

Metaphor

Understanding me, or my work, requires a thorough knowledge of the nature of metaphor. Metaphor is ubiquitous in my daily life. I experience metaphor like other people consume food—for nourishment and pleasure. I notice and apprehend them; I don't create them. As I will explain, I consider metaphors to be direct communications from God. Perceiving metaphors is my main religious practice, my form of worship, superseding even sex. Although I generally do not care if my thoughts are adopted by others, I do recommend the reader take up *this* practice. If you want to live a worthwhile life, you *must* develop skill in metaphor.

A *metaphor* is a meaningful correspondence, an enlightening similarity, between two things. A *potential metaphor* is one that exists, but that has not yet been perceived. Acknowledgment of a potential metaphor brings the metaphor to life for the observer. More simply put, statements such as “X is like Y” are metaphors. However, the correspondence should be *meaningful*, which is to say that apprehension of a metaphor sheds light, intellectual and spiritual, on both X and Y. X and Y will gain significance in the mind of the observer as a result of the observing. “Enlightening similarity” is just another way of putting it, with a mild difference in emphasis. “A car is like a train” is a metaphor, but it is *weak*. Yes, both are modes of

transportation, both have wheels, and both go fast, but we gain little insight into the nature of existence by acknowledging this metaphor. This metaphor enlightens only slightly.

Some metaphors are weak in another way. “An apple is like a piece of cheese” is weak in the previous sense (it doesn’t shed much light), but it is also weak because the only significant way an apple resembles cheese is that both are foodstuffs. They are not even both fruit; they are quite different foodstuffs. So this metaphor reveals even less about the objects than the car/train metaphor did. In this essay, we will discuss *strong* metaphors.

Some strong metaphors pass into a category all their own. Traditionally, they are called *similes*, but I prefer the term *perfect metaphor*. They are metaphors of the form “X is Y,” excluding cases where X really is Y. “2 is 8/4” is not a metaphor at all; it is properly called an *equation*. “My home is a womb” is a metaphor, and it might be a perfect metaphor if the observer feels such a strong correspondence between her home and a womb that, for her, it feels like a *perfect* correspondence. For example, her home is small (perhaps one room), dark, warm, safe, humid, and nurturing to her. With all of those womblike qualities, she might be justified in feeling that the metaphor is perfect. Obviously, a perfect metaphor stops short of being an equation. It is not *that* perfect. It’s just that the observer is so excited about the many similarities that she feels justified in making a claim of perfection.

Let’s examine a couple of easy metaphors that do enlighten. “Peace is like a sunny day” and “Rage is like a bad storm.” They are easy, because everyone can immediately see how the calm serenity of a peaceful disposition resembles pleasant weather, and how the tempestuous violence of rage resembles a destructive storm. Indeed, states of weather resemble human feelings. People like being around the serene, because they are not bothered and one can relax and exchange

pleasantries with them. One feels no threat or discomfort; rather the sunny disposition rubs off, much like a sunny day makes everybody feel happy. Rage, on the other hand, resembles a bad storm. Recriminations, perhaps punches, fly. Bystanders may feel extreme discomfort in its presence, just as one avoids the pouring rain, and fears lightning. Where will it strike next?

Another common metaphor about rage reads “Rage is like a runaway freight train.” This metaphor interests me because it points out something about the nature of the *experience* of rage in oneself. Rage builds upon itself, and threatens to spin out of control. Those who have anger-management issues, a recent preoccupation, discuss this condition ad nauseum. A train is a powerful, potentially destructive monster, just like rage. A runaway train gains momentum by itself, as it thrusts forward on the tracks toward an unsuspecting village. This combination of destructive power and self-developing momentum are very similar in the train and the enraged. We actually learn and underscore in our minds something about rage by recognizing this metaphor.

