



## Abstract

By exploring personal narratives through metaphoric images, students and nurses increase their understanding of who they are as persons and how that self-knowledge impacts their professional relationships with those in their care. In this article I share how I use metaphor-reflection in various aspects of my healthcare involvement. As a patient many years ago, metaphors helped me apprehend the meaning of cancer in my life. Today, as a nurse-teacher and researcher, I guide students through professional self-discovery using narrative reflective process that incorporates metaphors. In clinical practice I work with nurses as they explore how narrative reflection informs their caregiver-carereceiver interactions. With expanded self-awareness nurses have the potential to further assist their patients in exploring the meaning of their illness events through metaphors, thus enhancing the integration of that traumatic event into their respective lives. By working reflectively with metaphoric images, my hope for this writing is that my own engagement in narrative metaphor-reflection encourages the readers to story their own world in a more meaningful way.

**Key Words** experience, metaphor, narrative, reflection, therapeutic relationships

## Metaphor-reflection in my healthcare experience

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### Introduction

Exploring experience through reflection has been recognized as integral for personal and professional growth.[1,2,3,4,5] Considering the intensity of healthcare experiences, this recognition is even more poignant in healthcare education and practice.[6,7,8] In my role as nurse-teacher and researcher I strive to assist caregivers and *carereceivers* in making more meaningful connections within their personal and professional lives. For this purpose I have adapted the reflective method of narrative inquiry, which recognizes that our personal practical knowledge informs our professional way of being.[3] Based on that premise I implement with students and caregivers the Narrative Reflective Process [8], a form of guided narrative reflection that includes storytelling, writing,

metaphors and drawing. An aspect of the narrative reflective process that seems to have inspired a fair amount of intrigue over the past few years is the metaphor. In this article I write about how I envision and implement metaphors and *metaphor-reflection* in my healthcare experience.

*Dear Reader: As we engage in the dialogue on the following pages, I invite you to consider your own metaphors and how they may be playing out in your personal and professional life.*

### Discerning the difference between analogy, simile and metaphor

I begin with a brief definition and description of two terms often used interchangeably with metaphor: analogy and simile. According to Webster's[9] dictionary, analogy is defined as "a partial similarity between like features of two things on which a comparison may be based" (p. 53). This

is further supported by an investigation into the etymology of the word, analogy. Like many other words, it stems from its ancient Greek roots in the shape of *analogia*, which refers to equality of ratios, proportionality, and similarity (p. 15).[10] Analogy is often considered a significant part of learning and knowledge advancement in every field of study where deductive and inferential reasoning allows the person to logically puzzle through a situation and thus expand understanding of new phenomena. This process requires complex cognitive workings,[11] using, amongst others, such analogical language as similes and metaphors. Gentner[12] writes:

The term ‘metaphor’ conveys an artistic or expressive non-literal comparison of a certain form; the term ‘model’ [referring to analogy] conveys an explanatory predictive non-literal comparison (p. 107).

Lee and Holyoak[13] add, in learning new concepts we often use analogical inferences stemming from similar, already known, past situations. For example, in learning about the physiology of the kidneys, we may say that kidneys are analogous to a coffee filter. They share certain logical functionality that is recognizable and “suggests further inferences” for subsequent learning.[14] In this situation the analogy becomes a *stepping stone* to learning new concepts. As we shall see later, metaphor too is a *springboard* to expanded understanding. But, as the two metaphors of stepping stone and springboard suggest, analogy is more logical and predictable, and in some ways linear, while metaphor is multidimensional, incongruous and capricious.

Simile, on the other hand, unabashedly displays the comparison of two dissimilar subjects using linking words *like* or *as*; for example, *Gentle as the morning rain*, or *Hungry like a wolf*. According to Webster’s[9], simile is defined as “a figure of speech in which two unlike things are explicitly compared” (p. 1328). Etymologically it is a Latin word for *likeness or comparison* (p. 1007).[15] An example of simile could also be: *Kind words are like a balm to a heavy heart*. However, the same notion may be communicated using a metaphor to sound like, *Kind words are a balm on a heavy heart*. Simile overtly displays the moment of resemblance, while metaphor implies it. In fact, simile is often seen as metaphor, differing from it only in the way it is articulated. [16] Because of its explicitness, simile is a more obvious comparison, requiring markedly less interpretation than its close relative, metaphor. Its shameless exposition of the objects being compared renders it lengthy, “and just because it is longer, it is less attractive [...] it does not say outright that ‘this’ is ‘that’, and therefore the hearer is less interested in the idea” (p. 26).[16]

