What is a metaphor? Generally speaking, it’s a story or an idea that parallels another pattern or situation. So if I say, “This car is a dream to drive,” I’m using a metaphor. The car isn’t a dream, of course, but everyone understands what I mean.

We dream in metaphor and we all use metaphors when we communicate – even if we don’t know we are using them.

In therapy, approaching a problem metaphorically is helpful on several levels. Because a metaphor seems different from the conscious concern or problem pre-occupying the client, it allows the conscious mind to relax. But at the same time, the pattern-perceiving unconscious mind can make the match and use the metaphor for therapeutic change.

Since we dream in metaphor, it can be said that metaphor is the ‘language of the unconscious’, and so all metaphor is hypnotic because it appeals to the unconscious mind. Anything that appeals more to your unconscious mind is a naturally hypnotic way of communicating.

Now, if we really think about it, all language is metaphorical. Why? Because all words ‘stand in’ for reality. The word ‘chair’, for example, is not itself a chair, but your mind has learned that this sound is a metaphor for an actual chair. All words require the brain to make a match to the reality they describe.

But I want to look more specifically at the way we can use extended metaphor hypnotically, and the way we can construct metaphors by looking at the patterns of situations rather than just the specific details.

I’ll give you an example where I really had to use a metaphor rather than work directly on the problem. A woman called me to tell me that her twelve year old son was willing to come and see me for bed wetting but he was very reluctant.

He had been dragged from one psychologist to another, through counselors and hypnotherapists. He’d even seen a faith healer and he was sick and tired of the humiliating experience of discussing his bed wetting with a bunch of well-meaning strangers. So I was his last resort, and he would see me only on condition we didn’t talk about – or even mention – his bed wetting. An interesting challenge!

But of course the lad did want a solution. All I had to do was to meet him and find out what interested him. Then I should be able to mold his interests into a ‘parallel pattern’ that provided a solution – in other words, a metaphor. This would hopefully prevent his conscious mind from rejecting too obvious an intervention.

So the mother brought him along and she stayed in the room with us to ensure the boy wasn’t upset by any direct reference I might make to bed wetting. The lad (we’ll call him James) was friendly, and I asked him what he enjoyed doing. He told me he loved
playing cricket. He also told me that he was a great bowler and could often bowl out other boys. We talked about many things and then I began to discuss cricket again. I said to James:

“You know, James, it’s a curious thing the way the mind works, and it’s curious also how the body works. Once upon a time bowling was totally new to you and you had to learn how to do it... and now the tiny muscles in your hand know exactly when to let go... of the ball... they don’t let go when you’re running up to the stumps... they just know... all by themselves... without you having to think about it too much... exactly when to let go... just at the right time... and it’s great that you... can trust your unconscious mind to let go at just the right time...”

Now this may sound rather an obvious use of metaphor to you – matching the pattern of ‘letting go of a cricket ball’ and ‘letting go of urine’ and suggesting this could happen at the right time and that he could trust his mind to do this for him. But bear in mind, this conversation was embedded within lots of other apparently small talk with him and his mother. When I spoke to him about the unconscious mind’s capacity to know when to let go at exactly the right time, I slowed my voice, speaking more softly, and I noticed that his eyes glazed over somewhat – a part of him knew exactly what I was talking about, although his mother – and his conscious mind, I’m sure – did not.

But I still felt I wanted to strengthen the metaphorical message further, so later in our conversation I asked James where he liked to play cricket. He told me he had been playing in Ireland recently, as his father lived there. He said he had flown there and back and when I asked him about that he said he loved flying. I started reminiscing about a flying experience of my own:

“I was flying from Britain to the US over the Atlantic during the night, once. That was before the 9/11 stuff, and the flight engineer actually invited me up into the flight deck, and do you know, both the pilot and the co-pilot were fast asleep and snoring! The engineer saw I was rather worried at this sight and said to me: ‘It’s fine... you can relax... because everything is taken care of automatically by the plane’s computers... so they can... sleep all the way through the night... while everything is taken care of automatically...’

Now again this seems fairly obvious – using the plane’s ability to operate automatically while the pilots sleep as a way of letting James know that his body can remain in control as he sleeps. As before, though, I embedded this chat deep within lots of other topics of discussion to ensure he didn’t make the conscious link.

James left the session after an hour, having had a very enjoyable talk with an interested adult. His mother looked a bit bemused, especially as she paid me, but called me back later absolutely astonished to report that he had abruptly stopped wetting the bed after the session. All thanks to a cricket ball and a night flight to America.

