

Metaphors Be With You

by **Meg Riley**, director, Advocacy and Witness, Unitarian Universalist Association, Washington, DC

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Some years ago there was a Japanese Zen master who decided to modernize one of the old *koans* so that his students could more easily relate their spiritual practice to contemporary life. The old *koan* went something like this: "How can you stop a galloping horse while sitting still?" In place of the galloping horse, the *roshi* used the image of the Tokyo Express, so that the *koan* now went, "How can you stop the Tokyo Express while sitting still?"

Koans sometimes drive people to intense grappling with the paradoxical nature of reality, and one of the master's students in particular found himself engaged in a life or death struggle with the Tokyo Express *koan*. No matter how hard he tried, or didn't try—for he tried that too—the master would simply ring his little bell and dismiss the student's efforts.

Finally, at the end of his rope, the student left the monastery early one morning, made his way to the tracks that carried the speeding commuter trains to Tokyo every morning, and sat down on the tracks, legs crossed in the proper full-lotus position, lowered his eyes just so, and began to sit *zazen*—right in the path of the 7:05.

He never knew what hit him, and if he did get the answer to the *koan*, he never got the chance to tell anybody.

In Japan, where people have some experience with such things, there was no scandal, though some people shook their heads. He had acted correctly by throwing himself one hundred percent into his *koan*. But he had made one mistake, and a fatal one at that: he had taken the teacher's words literally, and in so doing, missed the point.

Recently a friend came to visit sporting a bumper sticker with this sermon's title on it, "Metaphors be with you." It took me several readings to understand its *double entendre*, "meta-*phors* be with you..." but I liked it immediately, and made her promise to get me one. It turned out she'd never noticed the double meaning, but had simply liked it! Metaphors be with you. To me, that is about the most wonderful blessing I could offer to drivers behind me, or to anyone. Because a person who has metaphors with them is a person who has some freedom to move and to think, who has perspective, who has an understanding of the paradoxical nature of reality, and who probably has a sense of humor.

I've seen the bumper sticker with the opposite sentiment on it many times: "God wrote it, I read it that settles it." To me that bumper sticker conveys literalist, fundamentalist, closed, contracted thinking. I don't fault anyone for reading the Bible as God's word, though Biblical scholars would say that God has some fairly distinct and separate personalities if that is the case. But I do wonder, having spent a good deal of time reading it myself, just exactly *what* does it settle?

One of my family members, who is what you might call a fundamentalist, literalist atheist, told me that it was after reading the Bible that he knew there was no God. "It just doesn't make sense, it's full of contradictions," he told me. I replied that he is giving some old texts a great deal more power over his spiritual life than I do if he expects them to convince him whether there is or is not a God. His bumper sticker might read, "God did not write it, I read it that settles it." His view, too, might be enriched by a more metaphorical reading of the Bible.

"One property of poetic language," writes poet Adrienne Rich, "is to engage us with states that themselves would deprive us of language and reduce us to passive sufferers."

Or, from poet Audre Lorde, "We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so that they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundation for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before."

If this seems vaguely true but too large to touch, consider this very concrete example of the magic of poetry in action. It is from Vivian Gussin Paley's book, *Wally's Stories: Conversations in the Kindergarten*. Paley is an amazingly observant kindergarten teacher. She writes:

Most children have learned a language and do make sense by the time they enter kindergarten. Rose, however, was not convinced that words had commonly accepted meanings; she did not always make the connections between words and actions that followed.

After several hearings of the Five Chinese Brothers, in which one brother "swallows the sea," we discovered while acting the story that Rose heard "sea" as "seed." The picture in the book shows a man kneeling on the beach, drinking the sea. His cheeks fill until his head is huge with water. Soon the sea bed is empty and only shells and fish are visible. Then, unable to contain the sea any longer, he expels it forcefully.

