

Thinking Metaphorically within One's Supervision/Coaching Practice

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"All language is metaphor." While this claim can provoke some consternation amongst one's peers, the idea deserves robust reflection, especially in the field of supervision and coaching. In a world where the meaning of language is often flattened by the efficacy of protocols and procedures, the resonances of what we experience infused with a figurative landscape of picture forms can easily be dismissed. Charles Taylor, in *The Language Animal*, counters this reductive narrative by reminding us that "metaphor does lead us to notice what might not otherwise be noticed."¹ This is an appealing proposition to explore as it prompts questions about how one might understand and use metaphor within the supervisor/coach-client relationship. It also encourages reflection on one's practice by asking what kind of competencies are embodied in the use of picture forms. In this article, I explore the language of metaphor, why metaphors are significant, why metaphors matter, and how to discern the language of metaphor within one's supervision or coaching practice.

I am not a linguist or even a language specialist. However, through my PhD studies and interactions with Marshall McLuhan (a communications guru), I came across his thought-provoking claim that "all words, in every language, are metaphors."² At the time, unsure whether such a claim was valid, I prodded a senior colleague in biblical studies to ascertain his thoughts. He was less confident, suggesting the idea didn't warrant much attention. Ironically, on the same day of our interaction, he and I attended a public lecture that evening by renowned biblical scholar Stanley Porter. To my surprise, Porter candidly began his lecture by saying, "All language is metaphor." This ignited my curiosity to delve further into McLuhan's understanding of metaphor and how the interface of technology, communication and culture shapes our use of metaphor.

McLuhan insightfully observed that "the usual approach to metaphor is purely verbal rather than operational or structural."³ In *Laws of Media*, he was keen to make the case that our use of metaphor is much more embodied. In other words, we use metaphorical language in a pre-reflective way.

A helpful footnote to one's use of language is expressed by Sean Gilbert in "Out of Silence: An Exploration into the Language of Faith." Gilbert draws upon Charles Taylor's *The Language Animal* to identify two recognisable Western philosophical approaches to the use of language. He utilises these concepts in a rebuttal surrounding "the pervasive cultural pressure to use instrumental language within the Uniting Church of Australia."⁴ I mention this because Taylor's two designations demonstrate the perceptual workings of language within culture.

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The first of Taylor's categorisations is the "designative-instrumental" approach. This is representative of a scientific, empiricist and Cartesian paradigm in which the instrumental understanding and practice of language resides in objective designations, meaning that verbal or written forms describe a pre-existing reality or idea. Taylor repudiates this idea by arguing that the holistic phenomenon of language is far more textured. Moreover, reducing language to an instrumental orientation would flatten its meaning and diminish its inventiveness. This points to Taylor's second categorisation, the "expressive-constitutive nature of language."⁵ In other words, the language of metaphor is descriptive. Gibert helpfully expresses this designation by stating, "Language, therefore, is expressive of vision and re-vision. It is constitutive of revolving and meaning-making parts."⁶

Taylor's second categorisation fits well with McLuhan's approach to metaphor since the latter suggests two receptive fields in which metaphor is present — a verbal field of meaning and an operational (or structural) field of meaning.⁷ As a communications specialist in the field of media, McLuhan extended his schema to include Gestalt psychology. This provided a phenomenological dimension to his work by identifying two symbiotic fields — figure and ground. These fields are constantly and unconsciously in play. Consequently, when McLuhan claims that "verbal metaphors are figure forms without ground" he is saying metaphors are more than one-dimensional, that a broader causation is resonant which goes well beyond a functional-only view. This would imply one's use of metaphor may be saying something deeper about their wider environmental context. Arguably, this gives gravitas to the presence of metaphor in describing what cannot be seen. It also draws attention to another register in which metaphor is at play. Suffice to say, the terms "figure" and "ground" are a helpful addition to one's grammar when considering the use of metaphor within one's supervision or coaching practice.

