

*Widening the Lens: Enhancing the connection to self and Spiritual meaning through the use of  
Metaphors*

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**Abstract:**

Metaphors can be powerful tools in social work for promoting change, as they activate the whole brain and engage the whole person. When used clinically, they can help to bypass the usual circuits that resist change or rationalize the status quo and make something unfamiliar more accessible and acceptable.

This paper explores the use of metaphors—and particularly the iceberg metaphor as articulated by Virginia Satir—in clinical practice, as a framework for encouraging an enhanced connection to self and sense of spiritual meaning. Satir envisioned the eight components of the iceberg as (from top down): behaviour (above the water line), coping style (at the water line) and feelings, feelings about feelings, perceptions, expectations, yearnings and core self (below the water line). Life energy, sense of self and spiritual beliefs are most readily evoked by reflecting on one's yearnings.

The use of metaphors with social work students to facilitate better integration of their personal, professional and spiritual sides is explored. Reference is made to other social workers' examinations of metaphor as a therapeutic tool.

**Biography:**

Mary has 30 years of experience in Clinical Social Work in Health and Mental Health settings and has been in private practice for the past 9 years. She has also been a sessional instructor at UBC School of Social Work, in 2008 and 2009 with the Masters Group Work class. She has also been studying with the Satir Institute of the Pacific since 2001. She has presented at a number of national conferences and has co published in the Canadian Journal of Counselling, Jan 2003, A Creative Model for a Post-Treatment Group for Women With Cancer.

*“The metaphor is probably the most fertile power possessed by man.”*

*Jose Orega Y Gasset, 1983-1955, in The Dehumanization of Art.*

Metaphors form a fundamental part of much of our daily conversation and communication, and naturally occur in our work with clients. They can slip into familiar patterns of speech and communication without our having conscious regard for their impact or therapeutic potential. This article seeks to examine the possibility of bringing greater awareness to the use of metaphors as a clinical tool to activate the whole brain and engage the whole person. When used with therapeutic intent, metaphors can bypass the usual circuits that resist change or rationalize the status quo, and make something unfamiliar more accessible and acceptable. Careful listening to a client’s use of metaphor allows the clinician to build on the client’s own meaning constructs in an organic and fluid manner, assisting the client to move beyond his or her previous level of awareness and to gain a greater sense of safety in, and ownership of, the therapeutic process. Using metaphors can hasten the establishment of a connection with the client and make the process of therapeutic change more efficient by lessening the need for as much emphasis on historical data-sharing and possibly even self-disclosure.

Recent social work literature that refers to metaphors highlights their potential as a tool for change in group work and in social work education, but there are few references to the use of metaphors as a bridge to a more meaning-based and spiritual perspective with clients. Sensitive awareness of the cultural components and attention to the respective meanings of language of both client and practitioner becomes especially important as one seeks to build on a client’s

metaphors and provide a link to deeper levels of meaning for the client in a safe and respectful way.

Virginia Satir, a social worker well known for her significant contributions in the area of family systems and transformative approaches to change in individuals and families, has stated that for her, metaphors act as her “adjunct therapist”. In her words: “There are so many things that have to do with meanings in terms of human beings, and often language is a limiting factor. So when I want to get some special meaning across, I will bring in a metaphor. By using a metaphor, I can make space between whatever is and what I am trying to get across. In that way, a metaphor is an adjunct therapist.” (2001, p. 259).

She saw the power of the metaphor when used to create a picture that simple words seem to lack the capacity to convey, allowing the worker to engage the right hemisphere, the intuitive and sensing, which gives “juice to the form” and supports deeper perceptual change. She also saw metaphors as a non-threatening way to help the client tune in to a deeper understanding of what they already know, to awaken to new possibilities and choices available, and to extend their understanding of their alternatives when they seem stuck. In her words: “When people can do metaphorical thinking, they are already steps ahead in any problem solving. The linear method has nothing to offer compared to the metaphor in giving power to bring about change....Metaphors are the bulbs or candles that illuminate new possibilities and provide links into the new” (2001, p. 269).