As noted above, in some ways metaphor is an abridged version of simile, using the verb *to be*. In other words, metaphor establishes an immediate relationship between two seemingly unrelated subjects, and as a result, leaves the interpretation to the receiver of the message. Consequently, the effectiveness of metaphor is contingent on the sender and the receiver sharing the same or similar contextual points of reference. This warp speed of multidimensional thinking connects the gestalt of one object or subject and treats it as identical to another. In this way the first subject can be efficiently and perhaps more elaborately explicated. Because implicit and explicit characteristics from the second subject are implemented to enhance the portrayal of the first, a greater understanding of the initial subject is possible. For example, *This nurse is an angel*, when reflected upon, sheds light on the subject of this statement “nurse”, ascribing to it socially constructed attributes of “an angel”, such as caring, compassionate, gentle and so on.

Because the first, literal meaning, the metaphor insinuates, seems to be false, it requires a further reflection on, and the analysis of, the possible secondary meanings of the metaphoric word or phrase. This second level critical reflection may uncover multiple possibilities that may not have been immediately apparent and thus considered earlier. The complexity is achieved through what the metaphor is communicating and by what the receiver has the potential to learn from that metaphor, which often includes clustering of new information. This action requires awareness, high level of perception and the desire to think omni-directionally, thus fully engaging the intuitive faculties. Accordingly, “a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars” (p. 23).[16]

Webster’s[9] defines metaphor as “the application of a word or phrase to an object or concept which it does not literally denote, in order to suggest comparison with another object or concept” (p. 901). This notion of communicating “similarities between semantically distant concepts [...] dates back at least as far as Aristotle’s Poetics” (p. 194).[17] In trying to understand and explain metaphor, Aristotle availed himself of a metaphor loaned from “the realm of movement; *phora* as we know, is a kind of change, namely change with respect to location” (p. 17).[16] *Meta* in Greek denotes “sharing, joint action, quest and change” (p. 291).[10] Thus, etymologically, *metaphor* is a Greek word denoting *transfer* or *transport*, especially of meaning (p. 656).[15] As such, we could project further attributes to the role of metaphor that include *bridge*, *vehicle*, and *link*.

## Meaningful use of metaphors and metaphor-reflection in my healthcare experience

Metaphors, be they implicit or explicit, allow us the opportunity to safely ruminate on life events in order to uncover the learning within them, and based on its outcomes, to make more informed choices for the future. Whether or not we are aware of the metaphoric lens through which we make sense of the world, I believe it is there and fully operational. So as we seek to make coherent our world, we “search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives” (p. 233).[18] Consequently, I contend that by intentionally exploring our metaphoric images we are more fully engaged in life: with self and with the other.

In healthcare metaphors and metaphor-reflection become “another way to explore emotions and emotional work” for both, patients and their caregivers (p. 333).[19] For example, implicit metaphors are significant in healthcare as they allow the symbolic representation of an actual illness to serve as a buffer zone where the ill person may safely dwell in time and space in order to discern and extrapolate the issues that may have been too uncomfortable to broach directly.[20] Metaphors also permit the individual to wring the experience for its essence, and with that new learning to make sense of an otherwise overwhelming situation. In the following illustration from my doctoral research on how personal serious illness of nurse-teachers may impact their teaching and nursing practice, I reflect on why I destroyed my journals chronicling my own illness experience.[21] This text emerged early on in my research process:

In my research work I relate my story in as much detail as I am able to recall. I cannot use the journals I wrote throughout the various stages of my illness experience since I repeatedly destroyed them. I didn't think much of this practice until I spoke about it with my colleagues, Deirdre and Gail. They both wisely suggested I write about the recurrent destruction of my journals. Although the possible reasons for journal destruction may vary for others, what my writing brought to light for me is that by destroying the written accounts of my illness I was somehow destroying the possibility of that illness coming back. I was distancing myself from it. Moving on.

