

THE WORLDS WITHIN A WORD



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The Metaphoric Structures of Difficulties & Desires

The writer John Berger in an essay entitled “Lost off Cape Wrath,” recounts a dream he had of a land in which a decree was passed that made every word, uttered or thought, into the actual object. This applied to all words - nouns, verbs, adverbs, and the rest. Because everything could be seen, there was great clarity of communication in the land, though after while it became rather overcrowded. So the people who lived there began to tentatively test what would happen if some of the words remained symbols. As a result of the decree having been enforced for so long, they made the unexpected discovery. The objects began to speak. Later, Berger admitted that he thought that the country of his dream was the world of literature. I think it is the world of everyone’s imagination.

Each of us has an inner landscape of our imagination. Rather than the information of our minds being distributed across the surface of a hard drive, we experience our memories as having certain mental locations. The people, buildings, actions and even emotions occupy their particular and familiar places in our minds’ eye, ear and body. “I’m in a certain state of mind.” “Let’s put that behind us and get to what’s right under our noses.” “That’s beyond belief.” These places and positions are individual and distinct to us, though through the use of familiar words, we come to believe our inner landscape is somehow similar to others. And in some real sense, it is, as we have taken our shared outer world and made it each of our individual inner ones.

A couple of decades back, the Canadian NLP Trainers Deanna Sager and Chris Dunkle, would set up what appeared to be a door frame with a piece of plastic wrap stretched across the middle. They would proceed to elicit a trainee’s goal and have him or her draw the goal or a symbol of it on a piece of paper. Then they would place the trainee on one side of plastic wrap obstructed door frame and the goal on the other. Allowing a moment for the trainee to absorb the situation, they would indicate that the trainee go for his or her goal. In this bare, minimalist form, the individual trainee’s goal achievement strategy was often revealed. Each ordinary action / reaction to the situation revealed itself as a highly symbolic metaphor of the trainee’s movement through life; whether these were hesitation, asking permission, avoidance, confrontation, or celebration. As I used this exercise with groups, I became increasingly intrigued at the different ways in which people would respond to “the barrier.” That they acted like they had to.

One way to make sense of this is that our inner landscape is created of our outer world. That it reflects the features most familiar to us in an iconic or at least simplified form. As Richard Bandler has noticed, most peoples inner worlds of experience are considerably less rich than their outer world. The plastic obstructed the door frame and goal picture creates even a greater simplification: here, there, and a block on the pathway to there. In this symbolic, pattern revealing form, the paths of habit and the paths not taken become much easier to see. For instance, throughout my NLP Practitioner training, we were taught techniques for overcoming stuck states. As I was very interested in learning and applying these skills, I cooperatively came up with various difficulties for my fellow trainees to “unstuck”. Though if the truth be known, I’ve never really thought of myself as getting stuck or being stuck. When Anthony Robbins started breaking boards, and walking over hot coals, all the while talking about “breakthroughs,” I found this more familiar. What then “struck” me (so to speak) about these contrasting metaphors, and the others that were beginning to form in my mind, was the profoundly different worlds they implied. It appeared to me that the choice of words used to describe difficulties or desires; *stuck*, *breakthrough* and the rest, said a lot more about mental maps and inner landscapes of the seminar leader than it did about the individual clients’.

As John Berger notes in the same essay, “One does not look through writing on to reality — as though a clean or dirty window-pane. Words are never transparent. They create their own space, the space of experience.” If you think life is filled with barriers that need to be broken through, then you will use your creativity and tenacity and the rest to muster the resources to do that. If your inner world is constantly stuck, you will gather your resources to get moving in a direction, any direction, and the sooner and faster, the better.