Consider a somewhat controversial metaphor, with supporters and detractors popular in American life. “Dog ownership is like child rearing.” I confess, I am a supporter of this metaphor. My partner and I have owned a sixty-pound dog for eleven years. He is old now, but we believe with absolute certainty that he is our child. Family members have repeatedly warned us against taking him to the vet compulsively, and in the last few years we have heeded that advice. But for most of his life, he went to the vet for the slightest ailment. We spent well over ten thousand dollars on vet bills, because we worried about him like a parent worries about a child. It’s been love. We have to pick up his poop, make sure he doesn’t run out into traffic, discourage him from eating discarded chicken bones, provide him playtime with his friends

at great expense, and give him license to take up room in our apartment, even if it leads to our discomfort. My partner once looked at me and said, “Thank God he’s never going to want a driver’s license.” Clearly, child rearing has many more facets to it that we may not be able to imagine, but all the basic structures are there, even if you think dog ownership inferior to child rearing. That metaphor is not really about dogs and children, however. It is about the experience of caring for another creature. Apprehending the metaphor enlightens the observer about what it means to be an interested caretaker.

Now I’d like to introduce a metaphor (one of my personal favorites) that is not widely acknowledged. “Conversing with friends is like dining on one another’s souls.” This metaphor may have suggested itself to me because conversation so often accompanies dinner. How are conversation and cannibalism similar? Conversation partners nourish one another by sharing their thoughts. Better than reading, or hearing a lecture, conversation allows two souls to *play* and, in the process, enrich themselves. I give pieces of myself to the other, and he gives pieces of himself to me. We are made vulnerable, exposed and consumed. Neither of us is diminished in the giving, but we nevertheless sacrifice ourselves. The cannibalism of souls happens with the utmost ease. I cannot avoid the obvious comparison to the Last Supper. “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Jesus sacrificed himself for love of his disciples, love of his enemies—indeed, love of all humanity. His love was deep and abiding. Correctly understood, the Last Supper is another metaphor about the nature of love and loving. “Selfless love is like being eaten alive.” Most parents will give their children food and sneakers, before they nourish themselves. Most husbands will go without a new suit so their wives can have a new dress. Most friends will drop everything to come to the aid of a suffering buddy. Most conversation partners share

things about themselves without concern for their exposure to ridicule, to help the other see an important insight. Love says, "I will give you my flesh and blood before I will allow you to do without." This is Jesus's metaphor, not mine, but shame on those (especially Christians) who have never contemplated its true meaning.

While cannibalism beautifully captures the essence of self-sacrifice, another great metaphor for love is slavery. "Love of a friend, partner, or child is like slavery." At the heart of slavery lies complicity and compulsion. Indeed, we find both of these in love. Coming to love someone, except a child, doesn't happen overnight. Even in the case of children, ideally the prospective parents will contemplate whether they want to love a child. Embarking on love is a choice; therefore, the lover is complicit in his loving. But the *compulsion* is extreme. We feel it in our torso: stomach *and* chest. An ache like no other blossoms there, and we *need* to celebrate, nourish, raise up, and make happy our beloved. It doesn't go away when it's real. I don't need to justify my statement that love of a friend, partner, or child is a heavy chain and manacle that binds us to them permanently. This metaphor is actually an example of a perfect metaphor. Love and slavery are so close in nature that it actually may seem that they are one and the same.

One enlightening way of looking at Plato's Doctrine of Forms involves understanding the forms as a sort of metaphor. Platonic forms are commonly understood to be overarching abstract concepts of which actual things partake. For example, the chair I am sitting in, the chair across the room, the chair I sat in yesterday at the office, the chair in my mother's sitting room, et cetera indefinitely, all feed off of the grand concept "Chair." That concept is a Platonic form that exists in the heaven of the abstract, and we can perceive it, download it to our minds, by recognizing the similarities in the chairs we encounter. Notice the phrase "recognizing the similarities." Is

this not the essence of metaphor as we defined it? Many people who have trouble with Plato's doctrine might have an easier time if they think of the doctrine in terms of metaphor. Then a form is a grand overarching product of an infinite, or very large, number of metaphors. "This chair is like that chair," "That chair is like a third chair," et cetera. Put all the metaphors together, generate an essence that all the metaphors support, and you have a Platonic form for "Chair."

How does one "generate an essence" from a metaphor? Consider one of my favorite metaphors, discussed earlier: "Conversing with friends is like dining on one another's souls." We already know how the two subjects are similar, but can we distill, through a process of triangulation, a third thing, beyond the two subjects, that summarizes their similarity? I'll suggest *sharing*, although I can think of a number of other productive possibilities. Both conversation, when it's done right, and dining on one another's souls, when they are lovingly offered, are examples of sharing. Sharing is like conversation, and sharing is like dining on one another's souls. Indeed, our whole concept of sharing, which for many may have merely involved offering up a cookie over lunch, expands and reveals pounds of new information about the nature of the human soul, love, consideration, and mutual sacrifice. This has been an extremely useful metaphor.