To appreciate the value of McLuhan's contribution, it is beneficial to explain more explicitly how he applied "figure" and "ground" to his understanding of media forms. He saw their relevance in identifying two spatial fields — visual and acoustic — and their distinctive properties as perceptual. McLuhan was concerned about two colliding communicative environments, the spatial world of print and the spatial world of electric media. The world of print, he argued, exponentially extended the sense of sight such that Western perceptions of reality increasingly attuned its sensitivities to the left hemisphere of the brain. With the arrival of electronic forms of media, however (extending to digital modalities), Western sensibilities became subservient to a visual-only register of meanings. McLuhan argued that this offset our perceptual readiness to be receptive and conversant with more resonant forms of meaning. In other words, Western culture had become unconsciously predisposed to an instrumental way of perceiving the world.

Iain McGilchrist, in *The Master and His Emissary*, indirectly yet appropriately expands on McLuhan's work by offering an extensive study on the brain and its two hemispheres. Gilchrist explains that

the left hemisphere operates an abstract visual-form system, storing information that remains relatively invariant across specific instances, producing abstracted type or classes of things; whereas the right hemisphere is aware of and remembers what it is that distinguishes specific instances of a type, one from another. The right hemisphere deals preferentially with actually existing things, as they are encountered in the real world. Because its language roots things in the context of the world, it is concerned with relations between things. Thus the right hemisphere does have a vocabulary: it certainly has a lexicon of concrete nouns and imageable words which it shares with the left hemisphere; but more than that, perceptual links between words are made primarily through the right hemisphere.⁸

To summarise, McLuhan's adoption of Gestalt psychology broadens the scope of metaphor. His use of "figure" and "ground" provides a vocabulary by which to analyse new media by naming (1) the area of attention (figure) — what we see, the "thing" we objectify and use, aligned to the process of the left-hemisphere of the brain; and (2) the area of inattention (ground) — the surrounding space or those dimensions that go unnoticed. Essentially, "ground" is our bodily lived context — our environment, perceived and processed by the right hemisphere of the brain. These two hemispheres of perception continually interact with each other across a common "boundary or interval that serves to define both simultaneously."⁹ In *The New Science of Communication*, a commentary on McLuhan's approach, Anthony Wachs explains, "This interplay constitutes our consciousness and perception of reality."¹⁰ In other words, metaphors are playing in both spatial fields; what we see and, even more importantly, what we don't see.

The perimeters of the discussion don't allow for an analysis of Paul Ricoeur's work on metaphor other than to acknowledge McLuhan's rebuttal of his thinking. That is to say, "Ricoeur restricts the discussion of metaphor to the matching of things instead of process making, to concepts instead of percepts, to logic and dialectics instead of poesis."¹¹ Consequently, McLuhan argues, "Ricoeur's main problem, and that of most contemporary rhetorical criticism, is related to the confusion that arises from not dealing with something on its own terms."¹² With this in mind, how might the use of metaphor apply to one's supervision or coaching practice?

METAPHOR IN SUPERVISION AND COACHING

A helpful place to start is with several definitions surrounding the aims of supervision and coaching. Doing so signals the significance of what is an embodied process given to a particular list of sensibilities. As a starting point, Davys and Beddoe offer a generic definition of supervision, explaining that

supervision is a forum for reflection and learning. It is an interactive dialogue between at least two people, one of whom is a supervisee. This dialogue shapes a process of review, reflection, critique and replenishment for professional practitioners.¹³

Narrowing the focus slightly, Leach and Patterson state that

pastoral supervision is practised for the sake of the supervisee, providing a space in which their well-being, growth and development are taken seriously, and for the

sake of those among whom the supervisee works, providing a realistic point of accountability within the body of Christ for their work as chaplains, local church ministers, spiritual directors, pastoral counsellors or youth workers.¹⁴

Broughton ramps up the learning component of pastoral supervision by adding that “all true learning begins at the edge of not knowing.”¹⁵ Of note is Broughton’s posture which advocates theologically for an attentiveness that gives credence to the divine resonance at play within the pastoral encounter.