I’d like to impart an important word of caution here: some people like to pick metaphors apart to find the ‘meaning’. This is like trying to explain why a joke is funny rather than just letting the joke take effect. Too much analysis of a story may leech the charge, the power from it. A good metaphor (!) for this is the little tale of the little boy fascinated by insects. He found a spider, and wanted to know how it walked. So he pulled all its legs off. Now he had lots of pieces of spider – but absolutely no walking to speak of! Of course, for the purposes of this article, we are too, to some extent, dissecting metaphor, but when you use metaphor in practice you’ll find it works better if you leave it for the unconscious mind. James didn’t know I was delivering metaphors – he thought I was talking about cricket and flying.
Metaphors are at their most powerful when they ‘fit’ the interests of the person you are talking to, but we can also use what we might call ‘generic metaphors’.

On the wart treatment hypnosis download I tell a story about the king who has one daughter. The King dies, and the inexperienced daughter is left to govern the land. The ruler of a neighboring land takes advantage of the rookie ruler and orders his army to start invading. The marauders move in, taking over more and more of her kingdom and advancing toward her palace.

The new queen doesn’t know how to get rid of these alien invaders, but at last she remembers a wise old man her father used to consult in times of need and difficulty. So she climbs a high mountain and finds the old sage. She tells him all about the invading armies and how they are threatening her kingdom. The ancient sage looks deep into her eyes and says: “These invaders need feeding, do they not? They need fresh supplies of clothing, food, water and weapons. And how are they being supplied? Look not to the army, but to the supply of the army.”

Immediately she knows what to do. She orders her own soldiers to block off the rivers and canals that the invaders were using to transport supplies. Almost as soon as the rivers are blocked off, the invading armies begin to weaken as they grow hungry and thirsty. Without sustenance, they quickly disperse and drop away.

Now a wart can truly be seen as an ‘alien invader’. And warts, just like invading armies, need to be fed to carry on living, and warts are fed by blood. We also know that hypnosis is an excellent tool for altering blood flow. So now we have a metaphor that matches the need to cut off the blood supply from feeding the warts.

Melissa Armer wrote to us after her wart-infected son had listened to this session: “I couldn’t believe what I saw. Beautiful pink skin with no scarring! The warts were ‘dying’ and we were ecstatic!” The warts were ‘dying’ because they were no longer being fed. Many wart sufferers have been helped by this story when other treatments produced little or no result. Do not underestimate the potency of a well placed metaphor to embed patterns for the unconscious mind to follow.

All ‘traditional stories’ contain powerful messages at different levels of meaning. Here in the West we have been conditioned to try to get the point of a story, or to wait for the ‘punch line’. But one and the same story can contain multiple meanings depending on who is listening, and when in their lives they are hearing the tale.

The ending of the story may be less significant than the patterns contained at the start or in the middle. It’s a great thing to collect stories and remember them. Stories make great hypnotic inductions in themselves. Asking someone to close their eyes and telling them a story invites hypnotic trance and you can embellish the story with all kinds of indirect suggestions and sensory detail that can be dream like for them.

And when I say ‘story’, I am not just talking about the obvious meaning of that word. When I spoke to James about the body’s amazing ability to know just the right time to release the cricket ball from the hand and telling him about my night flight over the Atlantic, those were still ‘stories’.

So here are the main points to remember about metaphor:

To use metaphor you need to:

- construct an idea or story that is different from the problem, but matches its pattern

For example, the story of the princess who blocks off supplies to an invading army parallels the pattern of blood supplying a wart on the skin.
• match the metaphor if at all possible to the interests of the person listening to it

So for the boy who loved cricket and flying I constructed metaphors around those topics; more general stories tend to engage the interest of people because they appeal to universal principles of characterization and plot.

• let the metaphor remain unexplained so the unconscious mind can work on it –

James didn’t know I was telling him ‘therapeutic metaphors’.

• make sure the metaphor provides a solution to the problem, and therefore hope –

A good metaphor lays down instructions to the unconscious for a way forward: the wart story paralleled not just the problem –blood supplying warts – but also the solution – cutting off supply.

When you begin to see patterns rather than just specifics, then creating and applying metaphors becomes easy, enjoyable and highly effective. Have fun with this and remember, if a metaphor doesn’t ‘take’ (as it were) then nothing has been lost. The listener has just heard an interesting story or anecdote. But on the other hand, you will often be staggered by the power of stories for, as they say, ‘children of all ages’.

Mark Tyrrell