The fruits of this reflection materialized for me in creating a metaphor for a serious illness:

*To me the experience of a serious illness is a person walking along a dark street at night, being suddenly attacked, fighting off this assailant, and only when a certain distance has fallen between the two, does the person feel safe enough to look back and assess the damage inflicted by the assault (p. 24).[23]*

Through reflection on that image I was able to gen-

erate a new understanding of my relationship with illness. If the illness is an assailant in a dark street, then I am a victim that may fall pray to that attacker. According to that image there is a power differential that elicits fear within the attacked. Only sometimes can the assailant be fought off, and when that happens the victim may not look back until sufficient distance (time) has elapsed, and she feels out of the danger zone. (p. 47)

Bringing such unconscious metaphors into awareness allows us the opportunity to make choices in how to more intentionally and deliberately engage in life. In the above example my reflection bore fruit in form of a metaphor, which subsequently provided me with an opportunity to delve deeper into my relationship with my illness. At this point I was able to reflect on my experience of isolation as I received radioactive iodine treatment for thyroid cancer. This further reflective work resulted in a short poem, written approximately four years after the earlier writing, December 12, 2005:

### *The illness and the ill*

*Alone.*

*Staring at each other.*

*One contemplating the other*

*Wondering the meaning of their encounter.*

*One the teacher.*

*The other, an unwilling student,*

*Stripped to the bare bone of life.*

*Alone in the darkness*

*The Illness and the Ill (p. 83).[8]*

The image created, or perhaps described, in this poem allowed me numerous subsequent occasions to explore a patient's illness experience and how that may be made more meaningful for the individual. For example, I have come to the awareness that when we are ill, all of our worldly markings become insignificant. We are simply human beings experiencing an illness. Consequently, in order for patients to perceive being cared for, I assert that caregivers need to create healing environments by connecting at a human level with those in their care. However, in order for the caregivers to do so, I believe they need to first connect with their own sense of who they are as human beings.

With this in mind, I suggest that the human dimension of being cannot be taught as an *extrinsic object*. It is a lived dimension of who we are, and in order to teach it we need to live it (p. 89).[8]

This proposition takes me, in my role as nurse-teacher, into teaching-learning relationships with my fourth year students, our future nurses. When I teach caring to them I acknowledge their personal knowing that grows out of their contextualized histories. I guide them through the narrative reflective pro-

cess I adapted from my earlier work with ill nurse-teachers. This narrative reflective process entails such creative reflective self-expressions as stories, metaphors, letter-writing and drawing. It is important to note, however, that creative self-expression does not easily flow for everyone. One of my former senior students, Glenda, wrote me of her struggle engaging in the narrative reflective process. She writes:

The process of this development has not been easy for me. I generally don't think of my life in metaphors and I don't usually like the "touchy feely" assignments. It took some effort for me to think of my life events in terms of who I am today (p.88).[8]

Glenda respectfully accepted my guidance in this process and through painstaking engagement in the reflective exercise, over the term grew to appreciate its value. In the winter semester she found that her chosen metaphor of a willow tree represented her accurately as a caregiver ready to embark on her nursing career. She described the characteristics of the tree and reflected on how her caregiving qualities are the same.

Working with metaphor-reflection piece, as part of the narrative reflective process, allows for increased self-awareness with the opportunity for intentional growth and development that may not have been readily apparent earlier. For example, Peter, a fourth year nursing student, chose a boxing ring as his life metaphor. In reading an excerpt from the letter "written by" his metaphor we see how he generates positive coping strategies for himself:

Some 'boxers' have been known to be distracted by negative jeers from the crowd outside the ring (i.e. listening to negative comments like 'you can never do that or this, you will never succeed, etc.!'). Your ability to shut your ears from derogatory comments can be helpful. But I suggest you try to listen sometimes and critique and analyze the comments. Use them for your advantage and for further learning and growth. ("Response Letter from my Metaphor")

My desire, borne out of my own reconstructed illness experience, many years earlier, is to ultimately enhance the quality of the same for the patients. In my role of a nurse-teacher I strive to educate and guide my students and nurses on how to access their own humanness through the narrative reflective process using metaphors. I believe that once the caregivers become more aware of who they are and what they bring into their professional therapeutic relationships, they are more likely to provide time and space, as well as guidance, to those in their care and so help them encounter their illness in a more meaningful way.

The process I just shared with you illustrates how a personal life experience, no matter how painful, when purposefully

reflected upon through creative reflective means that encompass metaphors, may bear fruit in the form of personal meaning making, knowledge creation and benefit to humanity.