Satir acknowledged that spiritual meaning was a fundamental component of her work with clients and the change process through which she engaged them. “I believe spirituality is our connection to the universe and is basic to our existence, and therefore is essential to our therapeutic context” (1988, p.334).

Satir collaborated with three of her students to articulate in greater detail her concepts and methods during the last few months of her life. The result of this collaboration was *The Satir Model*, published three years after her death in 1988. The Iceberg Metaphor was a key component of her work with clients. She viewed behaviour as the part of us that is visible to the world, the tip of the iceberg, the part that floats above the water line. She identified coping styles at the water line, and envisioned the following below the water line: feelings, feelings about feelings, beliefs, values and perceptions, expectations, yearnings and the core sense of self at the deepest level of the iceberg. From her systemic perspective, change that happens at any one of these levels has an impact on all the other levels. The iceberg metaphor is easily understood by clients, and allows for a deeper awareness of the various aspects of ourselves, including parts that can feel in competition with each other. Each part can be viewed as having an iceberg, a constellation of feelings, perceptions, expectations and yearnings, and by tapping into the similarities or differences among parts of ourselves using the metaphor of the iceberg, resolution or greater clarity can often be more readily achieved. Tapping into yearnings provides a natural and organic way to help the client connect with deeper spiritual meaning in their lives and with the life energy that emanates from those yearnings. Yearnings are basic to all humans, whether held consciously or less consciously, and they

can provide a natural bridge to deepening and widening the process of change and transformation, involving the whole person.

Trudy Duffy, in her article “White Gloves and Cracked Vases: How Metaphors Help Group Workers Construct New Perspectives and Responses”, promotes the use of metaphors as a way for group workers to reflect on their practice. She encouraged group workers in a supervision group to come up with a metaphor to represent some aspect of their group, stimulating a reflective process that resulted in new perspectives for unpacking situations that were puzzling, and promoted better integration of method and theory and enhanced self awareness. Duffy emphasized that caution needs to be exercised when using metaphors as they are time-bound and very context and culture specific (2001, p. 96).

The author has introduced the use of metaphors during check-in time at the beginning of group work classes to encourage students to focus on, and share, with fewer words and greater meaning, their own state at that moment at the outset of the class. Frequently, the act of standing back and placing themselves in a visual and metaphorical context, even briefly, helped the students to bring a greater level of self-awareness in that moment and to be more fully present for the class. It also provided good practice for use in their groups. Sharing metaphors has proved to be a tool of communication that can limit disclosure and promote safety while allowing for greater connection with others.

Similarly, the author has used the iceberg metaphor as outlined by Satir with group work students to explore areas of practice that they found challenging. By comparing their

“professional” icebergs —noting their professional values, expectations, and beliefs related to an area of challenge (such as handling conflict, dealing with the silent group members, managing more intense feelings of members of their groups) and “personal” icebergs—focusing on areas such as family of origin values, rules, and expectations —they could identify some of the impact their earlier lives might have had on their professional practice. The connections, made more visible through these contrasting icebergs, proved helpful in problem solving and gaining greater understanding in areas they had identified as challenging. This activity also facilitated greater integration of the personal and professional aspects of themselves.

In summary, deepening our respect for and employing the use of metaphors with clients and in classroom situations with social work students can widen and deepen the potential for learning, growth and transformation. Virginia Satir, in addressing her relationship with her clients using a metaphor of light, highlights the power of drawing on the visual to portray and enhance connection and spiritual meaning: “When I am completely harmonious with myself, it is like one light reaching out to another. At the outset, it is not a question of “I will help you”. It is simply a question of life reaching out to life. All life talks to life when it is in a harmonious state. If my ego is involved, or if I need them to get well, then it is a different story”, (quoted by Simon, 1989, p. 39).

References:

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