Rose observed the pictures as she heard the words. She did not ask herself: how could the swallowing of a seed produce such an effect? For her, words and pictures did not have to be connected. She accepted confusion as a normal state. She didn't know she had a right to understand. However, acting out a story is a precise enterprise. When Rose put a bead on the rug and pretended to swallow it, the children asked what she was doing.

"I'm eating the seed, that's what," she said. Eddie saw the error first. "No, that's for planting. This is water. You know, a sea."

Rose was perplexed. Seeing she had made a mistake, she stopped listening. Wally took the bead out of her hand. "Pretend a fairy changed the seed into a big ocean. They call that a sea sometimes and sometimes they call it an ocean. Now just drink it like the man in the book....Blow up your cheeks like this...." Rose copied every motion Wally made and then did it by herself, grinning at him.

Paley's reflection follows:

I would not have 'explained' the difference between sea and seed by magically turning a sea into a seed. And yet, why not? Wally's magic released Rose from her fear and embarrassment. Now she could listen and understand.... Wally used the word pretend as a teaching tool.

"The language of power-from-within," writes the Wiccan theologian Starhawk, "is poetry, metaphor, symbol, ritual, the language of magic, of 'thinking in things,' where the concrete becomes resonant with mysteries that go beyond its seemingly solid form."

I think that, at this particular juncture in UU history, more metaphor and less literalist identification with various theological identities could be a healing force in our congregations' spiritual lives.

I visit a lot of churches. And as I do, I am troubled by what seems to me an increasing tension between Unitarian Universalists of various theologies—particularly between UUs with the self-identity of "humanists" and UUs with the self-identity of "theists." I guess it troubles me particularly because, having grown up in this faith, it seems to me that the whole point of our faith is to be more committed to religious metaphors than to religious labels. Yet I see UUs on both sides of what seems to me a non-existent fence digging in trenches and feeling increasingly intolerant of one another.

Buddhism, as I currently understand it, is a metaphoric system holding the kindness of Wally's statement: "Let's pretend a fairy turned the seed into a big ocean." Only the

Buddhist's statement might look something like this: "Let's pretend a fairy turned your heart into the heart of the universe. Let's pretend that by knowing our own hearts, we know the heart of the universe and touch freedom."

Couldn't Christianity's story be explained as, "Pretend that God has already been tortured and murdered, but that God was even bigger than death. Pretend that identifying with the bigness that can't be killed frees us to be with God."

Humanism's metaphoric statement might be: "Pretend that everything that is divine resides right inside us as human beings! By really harvesting all of the wonderful bounty right in our own flawed, imperfect selves, we can be free to live as strong, powerful, spiritual beings."

In each case, I am looking at the metaphors offered by given religious symbol systems with the intention of finding liberation and freedom, just as Wally's intention in pretending that a seed became a sea was to free Rose from embarrassment and fear.

We need to open up every kind of metaphor—religious, scientific, artistic—to look for hints of freedom if Unitarian Universalism is to be a vital, pluralistic, liberating religious movement. That is the beauty of our abiding belief in the ongoing nature of revelation: that truth and beauty can be more fully known each day of our lives.

Metaphor is a vehicle for bearing larger, deeper meaning. We can do ourselves harm if we take religious language of any kind literally, like the man sitting on the tracks of the Tokyo Express. But if we, rather, use metaphor to carry us across chasms of fear, of uncertainty, of despair, then religion can offer us, for a moment at least, the gifts we need in order to be free.

Let's pretend! Let's pretend that we need each other, that each of us has unique and complex understandings of the world which are made stronger by sharing them in contexts where others, who are unthreatened by diversity, will put forth their own. Let's pretend that we really have the power to imagine and then to create justice. Let's pretend that in so doing, we will re-imagine and re-create our very souls.

In the words of Adrienne Rich:

Any truly revolutionary art is an alchemy through which waste, greed, brutality...and anger are transmuted into some drenching recognition of the WHAT IF? The possible. WHAT IF? The first revolutionary question, the question the dying forces don't know how to ask.

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