Sometimes metaphors are *compound*, or complex. Traditionally, complex metaphors are called *allegories*, but in keeping with our nomenclature, we shall call them *compound metaphors*. Heretofore, we have been discussing *atomic metaphors*: "X is like Y." Compound metaphors are complicated arrangements of atomic metaphors, often interlocking or interplaying, frequently in a narrative format, and likely merely suggested. In the hands of an expert, like Plato, Jesus, Dante, Milton, or Shakespeare, the entire edifice of metaphors forms a grand metaphor of its own. A story of a

journey filled with atomic metaphors, for example, might best be understood as describing an individual's spiritual discoveries on the way.

Let's examine an important, small compound metaphor belonging to Jesus. Matthew 19:24 reads, "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." We have "a camel going through the eye of a needle" compared to "a rich man entering the kingdom of God." We have "a camel" compared to "a rich man," and we have "the eye of a needle" compared to "the entrance to the kingdom of God." So, clearly, Jesus invokes a compound metaphor. What does it mean?

In what way is a rich man like a camel? Camels are enormous. People ride them. They would have been familiar to the people Jesus was talking to. Rich people, however, aren't necessarily obese. How might Jesus have been suggesting that rich people are huge? Their bank accounts might be huge, and that might give them a lot of power, which would in turn give them a huge presence. Take one step more and you've got it. A huge presence houses a huge *ego*. On the other hand, how is the eye of a needle like the entrance to heaven? The eye is tiny; in fact, it is miraculously tiny. Jesus deliberately chose something exceptionally tiny to compare to the entrance. Now it is becoming clear. In order to get into heaven, one's ego must fit through a tiny aperture set up to exclude outside egos. Poor people, rich people who give everything away to take care of others, modest people, loving people, self-sacrificing people, generous people—in other words, people who don't *care* about their own egos—have a chance at passing through the gate to heaven. People with power, importance, or money, who necessarily have big egos, have no chance of getting into heaven at all. What is it about ego size that caused God to create heaven and earth in such a way that people with large egos

couldn't get into heaven? *That* is the central, almost universally misunderstood mystery of all religious thought.

Sonnet 73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consummed with that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

—1609

Shakespeare's sonnet is a compound metaphor, but much more complex than the one just discussed. I will not offer a thorough and detailed analysis of the poem, because this essay is not literary criticism. However, the basic metaphorical structure is fair game. It is beautiful, as befits Shakespeare, and it particularly appeals to me, because I find myself at mid-life, and my partner is downright elderly. It is a sonnet about a couple, at just our relative ages, facing the winter of life. The first quatrain establishes the premise: you see winter in me. Of course, winter is described eloquently: the leaves are almost gone from branches that shake in the cold, and those same "bare ruined choirs" (gorgeous) go without the birds that recently sang on them. "My old age is like winter."

The next quatrain compares old age to twilight and oncoming night. As black night has consumed the fading sunset in the western sky, death comes to extinguish us. Is the speaker dead already? I think it remains unclear, and that's as it should be. The third quatrain suggests a funeral bier filled with ash. The fire left in me burns up what's left of my life. My youth and my past are consumed with my body. So we have three metaphors, one in each of the three quatrains: I am like winter, I am like twilight, I am like a man consumed by his own self-generating fire. Finally, the lover, left behind, loves the dying partner all the more. The dying itself inspires love, which is a subtle, sophisticated observation, true to Shakespeare's reputation.

The sonnet offers us three times as much information about old age as an atomic metaphor would. Two of the metaphors compare old age to periods in nature: a season and a time of day. Clearly the process of human life (youth, middle age, old age) occurs naturally in the seasons of the year, the passing of a day, as if to remind. The third quatrain suggests that the life force itself, nourishing in youth, ultimately consumes the man in old age. This in turn implies that the same flame found in a human being can be witnessed in nature. When the wick burns down, the candle extinguishes. Hence, there is something about life on this planet that *requires* a cycle of growth, flourishing, decline, and death. The sonnet is about many things, but one of those is the comic, tragic inevitability of decline that is old age.