The Metaphoric Structures of Difficulties and Desires

In the middle of a demonstration of some advanced work, I asked the participant center stage with me what she wanted. Her answer was, “I want to matter.” At that moment, I was struck by the literalness of the metaphor she had offered me. She wanted *to [be] matter* — that is, to be seen and responded to as real as anything else with its own place in the universe. After that weekend, I began working with clients in terms of the metaphors contained in their first phrases to me. These are among the more common ones I have found so far:

Some Typical Metaphoric Formulations of Difficulties & Desires

<u>Difficulties</u>	<u>Desires</u>
Problem	Solution
Stuck	Free
Stagnant	Moving
Blocked	Wide open
Barrier	Breakthrough
Overwhelmed / Buried	On top
Behind / Held back	Ahead
Empty / Drained	Full
Confused	Focused
Lost	On track / Saved
In / Out	Out / In
Down	Up
Present State	Desired / Target State
[-]	[+]

The word “difficulties” is used instead of “problems”, in as much as a “problem” is clearly a metaphor. Since elementary school, we have done math problems, word problems and have *solved* many large and small life problems. This metaphor clearly implies that for each problem there is a single and correct solution. This is something we all learned in our school days and most of us still follow today. After all, when you find a solution to a problem at work these days, do you go on and find at least two more, just in case one of them might be better? Unlikely. A problem has *a* solution.

The Problem/Solution pairing also points out the way a metaphor defines a situation. Whatever solution is finally implemented, it will necessarily be defined by the problem. Possibilities encompassing a larger scope than the problem are unlikely to be considered. This could be called “The Problem–Solution Problem,” or the “Error–Correction Error”. The only possible solutions will be those defined by the problem.

The other pairs of difficulties and desires can also be seen as having similar constraints around their metaphoric formulations. For example, someone *behind* will want to *get ahead*, someone who feels *blocked* will most likely

seek to *breakthrough*, while someone who is *in* trouble will seek to get *out*. Even when they initially pay attention to the positive side, for example: being *up*, or staying *focused* or another desire side choice, these are still half of a pair within the specific metaphor.

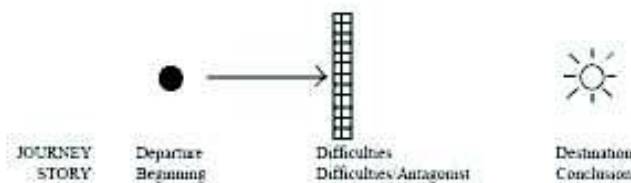
These pairs of opposites can be seen as illustrating each side of the NLP Meta-Program Motivation Direction. An individual's attention may be more habituated to what to move Away From or what to move Toward, and it will still be within a metaphoric formulation.

Paths: The Metaphoric Structure of Goals

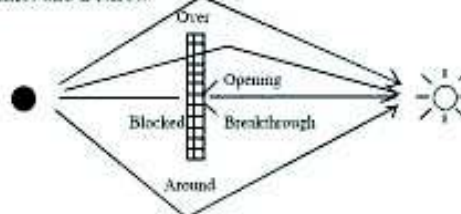
These metaphoric formulations can also be laid out as if they indicated points along a passage from a beginning to an end. The physical analogy is simply getting from here to there. In terms of life experience, this is the metaphor of the journey. It begins with a departure, proceeds through numerable intermediate locations and finally arrives at a destination. It is also the basis of story structure with its beginning, middle and end. As an inner landscape, the metaphor may, and probably should, be taken as a complete description. Among the variables to be carefully considered are the actual locations of the here and there. The distance between them is certainly important, as is the direction of the journey and the speed with which one travels. Making the analogy complete, one could survey what environmental impediments might affect the progress of an actual physical journey and then seek the metaphoric equivalence. These impediments would include: the already acknowledged blocks, the kinds of the terrain, any burdens the travelers might be carrying with them, any counterforces resisting the journey or journeyers headed in the opposite direction, and finally, how much energy the travelers have for their journey. A number of these could be displayed in the following way:

Physically Relating the Difficulties and Desires Along a Path

Outcomes as Destinations



Barrier Related Difficulties and Desires:



There appear to be as many as twenty of these metaphors for difficulties and desires, and yet most people use less than a handful of them. Further more, among the ones they do use, there appears to be at least one that they often refer to that doesn't serve them. Take the example of someone who often feels *blocked*. On the positive side, he seeks to *breakthrough*. Only, he never does, at least not in any permanent sense. What happens is he finds himself getting blocked again and again with an occasional heroic breakthrough. It is in this sense that I mean the metaphor doesn't serve him. It doesn't provide him with a model of experience that encourages action, responsibility, and well-being. Most interesting, if we were to approach him with the idea that this formulation is not useful, he would likely insist that this is the way things are. He would probably not respond positively to the idea that he needed to get *back on track* or *unstuck*. If we pressed, he would likely insist he was *on track* and not *stuck*, but rather *blocked*, and herein is revealed the importance of the metaphoric formulation.

