



In Search of Your Personal Metaphors: Sparks that Ignite Self-Actualization and Support Well-Being

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Bill is a catalyst contributing to generational well-being through increased self-awareness and self-actualization. He is a master at helping others discover their personal metaphors, their spark.

If you think back to some of the most memorable books you've read, speeches you've heard, or even movies you've seen, chances are they were enhanced with the use of figurative language, such as similes, allusions and metaphors. That's because figurative language is typically more imaginative and thought-provoking than literal language (i.e., legal documents, academic papers). It's used to add creative flourishes or explain complicated ideas in a way that is both interesting and easy to understand and can be more effective at making emotional connections. In fact, many "figures of speech" have become part of our everyday language. If you're nervous, you might say you have "butterflies in your stomach." If something is difficult, it can be compared to "moving a mountain." And if you're encouraging someone to take charge of a situation, you may urge them to "take the bull by the horns."

While there are five common types of figurative language, the Family Tapestry Discovery Process has found the use of metaphors to be particularly effective in communicating ideas, developing a conversational language, and conveying an individual's passions, interests, and expectations in a feasible plan of action. Let me explain.

What is a Metaphor?

In its simplest definition, a metaphor compares two different things. However, a metaphor does not use the words "like" or "as." Unlike similes (e.g., busy as a bee), metaphors don't acknowledge that they're comparisons, which makes them more figurative. Metaphors apply a name, descriptive term or phrase to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. Some common examples include "killing him with kindness," "getting cold feet," and "having a heart of gold." When used effectively, metaphors can help people better understand unfamiliar concepts and paint familiar things in a new light.

The Role of Metaphors in Your Story

The fastest way to lose someone's interest (and watch their eyes glaze over) may be presenting information with a barrage of complex graphs, statistics, and dry reports. Unfortunately, many traditional personal assessment tools do just that. Having delivered over 3,000 individual PRO-D™ assessments, as part of the Discovery Experience, I have come to appreciate the importance of interpreting the results in a manner that is clear, concise, and comprehensive. This includes the language of metaphor.

When implemented across a broad spectrum of emotion, reality, human dynamics, age, gender and experience, the language of metaphor can establish a cohesive dialogue based upon expectation, understanding and objectivity.



Using Metaphors Effectively

Of course, the key is using metaphors effectively: The message and tone of the language must provide context, be understandable, recognize individual learning styles, and introduce concepts of Archetypes,¹ Roles and Convergence during a shared common experience.

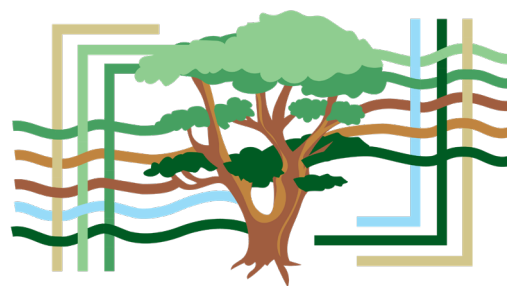
The language of metaphor is unique in that it is not restrictive, definitive, precise, or confining like the language of law or academic research. Instead of interpreting information through graphs, cohorts, and complex fixed categories, it is conversational. Additionally, effective use of this language must not be solely career-oriented, focusing on resumes, titles, job descriptions and classifications, but rather allow for the integration of both personal and professional balance and growth. And though it may sound a bit dramatic, the language of metaphor can be life changing, so it must adhere to the medical credo of “First do no harm.”

At Family Tapestry, we introduce the language of metaphor during the presentation of an individual’s PRO-D™ report and use it to create an objective and expansive dialogue within a multi-generational audience. Metaphors are used to personalize the results and provide insight into the distinctive characteristics that identify each participant. Using the responses provided in the specially designed 31-question “Reflections Survey,” the interpretive presentation can be validated and personalized through “common denominators.” While each participant is recognized for their individuality, the survey reveals a distinctive personal thread (common denominator), which can then be woven with other family stakeholders into a multi-generational tapestry – a family graphic that is presented as the Family Discovery Tree.

Identifying Personal Metaphors

Of course, personal metaphors are unique to everyone. They cannot be assigned or directed but must be discovered, adopted, and then embraced. In other words, each person must take ownership of his or her personal metaphor and then use it to provide context, understanding, direction and energy in pursuit of their life journey – a launching pad, so to speak. Because we work with a broad spectrum of participants who vary by age, gender, circumstance, and expectation, we adopted a story telling format to reach a level of common understanding. Stories are, after all, more interesting than reports!