### Reflection on my definition of metaphor

Once I distinguished the basic differences and similarities between analogy, simile and metaphor, I reflected on these definitions and on how best to make sense of them. In conversation with my friend Naomi (May 23, 2008), we discussed how to situate these concepts within the holistic paradigm. After elaborating my understanding of the three terms and how I use metaphor in my practice, she offered the following idea: analogy is the mind, simile is the body and metaphor is the soul. This mind-body-soul metaphor made perfect sense to me: the logical nature of analogy, where deductive thinking and deliberation come into play could well be metaphorically equated to the mind, while the clean, direct simplicity of simile could easily be likened to the body itself. Leaving metaphor to be represented by the spiritual realm of this whole, speaks aptly to metaphor's gestalt quality. For me the spiritual realm is the dimension where thinking jumps at light speed to different universes, connecting at some personally meaningful level, where bridges may be *scaffolded* to bring together two un-seemingly connected ideas thus creating relationships.

Based on the above deliberations and reflection I ponder further on my own view of metaphor. When I reflect on my life in order to learn who I am in this world and how I contribute to it, I become cognizant of different "metaphors [I] live by".[18] Coming into that awareness provides me with choices of possible ways I could engage in life and so take more informed steps forward. For example, through reflection I came to recognize that I see my life as a journey and that I often use the metaphor of *hiking up the mountain side* to represent the progression of life. This metaphor also frames my teaching style as I see myself further up the mountain than I do my young students. Since I am higher up the mountainside I feel that my view of the valley below is wider and clearer, and so from that place, I respectfully and compassionately offer my knowledge and experience to those in my care. As I humbly learn from this interaction I slowly move forward on my life path. When collaborating with colleagues, I use phrases like, "we help one another along" referring to the life-road we are traveling. When I worked as an emergency room nurse many years ago, I saw my role as helping injured fellow travellers get back on their feet.

Reflection through the use of metaphors becomes a mirror of who we are as professionals. For example, in my work with a

group of practicing nurses, I invited each of them to choose a metaphor that best represents her as a caregiver. One of the nurses, Tigress, chose a chair as her caregiver metaphor. When I asked her to draw the metaphor, she drew a large chair that filled most of the page. This nurse described the characteristics of the chair as having a strong back support and strong legs made out of wood. Upon reflection Tigress was able to see how she is with her patients in her nursing role. In our conversation she shared how the large seat of the chair allowed many different people to come and rest for a while as she supports them through her listening skills and knowledge. Tigress equated the chair to her ability to engage in her multiple ways of being a nurse. This awareness provided her with a prospect of making an informed choice on how to move her nursing care forward.

### Challenges of metaphors

Like with everything else, there are challenges that need to be considered when working with metaphors. Two of them we spoke of earlier. One recognizes that metaphors may not come easily to people who are more logical, linear thinkers. I believe, however, that with patience and practice this hurdle may be overcome sufficiently enough for metaphor exploration to be fruitful. For example, Sheila, a senior undergraduate student expressed her difficulty in identifying her life metaphor. In our conversation Sheila spoke of a life riddled with dilemmas and how her imminent graduation from the nursing program added yet under variable to her uncertainties. Upon engaging Sheila in a *guided reflection*, [22] she was able to recognize her life as being unsettled, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Once she drew the jigsaw puzzle, she was able to move to the next step, the metaphor-reflection, where she reflected on the question: *How can the metaphor puzzle help me learn about my life?*

The other challenge, of course, is the openness of metaphor to interpretation by the receiver. The majority of the work for this remedy, though not all, falls on the sender as s/he needs to carefully choose the metaphor with best possible potential for being accurately and meaningfully understood by the receiver. Lakoff and Johnson [18] note:

Metaphorical imagination is a crucial skill in creating rapport and in communicating the nature of ushered experience. This skill consists, in large measure, of the ability to bend your world view and adjust the way you categorize your experience (p. 231).

Along similar lines, sometimes, in the individual reflective process, metaphors may not be fully explored, thus rendering incomplete, and possibly faulty, information to its owner. Because of the nature of metaphor, its interpretation is mul-

tifaceted and as such requires willingness and patience to explore various possibilities until there is a sense of connection and satisfaction that the purpose of this exploration is fully achieved.

Another obstacle with the use of metaphors is its potential for constraint. When we use metaphors, we assertively ascribe identity of one subject to another, like, *My life is a mess*. Although some aspects of that metaphor may be perfectly true, and could serve well the individual in learning how her/his life is “a mess”, the metaphor does not provide the option for recognition of the positive aspects of that person’s life. Because of the metaphor’s astronomical potential for meaning making, its drawback is just that, its astronomical qualities of speed, gestalt and uniqueness of the choice of the comparative subject. Similarly, this is also significant when working with illness metaphors. Although metaphors may help patients constructively process their illness event, as suggested earlier, they may distract and detract from the actual illness experience. Sontag [23] expressed similar concern by stating,

... illness is not a metaphor, and [...] the most truthful way of regarding illness – and the healthiest way of being ill – is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking (p. 3).