To make sense of anything in the world, we need to make sense of it in terms of our lived experience. Life is filled with great (and small) difficulties as well as small and great desires. How we think of them is much more of an inner experience than an outer one. To return to the example of being *blocked*, staying face-to-face with the block and insisting on confronting it could, after awhile, look like a very *stuck* position. Let more time pass, and the person will undoubtedly be *behind* relative to his original schedule, but ask him about it and he will tell you, he is *blocked*. Any of the difficulty metaphors are possible, but the one foregrounded by him is *blocked*. This is most familiar to him and therefore most real, to him. He will seek to use NLP or another transformational technique of to seek to overcome his *block*. If he does, then he is that much more likely to use the same metaphoric formulation (and transformational technique) on even bigger difficulties. The more he succeeds with a particular metaphoric formulation, whether it's a breakthrough technology, a propulsion system, a problem-solving approach, or a paradigm shift, the more he will use it. As the hammer appears to work for more and more things, the world becomes more and more a nail. And if he doesn't succeed, he is that much more likely to seek a more powerful transformational technique to effect a change within his current metaphor, rather than a new or different metaphor for his difficulty.

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You can verify these observations in your own experience by bringing to mind an everyday difficulty that is current and real for you. Take a moment to write it down. Describe in your own words how it's a difficulty. Or, if it's your preference, describe a desire, something you want in your everyday experience. Again, notice the metaphoric language you use. Now, consider

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whether this is a familiar or recurring way you have of thinking of your difficulties or desires? Does the metaphoric language fit for other difficulties or desires in your life? When you have answered these questions, you might ask yourself; How effective has this metaphoric formulation been? Another way to ask the question is to notice whether or not you are always seeking the ultimate technique; the *breakthrough* that will put you *over the top*, get you *out* of that state permanently and *free* you to *focus* fully on your future. A digital yes/no, on/off orientation can alert you that you may have a limited model for change. For example, if you were *behind*, it's reasonable to think you would want to *catch up*. A heroic effort might catch you up, but it everyday efforts that will keep you there. Maintenance is not a paradigm-shattering breakthrough. It's just something you do. Getting *ahead* is even more effort

as it requires doing all the maintenance and then still having time left over to think of what might come next. An unlikely state of affairs for someone initially behind.

On the other hand, there are certain metaphoric formulations that are easy for you. Perhaps you never get *stuck*, or always *stay on track*. You may not even think of them as important metaphoric formulations since they don't require effort and lack attendant drama. Remember a time one of these was prominent in your experience. As it comes to mind, hold it there in whatever way this request makes sense, and with it in mind, relive your original difficult situation. When you have completed this, notice how the addition of this experience has affected your choices and number of possibilities you experience in that situation now. It's very likely you now have more freedom of metaphoric formulation and therefore more freedom of movement in that situation.

This multiple metaphor approach is the complete opposite of an ultimate technique orientation. Instead of seeking the single, most powerful approach, I'm suggesting we will be better off when we are able to access numerous different ways of metaphorically formulating what it is we want to accomplish, and by having more choices of how to think about it, we will have more ease in accomplishing it.

This simply restates an original premise of Neuro-Linguistic Programming:

If what you are doing isn't working, do something else.
Do anything else.

“It has struck me that ordinary unhappiness is easy to change. Any number of simple interventions and easily available life experiences will do. It is completely human to deal with it.”

This may be a disappointment to some who want a powerful mythic change from a master magician that transforms their very existence and I understand this. As a student of psychotherapies during the 60's period in American history and politics, I read with some disappointment that Sigmund Freud had set for himself the goal in therapy to turn neurosis into ordinary unhappiness. I thought, based on my wide experience of life at the age of twenty, this was an insufficiently grand goal for such a man regarded as so great. It is only years later that it has struck me that ordinary unhappiness is easy to change. Any number of simple interventions and easily available life experiences will do. It is completely human to deal with it.

For more information on Charles Faulkner's work, visit www.influentialcommunications.com

The BBNLP would like to Thank Charles Faulkner for this article which is an excerpt from his forthcoming book: *The Cognitive Unconscious - How Metaphors Shape Our Meaning*.

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