While supervision and coaching are similar, acknowledging the particularities of each is helpful to this discussion. Hawkins and Smith offer a broad definition, stating that “coaching is primarily about facilitating personal change and allowing clients to experiment with different behaviours.”¹⁶ In a more specific context, the International Coaching Federation (a significant body) describes coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential.”¹⁷

Within the institution I serve, these two disciplines merge, a deliberate move to capture the offerings of both.¹⁸ This conceptualisation is described as “forward-looking supervision,” which entails a coachee-centred posture that encourages client ownership. The coach prompts reflection by asking open-ended questions to encourage self-reflection, growth and learning. The underlying premise is client autonomy. Questions are tailored to the client’s back-and-forth response. My own experience in this space is one of a sacred exchange where the subtle resonances of the client’s language and posture are carefully observed. Often such moments are infused with metaphors in which excitement, frustration or indifference can be expressed. This requires a deeper level of listening that is predisposed to the speech as a grammar rather than a dialectic. On reflection, I think this is what Gibert is getting at when critiquing his ecclesial body about language becoming flat and needing “to demonstrate a soulful resonance, whereby union with (John 15:5) and through the freely given Spirit (Romans 5:5) is both spoken and enacted from an affected, thus inclined spiritual experience.”¹⁹

The dynamics of the supervisor-coach client exchange look something like this. The coach listens attentively to the client and moves gently through a sequence of questions. This draws the client out with an elevated sense of their own narrative where pictorial forms and words are used to describe their lived experience. In such moments, metaphors often bubble to the surface. That is, the client uses figurative language to communicate the thing they wish to process. I have observed that a client’s use of metaphor is not explicit. Moreover, it’s often hidden, encoded in their expression of an event, a challenge or perhaps an anxiety bubbling up from under the surface. This mode of language fits well with Taylor’s constitutive category concerning communication.²⁰ Such an emphasis describes a mode of bodily being in the world which I would argue is noncognitive and pre-reflective. Hands move, eyes flinch, and the jawline tightens without conscious thought. This describes a know-how, a noncognitive way of being in the world which is subject to one’s experience and making.

Philosopher James K. A. Smith has argued along these lines that human beings are “primarily desiring animals rather than merely thinking things.”²¹ He presses hard against popular slogans like “you are what you think.” He maintains that the premise of such slogans falsely construes the heart of a person to be in their mind. This overlooks the visceral elements of our being, our wants, longings and desires, which he argues are the core of our identity. They are the things that make our heart sing.²² For Smith, desire registers in a completely different place, where the core of one’s identity is shaped by what one ultimately loves. Smith takes this concept and applies it to Christian education, suggesting that we must recognise that “such love is a kind of subconscious desire that *operates without our thinking about it.*”²³ In other words, learning may not be so much what we are taught to think but rather what we might be encouraged into — a set of practices and rituals. These longings are more often moulded by symbolic visions of human flourishing, be that in some form of material prosperity or directed toward a utopian ideal. The impulse to act on what we see, by naming things and shaping them so they are alive to us in a particular way, is, essentially, the way humans find their identity.

If human identity is, in part, conditioned by sensory data, as I am suggesting, then symbolism within the human experience is a pre-reflective, formative driver. It plays on our aesthetic impulse to find meaning in what we see, how we make ourselves through experiencing the world. The aesthetic nerve of desire expresses an ontological perspective that runs counter to the mind-then-body ontology that has, to date, been dominant.²⁴ Smith argues compellingly that “our default way of intending the world is non-cognitive and pre-reflective: it is an affective mode of feeling our way around the world.”²⁵ In other words, we navigate our spatial environment without even thinking about it.

For example, we seldom consider the spatial context of getting to our place of work daily. We don’t think about the journey in terms of a linear progression of procedures we methodically undertake to get from A to B. We intuit the activity. The making practices of getting there are pre-reflective and noncognitive. It’s a know-how. Body memory gets us there. When pressed about the morning commute, our response may express feelings of frustration due to the bumper-to-bumper reality of a traffic-clogged motorway. The articulation of bumper-to-bumper may be expressing something much deeper.