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Earlier I wrote that I practice my religion, Christian Taoism, partly by busily apprehending and assessing metaphors. For me, metaphors, when they appear, are messages from God, designed to lure my mind, psyche, and soul *toward* God. God

primarily communicates with me by exposing me to an endless stream of metaphors. Digesting metaphors enables the observer to learn ever more about the human world and its spiritual meaning. That alone seduces the observer toward enlightenment. But in many ways, God is the ultimate metaphor, a kind of summary of all metaphors. If you accept my analysis of Plato's Doctrine of Forms as a doctrine of metaphor, then Plato already said what I'm saying, since the ultimate Platonic form is the *good*. Plato didn't know the Judeo-Christian God, but the early Christians certainly identified Plato's good with their God. So it all fits together quite nicely.

What do I mean when I say God communicates with me? Perhaps I am facing a choice in my life. I can retreat back to an earlier position, or I can launch forward and take a big risk. I ponder for days. Then I decide to go for a walk with the dog. My thoughts fade into the background as I monitor the dog, keeping him from walking into fellow pedestrians. Suddenly there is a noise in the street. I look up. I see a large sign on the other side of the bicycle lane. "No U-Turns." My mind clamps down in response like the grasping leaves of a Venus fly trap. God is suggesting I don't retreat back, but move forward, despite the risk. I may not make that decision, but God has weighed in with his prescient advice. It makes the entire intellectual and emotional balance of the decision process more interesting and thorough.

Only God could make me take the dog for a walk just in time to hear the noise that makes me look up to see the sign. Only God could make me choose that route. Everything has to align perfectly so that I can get the message. One might think this sort of thing doesn't happen often. In fact, my daily life is peppered with encounters with heaven-sent metaphors, large and small. On the other hand, how can God plan and arrange so many variables to "communicate" this way with so many people all at the same time? That's where

omnipotence comes in handy. Given what we know about computers, it's not that far-fetched. Of course, most people think sudden insight as the result of a seemingly random encounter with their environment constitutes coincidence, and that's fine if you are a person who believes the universe is dumb and random. No one, as yet, can refute that. I believe the universe is designed, however, albeit not by God, but by the Tao.

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Most of us occupy seats in a giant movie theater. Almost always, we face the screen. Rarely do we turn toward our compatriots, since we are riveted forward. All kinds of movies play on the screen: for example, movies about conservatism versus liberalism; Republicans versus Democrats; silly, romantic chick flicks; action movies in which heroes destroy the enemy, or sports stars win the game against all odds; depictions of successful, wealthy people that enable us to participate for a while in a lifestyle we will never experience; historical movies that comment on the past from the currently dominant point of view; empty, meaningless comedies that anaesthetize the audience. *They* created these movies for us, because they want us to behave in certain ways, and think certain kinds of things. And we do. There is nothing else, only the movies playing endlessly all our lives, subtly influencing and molding our minds and souls.

One of the men gets bored. He looks around the theater at all the other people vacantly staring at the screen. He looks back at the screen, and tries to concentrate, but he develops an increasingly nagging feeling that something just isn't right. This can't be all there is to life. The movie playing on the screen at the moment resembles the movie they played yesterday. It's basically the same—different costumes, different

dialogue, same message. He turns to his neighbor and shakes him. He asks him, "Do you like this movie?"

"Yeah, it's great," the other man confirms with a smile. Our hero realizes that *all* of the people in the theater are smiling. They all seem to think the movie is "great." He tries to concentrate on the movie. He wants to fit in, to conform. After all, what else is there to do? He may as well enjoy the movie, rather than simmer inside.

After another couple of hours, our hero has had enough. He spies the emergency exit at the front right of the theater. But how to get to it? No one he knows has ever *left* the theater. He takes one last look at the movie, his fellow moviegoers smiling up at the screen, and he gets up. Some people start to grumble that he's blocking their view. He panics and bolts for the aisle. People make room for him, but one woman near the end of the row grasps his sleeve and says, "Don't you think you should sit back down? There is nothing else." He doesn't care; it's too much for him to bear. He reaches the aisle and crouches down to avoid blocking someone's view. Then he notices ushers heading in his direction. They're carrying some kind of canvas bag or coat in front of them, and fast approaching him. "Sir, sir," they cry. He runs, as if his life depends on it, around the aisle toward the door. He can hear the ushers calling out to one another and running themselves. He reaches the door, grabs the bar, and pushes. Surprise, surprise—it opens.