We therefore need to be cognizant that, if not appropriately challenged through metaphor-reflection, metaphors could become constraining impediments to sought out progress and growth.

The above concern takes us to the fifth challenge of working with metaphors, which is our ready acceptance of overly used metaphors without reflecting on their meaning and usefulness in our life. In healthcare practice, such as addictions therapy, for example, that kind of unexamined language may in fact be counterproductive. Reflecting on a conversation I had with a colleague-friend, Paul King (April 30, 2008), who is a Gestalt therapist, I became aware of how an accepted metaphoric term *recovery*, may subliminally imply *recovery* of the underlying or root problems of the addiction. What came to light for me is that the more suitable metaphor for a successful healing could be *discovery*, the notion of *discovering* or uncovering the underlying issues that may have precipitated the addictive behaviours in the first place. By being mindful of the language we use in our therapeutic interactions with those in our care, we are in a position to positively impact the probability of healing. Whether or not the caregivers are aware of implicit metaphors they live by, these metaphors, consciously or unconsciously, drive our therapeutic interventions and expose our biases on how we

view the world and those in our care.

Similarly, some metaphoric expressions are so pervasive in our every day social interactions that we often pay little attention to when we use them and how they potentially shape our experiences. For example, we may be using the metaphor of *combat* when we say such phrases as, *I fought the traffic to get here. I exploded when I heard that. I was a hero yesterday, but today I'm in the slammer.* By recognizing this pattern, we are presented with options on how to progress: whether to explore deeper, on a personal level, the reason for the choice of combat metaphors, or to move it into the social realm by examining the relationship between the metaphor and the rising violence in our cities, or whether to do nothing. Even if we deliberately choose to do nothing, the sheer awareness of what we bring into our interactions with others empowers us to interact with intention and consciousness. It is only when we are in the state of awareness that we can make changes and grow.

And lastly, the challenge to implementing metaphor-reflection is the recognition that metaphors are tools; they are bridges, vehicles and links that help us get from one place of understanding to another. Metaphors are not reality! Knowing when to release the metaphor is an art that is unique to each individual undertaking the reflective practice using metaphors. It is especially so in teaching-learning situations. It behoves the teacher to know when the bridge to the new concept needs to be drawn and the learner fully engaged in the new learning. Metaphor-reflection, although very useful, needs to be mindfully implemented, so that like fabled Narcissus, we do not disappear into the mirrored pool of our reflection.

### **How does all this matter to my healthcare practice?**

Socrates is credited with the adage, *An unexamined life is not worth living.* Although I would not go so far as to recommend such extreme measures, I do believe that to fully engage in life it takes a lot of courage and even more work. By exploring our inner world, which is the underground river that feeds the surface river of life, we learn what nutrients of the underground feed the life-blood above ground. In other words, when we engage in metaphor-reflection, we may come to greater understanding how certain events come to happen in our lives and what options may be open to us for consideration. Metaphors are voluptuous detours that strive towards the same goal, that of enhanced understanding and expanded knowledge, only richer for the experience of the chosen path.

So, working with metaphors we may become aware of who we are as persons and what we bring into our relationships with others, be it in the classroom or in the hospital room. Through metaphor-reflection we get in touch with our own humanness and learn the paradox of being individual while connected to the greater whole. Metaphor-reflection brings in the divine that is in some ways simple and true and most often graceful.

This matters for me in my role as a teacher in how I relate to my students, and how together we can move forward our teaching-learning relationships. As a caregiver, I provide my students with tools to explore their own humanness and so prepare them, our future nurses, to be ready to facilitate that kind of exploration with their patients. By entering into metaphor-reflection we activate our creative and critical thinking that calls upon metaphors, analogies and similes, thus engaging our whole selves in the process of constructing meaningful therapeutic contexts for healing.

*And now, dear colleagues, I invite you to do the same in your respective professional fields as I believe that when we value metaphor-reflection that leads to increased self-awareness and meaning making, we are more likely to offer that same opportunity to those in our care. I am including here some questions to help you move forward, wherever you may be on your reflective journey:*

- 1) What metaphors, if any, in your personal and professional life did you become aware of as you read this article?*
- 2) What metaphors are explicit in your life? How do they reflect your actions? How do your actions reflect them?*
- 3) How could you introduce metaphor-reflection into your professional practice-setting?*

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