My point is that in a world where a cultural sensibility towards the left hemisphere of the brain is dominant, the aesthetic resonances of what we experience can easily go unheard. Moreover, when language itself is instrumentalised and the efficacy of protocols and procedures occupies the plausibility structures of what is valued, there is a hearing deficiency. That is, we haven’t developed the sensitivity to pick up on the aesthetics register how we humans use symbols and images to describe how we are relating to world and the making of ourselves in it. Meaning forms such as these are found in those stories that enchant us. They tug on our heartstrings and leave an aesthetic trace on the emotional register of our perceptual senses that are mostly metaphoric in form.

Conversely, when our use of symbols and images is ring-fenced by the cold logic of abstraction in which metaphors are rendered as verbal propositions — this is like that — the most we can expect is a one-dimensional view of reality. This leaves us blinded by a language which is unable to appreciate the relational dimensions of personhood and the bodily interplay of the senses, along with their affective power to shape our desires.²⁶ As noted above, Taylor reminds us that metaphor leads us to notice what we might otherwise miss.²⁷ In my own practice, I am reminded of a recent encounter with a client where their subtle use of metaphor served as a tipping point in what became a transformative moment for the client as they considered ministry practice.

EXAMPLE OF A CLIENT'S USE OF METAPHOR

In the final part of this essay, I describe a recent session I had with a client in which his discreet use of metaphor became a watershed moment. This emerged as we reflected upon a ministry challenge. The occasion offers an example of how metaphor can enhance the client/supervisor-coach reflective experience.

On this specific occasion, the session began by reflecting on James's wider activities, including his trip to Wellington and, most notably, his thrilling involvement in a barbershop quartet convention. Despite his enthusiasm, James acknowledged feeling tired. As he spoke, I observed his joy quickly dissipate to an inner groan of "I need to manage my workload better." The incongruence of James's speech suggested something deeper. The conversation then shifted to a discussion about KiwiTalk, a missional enterprise of the church that teaches English as an outreach program to immigrants to New Zealand. James felt a little conflicted as he acknowledged he felt that more could be done to communicate the gospel. He raised the idea of starting yet another program, an evangelistic program to complement KiwiTalk. His hesitation unfolded around feeling stretched and overextended.

Although the conversation began by exploring other possible programs, it quickly shifted back to KiwiTalk. His enthusiasm for this missional venture was evident. Was it possible to have spiritual discussions within the program without losing its welcoming atmosphere? James mentioned the challenge of finding the right balance between relationship-building and introducing gospel elements.

A little way into the conversation, I asked James to describe the spatial context of KiwiTalk. He responded by describing the gathering as a place of tables — a socially warm environment of five to six round tables where participants pull up their chairs.

James continued, explaining that he hosted one of the six tables. He gleefully announced that his table was the most preferred of all six. "Usually, eight to ten people huddle around my table." I then asked, "James, what was significant about the tables?" I followed with, "So what is significant about your table?" James responded by using a subtle metaphor — "My table is a dinner table." I responded, "Unpack that for me." He continued, "Everybody likes to interact, and they all like

to have their say. It is much like we're having dinner together. The space is brimming with questions, interjections and wholesome chatter."

I sensed the energy coming from James and fed back to him that he seemed excited by the imagery. I then asked James a string of questions related to the dinner table, exploring various dimensions of the metaphor. This led to what the dinner table might be saying about the structure and potential of KiwiTalk conversations. Questions surrounding eating and talking over dinner arose, which awakened James to a host of new possibilities surrounding the venture. When asked what was on the table, James responded by describing three bowls which he interpreted as table activities: people's stories, their personal aspirations in New Zealand, and current events. Even the tablecloth got a mention; James saw it as prayer. This aspect appeared fused to the actual table experience. With various table artefacts named, we explored what values were important to him in fostering a more evangelistic space. Curiosity, participation and questions emerged as necessary themes. This led to some brainstorming around suitable questions that might encourage KiwiTalk participants to think about Christianity and the gospel. The session concluded with James feeling at peace with himself and excited about a way forward, despite the constraints of time and energy he had expressed.