The ushers are still behind him, following with the white canvas. "Sir, sir," they shout. They follow him out into a dim alleyway, but he is running now and exits onto a bright, empty street. He can't hesitate to look around, but the light out here, shining from above, blinds him. The ushers are still following him as he runs through the streets, hitting metal mailboxes and lamp posts because he can't see for all the light. His lungs are bursting, and he feels he might have to give up, to turn himself

in to the ushers. Just as he is about to do that, he realizes they have gone away, back to the theater. He is lost to them.

Our hero squints. It's taking him a long time to see in the light, because he's been in the theater all his life. He starts to see things. The things aren't flat on the screen, but three-dimensional and real in a way he's completely unfamiliar with. He can touch them. He bangs on a window of a store, and it makes a noise, and he can control the noise with his fist. It's like he's in his *own* movie, a movie designed and executed by him, and the endless damnation of the picture show is over.

Where are the people? Well, of course, he thinks, the people are all back in the theater. He's free, but he's utterly alone. He would have died of boredom in the theater, but now he will die of loneliness. He roams the streets for hours, gazing at the vacant businesses, the taverns, the school, the city hall. He avoids getting close to the theater, but he has trouble judging where the movie theater is, because he's never used a map before. Gradually, he reaches the outskirts of the town, and the road begins to slope uphill. Fewer and fewer buildings and structures populate this part of town.

He begins to hear white noise, the quietest, most soothing white noise. The road begins to tilt precipitously. He decides to climb. The road slopes toward the light, which still bothers his eyes, but he perseveres. The climb is endless. Then, just when he decides he should give up and at least return to the empty town, he hears a voice: "Come here." Who could that be? Up near a ridge with some trees, where the road ends, is a small gathering of people. "Dude, come here. It's OK." The people are reaching out to him and calling him forward. There's an elderly, wrinkled man, and a middle-aged man with a dark complexion, and a young woman with long, flowing hair, and others. He finally reaches them.

The man with the dark complexion grasps his left hand, and the elderly man grasps the right. The woman offers him

some nourishment. Our hero grins broadly. "Where have you been?" Tears gather in his eyes, and he sucks in breath to stop himself from bawling outright. "Where have you been? Who are you?"

The dark man replies, "I'm Dante, and this is Socrates."

"And I'm Athena," the young woman says.

Our hero begins to breathe more regularly. "Where is this place?"

"It's the end of the world," Athena replies. Our hero's vision has returned to almost normal. He needn't squint anymore. He can look at the trees, and the edge of a nearby cliff, and a narrow, dirt path, beside which a cow and a lamb passively eat grass. But he doesn't dare look up at the sun. "You escaped," Athena half asked, half asserted.

"I didn't know I was supposed to. I just couldn't take it anymore, being in there. What happens to the people I left behind?" asks our hero.

"There's an incinerator behind the theater," says Dante with a frown.

"But come." Socrates motions him toward the cliff edge. He looks over the edge at a vision that takes his breath away. In every direction in the expanse beyond the rock formation, valleys; and streams; and mountains; and oceans; and cities teeming with people, and buildings, libraries, galleries, houses of worship, assembly halls and stadiums; and farms filled with animals and endless acres of crops; stretch forth, beckoning to him. "You can go anywhere you like," Socrates says.

He surveys the wonderful landscape for many minutes, and then he gazes up at the sky. It is a spectacular, beautiful deep blue. In the movies, it had never been so blue, but here it looks like a cello sounds. He feels a breeze brush his cheek, and he notices a thunderstorm brewing over a distant mountainside. He can hear and feel the rumble of the echoing thunder. Everything thrills him, and makes him want to cry

with joy. It is all real; not contrived; not propaganda; not manipulative, duplicitous, boring, or fake. It is sincere and beautiful and natural. He feels so grateful; his heart threatens to burst with love.

“Now look.” Socrates motions toward the sun. Our hero becomes afraid. Won’t he be blinded?

“No, look.” Dante points directly at the sun, and our hero follows Dante’s left arm with his eyes, to his hand, and beyond, toward the source of all light. He isn’t blinded. Instead he gazes into the face of God.