As mentioned, the story starts with the participants’ responses to the Reflections Survey. By determining “personal points of reference” in an individual’s responses, their guide identifies common denominators that can facilitate a dialogue, along with an exchange of mutual respect, trust and understanding. Common denominators can be such things as birth order, geographical location, interests, military service, experience, and more. I have found that when guiding an individual through their personal Discovery Experience, metaphors can be used to “connect the dots” and provide situational context. They can also encourage expansion of thought, create vision, introduce options, and support articulate expression.





Metaphors Facilitate Self-Actualization

While many personal assessments provide reports, many don't offer a way for an individual to pursue or implement insights for application. Since metaphors can serve in sequencing, prioritizing, and clarifying a comprehensive amount of material, they also serve to provide focus for developing a plan of actualization. Therefore, by using metaphors, which convey an understanding of self-awareness, the pursuit of self-actualization is prompted. At Family Tapestry, we have found that metaphors can provide objective (out of the box) perspectives and help introduce direction (cast off), as well as infuse commitment and enthusiasm for a chosen path of personal and professional growth (take the bull by the horns). And they can be applied within all stages of an individual's journey as appropriate (tacking into the wind).² Added focus for developing a personal roadmap is supported by the 10-step action plan included in the PRO-D™ report we provide.



As a Colonel, United States Army, Retired and avid sailor my personal action plan metaphors include:

- Cast off – a naval term meaning to untie or unmoor a boat and begin a journey.
- Clear air – a sailing term meaning to sail upwind where the air is clear, which provides superior boat speed and helps the sailor respond to wind shifts; the ability to move out of a bad situation.
- Waiting to be discovered – used when trying to express that something is yet to be discovered or uncovered, requiring curiosity and courage to make the discovery.
- An incoming tide raises all boats – based on a naval term and meaning that success benefits all those around it.
- In irons – a nautical term meaning headed into the wind with no way forward.
- Reconnaissance by fire – a military term referring to a warfare tactic in which military forces may fire on likely enemy positions to provoke a reaction.
- March or die – a term from the French Foreign Legion meaning we must keep moving forward; there is no going back or stopping. When we don't know what to do, we must just take the next step.
- Don't change horses in the middle of the stream – meaning it may not be wise to stop using one system and start another or stop supporting one person and start supporting someone else in the midst of certain situations.





Peeling the Onion

As the name implies, The Discovery Experience™ is focused on uncovering new knowledge. That excitement of discovery can also be conveyed in metaphors, such as:

- Uncharted waters – exploring new areas of knowledge as if sailing into unknown seas.
- Mining for gold – digging through vast amounts of data to find valuable insights.
- Opening a door – gaining access to new realms of understanding.
- Lighting a candle in the dark – bringing clarity and illumination to previously obscure areas.
- Cracking the code – deciphering complex problems to discover hidden meanings.

Each of these metaphors emphasizes different aspects of the discovery process, from gradual revelation of information to the adventure of finding something new. And, then of course, there is the well-known “peeling the onion” metaphor. When individuals ask why our process is so in-depth and includes so many steps, this metaphor comes to mind.

The Discovery Experience™ is like peeling an onion because there are several layers. Our engagement letter is akin to removing the skin, which is necessary for identification and preservation. Completing the Reflection Survey and the PRO-D™ assessment resembles peeling back the aromatic layers of the onion used for cooking a delicious dish. And your Discovery Experience Guide is like adding butter to the pan when you sauté the onion – providing insights and interpretation that create a richer experience. Just as onions enhance the flavor of many different dishes, your Discovery Experience™ and its application of metaphors enhances your journey for self-actualization which contributes to your well-being.

Conclusion

There are, of course, hundreds of metaphors that can be used to articulate your individual passions, interests, and expectations, and provide the direction needed to design a feasible plan of action. The question is “What are your personal metaphors?” At Family Tapestry, we encourage you to make your discovery and effectively use your metaphors to add deeper meaning to your story, and to provide a spark to your increased self-awareness and self-actualization.

¹ Archetype refers to a certain type of symbol that represents universal patterns of human nature – things about us we recognize as a type. It can be a role a person plays, like a hero or mentor, or a setting (i.e., work), or a theme (e.g. struggle). An archetype is something about being human that everyone will recognize. The Discovery Experience™ introduces nine archetypes, which are the basis of the self-awareness resource.

² Tacking into the wind is a sailing term, which refers to a maneuver by which the bow of the vessel is turned toward and through the wind so that the direction from which the wind blows changes from one side of the boat to the other, allowing progress in the desired direction.