CONCLUSION

I have discussed in this essay the significance of metaphor as it relates to one's supervision and coaching practice. This goes beyond advancing a method or posturing a particular angle I favour. I have rather endeavoured to explore the language of metaphor by offering a probing perspective that questions an instrumental approach by asking how our use of metaphor works in a pre-reflective and embodied way. I am suggesting that a deeper appreciation of metaphor uses the imagination to describe what we can't see but undeniably sense is real. Dehart, in *Light Up: The Science of Coaching with Metaphors*, articulates this sentiment well when she claims that "metaphors are a powerful tool our brains use to make sense of the abstract by connecting them to our tangible experiences."²⁸ Indeed, my own coaching experience in the example given above is one such scenario where an awareness of metaphor unlocked for the client new ways of seeing their situation and provided a practical pathway forward.

NOTES

¹ Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 42.

² Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 120.

³ McLuhan and McLuhan, *Laws of Media*, 120.

⁴ Sean Gilbert, "Out of Silence: An Exploration into the Language of Faith," *Uniting Church Studies* 24, no. 1 (June 2022): 1.

⁵ Gilbert, "Out of Silence," 5.

⁶ Gilbert, "Out of Silence," 6.

⁷ McLuhan and McLuhan, *Laws of Media*.

⁸ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (London: Yale University Press, 2012), 50–51.

⁹ McLuhan and McLuhan, *Laws of Media*, 5.

¹⁰ Anthony Wachs, *The New Science of Communication: Reconsidering McLuhan's Message for Our Modern Moment* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2015), 24.

¹¹ McLuhan and McLuhan, *Laws of Media*, 122.

¹² McLuhan and McLuhan, *Laws of Media*, 123.

¹³ Allyson Davys and Liz Beddoe, *Best Practice in Professional Supervision* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2021), 22.

¹⁴ Jane Leach and Michael Paterson, *Pastoral Supervision: A Handbook* (London: SCM, 2015), 1. This entails:

1. A regular, planned, intentional and bounded space in which a practitioner skilled in supervision (the supervisor) meets with one or more other practitioners (the supervisees) to look together at the supervisee's work.
2. A relationship characterised by trust, confidentiality, support and openness that gives the supervisee freedom and safety to explore the issues arising in their work. (p. 10)

¹⁵ Geoff Broughton, *A Practical Christology for Pastoral Supervision* (London: Routledge, 2021), 5.

¹⁶ Peter Hawkins and Nick Smith, *Coaching, Mentoring and Organisational Consultancy* (Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK: Open University Press, 2013), 27–28.

¹⁷ International Coaching Federation, "All Things Coaching," accessed January 30, 2025, <https://coachingfederation.org/about>.

¹⁸ Centre for Church Leadership, "Coaching for Church Leaders," accessed December 3, 2024, <https://www.centreforchurchleadership.nz/coaching>.

¹⁹ Gilbert, "Out of Silence," 9.

²⁰ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 5.

²¹ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Naker Academic, 2013), 27.

²² James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habits* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazo Press, 2016), 6.

²³ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 15, italics in original.

²⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 66–69. Smith identifies the traditional approach to anthropology as reductionistic as it has understood human beings as primarily intellectual creatures. This view takes no account of the body and its ability to function beyond the faculties of the mind. Smith illustrates this effectively in his analysis of the film *The King's Speech*, in which he explores the unorthodox approach taken by Lionel Logue in addressing George VI's stutter. He recounts Logue's antipodean methods and the ways in which "the establishment" critiqued his approach.

²⁵ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 50.

²⁶ Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (London: SPCK, 2018), 4–5. Williams, in responding to the question “What is consciousness?”, notes that

[as] soon as the language of the machine comes into play, we have a major conceptual or definitional problem. It is interesting that the machine model tends to assume that the fundamental form of causality in the world is mechanical. . . . It carries with it a set of assumptions too about materiality . . . and it rather ignores the extremely complicated questions about how information and the exchange of information, both natural and constructed systems, works causally. It ignores the issues of the emergent properties of more and more complex systems, and it ignores the perspective offered by what is usually referred to as holism, that something may be more than the sum of its parts and have properties as a whole which do not correspond to the properties of any of its component parts.

²⁷ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 42.

²⁸ Lyssa deHart, *Light Up: The Science of Coaching with Metaphors* (Barn Swallow Publishing, 2024), 95.