great deal more. I rely on a metaphor to explain this notion.

Truth walks about naked, dejected, embittered and shunned by all, and cannot find any place where he is accepted for what he is. Walking aimlessly, he meets Parable dressed in wonderfully colored, patterned attire. Parable asks why Truth is disheartened. Truth explained that no one seems to want to have anything to do with him because of his age.

Parable reprimanded Truth. "Look, I am just as old as you are and the older I get the more beloved I become. I will tell you the secret of my popularity. What people prefer is seeing everything dressed up, disguised. I will lend you my attire and you will see that people will love you as well."

Truth followed Parable's instruction and ever since then, they go hand in hand, equally revered by all. (Adapted from "A Parable on the Parable" in Newman, 1962).

Twentieth century theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (in Brown, Heschel & Novak, 1967), commented on the impact of hearing the story of the Binding of Isaac when he was a mere child studying with his rabbi in Poland for example.

Isaac was on the way to Mount Moriah with his father; then he lay on the altar bound, waiting to be sacrificed. My heart began to beat even faster; it actually sobbed with pity for Isaac. Behold, Abraham now lifted the knife. And now my heart froze within me with fright. Suddenly the voice of the angel was heard: "Abraham, lay not thine hand upon the lad, for now I know that thou fearest God." And here I broke into tears and wept aloud.

"Why are you crying?" asked the Rabbi. "You know Isaac was not killed.

And I said to him, still weeping, "But rabbi, suppose the angel had come a second too late?"

Heschel then added: "An angel cannot come late, my friends, but we, made of flesh and blood, we may come late."

Like Rusty and Marc's accounts, this also was a moment of truth and growth for young Heschel that enabled him to grasp deeper meanings that enriched his understanding of immediacy and the frailty of life.

Some years ago, I asked a psychologist who worked with resistant kidney transplant patients, most of whom were fundamentalist Christians who believed that God would protect them and preserve their lives, if there were a metaphor he utilized

to help convince patients accept a life-saving transplant. He shared a metaphor that he regularly utilized to change patient's intractable mindset.

A man caught in the flood turned away the rescuers who came to his home to take him to safety. "I'm praying and the Lord will take care of me," he said. Later, the rising waters were up to the first floor windows and a boat pulled up to rescue him. Again, he sent them away, saying that he lived a righteous life, always gave charity, and the Holy One would protect him. In the last scene, a helicopter arrived and dropped down a rope ladder to take him off his roof. Still he resisted, convinced that Lord would protect him, but he perished. In heaven at the throne of the Most High he complained: "I lived a righteous life, I prayed every day, gave charity, and looked out for the unfortunate. Why didn't you save me?" And the Lord said, "Save you, I sent rescuers, a boat, and a helicopter; what more could I have done?"

The psychologist said that when he told the patients this story, they often relented and consented to the life-saving surgery, substantiating that one metaphor can be more valuable than a thousand hours of logical reasoning.

A dramatic illustration of how tales can heal is the story of the rabbi whose grandfather had been a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement. He was asked to tell a story about the great master.

"A story," he began, "must be told in such a way that it constitutes help itself." And he told: "My grandfather was lame. Once they asked him to tell a story about his teacher. And he related how the holy Baal Shem used to hop and dance while he prayed. My grandfather rose as he spoke, and he was so swept away by his story that he himself began to hop and dance to show how the master had done. From that hour he was cured of his lameness. That's the way to tell a story!" (Buber, 1947)

Wouldn't it be wonderful if every story had such dramatic impact? However, most narratives and metaphors, work in more subtle, indirect ways that are not always readily identifiable. Ralph Waldo Emerson emphasized that it is difficult to identify insights gained from metaphors.

"Everything in creation has its appointed painter or poet, and remains in bondage like the princess in the fairy tale, till its appropriate liberator comes to set it free. The story of the Sleeping Beauty is more than a fairy tale, it is an allegory of the life of every human being who fights his way through life."

Thus, for Carl Jung, "The most important question anyone can ask is: 'What myth am I living?'" because each of us carries a life-shaping metaphor. Nevertheless, finding our own metaphor is not always a simple matter, as Robert Frost (1966) notes: "...unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease

with figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe with science; you are not safe in history."

Anthropologist Branislav Malinowski (1922/1961) coined the term Charter Myth—a lived reality, an active component of culture, a warrant for the future generations that binds a society together by reinforcing common values and mores connected to long-held rites, rituals, social practices and traditions. Charter myths legitimize societal arrangements, providing a sense of security, particularly in times of bewildering change. Simply stated, charter myths are texts that are pretexts for a contexts.

All religions embrace a central charter myth that transmits cultural heritage, values, language, philosophy, and spiritual traditions that may be counter to fact, requiring a "leap of faith. The Exodus narrative is a charter myth that focuses on personal and communal redemption: "In every generation, a person is obligated to regard himself as if he personally left Egypt" (*Pesachim* 10:5). Comparable is the injunction commanded the Israelites as they received the Law: "I make this covenant ... not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day ... and with those who are not with us here this day" (Deut 29:15). Such words reinforce the historical immediacy of the narrative.

A metaphor can be a terse comment that makes the listener and speaker understand a history without needing huge explanation. Just this past week, a radio-talk-show-host friend recalled a program on the African American struggle for equality in which a listener summarized the hours of radio conversation about the ascent of African Americans: "Rosa sat, so Martin could walk, so Obama could run, so our children could fly."

In families also, metaphors define the behavior of later generations. A charter myth reminds the reader of an ever-present tension between what is hoped for and what actually is, as it exerts influence that takes on a life of its own. However, when family charter myths are concealed, the more they are suppressed, the more they influence current relationships and behavior and the more they press for expression. The movie "Rain Man" (Dustin Hoffman) is a good example of how a personal charter myth shaped the destiny of the main protagonist and his father.

Last semester, I asked my students to tell me their personal charter myths. I found the accounts to be stunningly moving. One student, a South Korean fundamentalist Christian minister working on a doctorate shared his charter myth: When he was born, he refused to suckle and the doctors told his parents that he was the third baby to be born like that; the other two had died and their son also would die. His father took him and prayed over him and swore an oath to God that if his son lived, he would dedicate his child's life to God—a modern-day reenactment of the biblical Hannah and Samuel story. He lived and growing up did not think much about his father's sworn oath. However, as he reached maturity, he realized that not to follow his father's oath would render the oath a lie. Then he said, "Then I met God." He explained that as a young adult, his parents sent him on an eight-day religious retreat that he did not want to go on. He hated being there and stayed on the

periphery of the program. At the last session, the leader asked each participant to turn to the person next to him and bless him. He meekly put his hands on the shoulders of a man he could not stand, but the man grabbed him and gave him a bear hug. He said, "Then I heard God say, 'Even those you do not like are worthy of a blessing.'"

The title for this talk comes from a comment of management consultant Daniel H. Pink (2005): "A picture is worth a thousand words, but the right metaphor is worth a thousand pictures." I contrast that comment with Arthur Koestler's definition of three kinds of stories: "'Ha ha' stories to amuse and entertain, 'Ah ha' stories for discovery of ideas and education, and 'Ahhh' stories, where the tales are sublime and connect the teller and listener with a golden thread."

Metaphors rather than words or pictures connect the teller and listener with a golden thread that tugs at hearts and opens minds. Thank you.

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