



The use of metaphor in therapy

Dr Jonathan Lloyd

# Introductions

---

Group Introductions – including hopes and fears for the day, why you are here & describe yourself as a therapist metaphorically

# Agenda

---

09:30 – 09:50 Introductions

09:50 – 10:00 Definitions

10:10 – 11:00 Models of Therapy and their use of metaphor (including negative aspects)– what the literature tells us.

11:00 – 11:15 Coffee Break

11:15 – 12:00 Findings - a brief discussion including standing-in-for discussion.

12:00 – 12:30 Therapist Generated Metaphors including practice.

12:30 – 13:00 Lunch

13:00 – 13:30 Client Generated Metaphors including exercise.

13:30 – 14:00 Clean language – DVD and demonstration

14:00 – 15:30 Co-constructed/moving metaphors/plus practice

15:30 – 16:00 Conclusion

# Some Definitions

---

## METAPHOR

Overarching definition of metaphor: "as the phenomenon whereby we talk, and potentially think about something in terms of something else".

The term metaphor is derived from the Greek word metapherein, to transfer over. The etymological roots of the word are meta meaning beyond or over, plus pherein meaning to bring or bear.

In this context a metaphor is something that is brought or carried over or beyond.



**Similes** make use of the same cognitive mechanism as metaphors and have a rational or logical element to them. For example, ‘she smiled *like a* Cheshire Cat’



Examples of a British culturally specific **metonym** includes 'the Crown' meaning the monarchy. An example of a metonym perhaps with a with a more universal application would be 'plastic' meaning credit cards. They stand-in-for.



**Cryptophors**, are carriers of hidden meaning and are of particular relevance to counselling and psychotherapy (Cox & Theilgaard, 1987).



Deep Metaphors (therapeutic metaphors?)  
are defined as:

"consistent, recurring images of a life story that give coherence to, and aid in, the interpretation of the events of that life....and are used by clients to both circumscribe and frame possible solutions to the problems in their lives" (Mallinson et al., 1996, p.2).



# MODELS & METAPHOR

---



## Person Centred

Rogers uses organic metaphors to describe his approach such as a **potato which grows in a dark cellar which reveals an organism's tendencies to self-actualise** (Rogers, 1979).

**The absence of the promotion of the specific use of metaphors** in the traditional person-centred literature is probably due to the authentic person to person “therapy as relationship encounter” (Rogers, 1962, p.185) stance which takes precedence over techniques and theory (Wyatt, 2001). It is about “a way of being” (Rogers, 1980, p.227).

# Person Centred

---

**Communication:** - Rogers (1973, p.4) could not be clearer when he penned “one overriding theme in my professional life... is my caring about communication. I have wanted to understand, as profoundly as possible, the communication of the other. I have wanted to be understood.”

# Person Centred

---

The absence of the promotion of the specific use of metaphors in the traditional person-centred literature is probably due to the authentic person to person “therapy as relationship encounter” (Rogers, 1962, p.185) stance which takes precedence over techniques and theory (Wyatt, 2001). It is about “a way of being” (Rogers, 1980, p.227).

Empathy is defined by Rogers (1975, p.3) as:

**“entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever, that he/she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in his/her life, moving about in it delicately without making judgments, sensing meanings of which he/she is scarcely aware, but not trying to uncover feelings of which the person is totally unaware, since this would be too threatening...”**

There appears to be more explicit reference to the use of metaphors in the *process oriented* literature. Worsley (2002) proposes that meaning is never exhausted and the client's metaphors are "radically interpersonal" (p.82). He suggests that *client generated* metaphors are crucial in gaining an understanding of meaning and that they "invite shared exploration" (p.82) and the therapist needs to be guarded about what they offer into the client's metaphor.

Rennie (1998) suggests that the use of metaphor "liberates the secondary stream of consciousness" (p.44).

Sanders (2007, pp.111-112): “therapy is dialogue, is relational... A dialogical approach to therapy is one that emphasises or even rests completely on dialogue, that is, the *co-created* relationship between helper and the person being helped.”

I propose that the idea of co-created dialogue being a key concept has close connotations to the use of metaphors in therapy.

# Relational Depth



Knox (2011, p.132):

“Do you know the ...is it, Michelangelo painting in the Sistine Chapel, where you have the two fingers? It’s kind of like that and there comes a point ‘ch-ch-ch’ and the contact is there...”

# CBT

---

Stott et al. (2010) explain the importance of metaphors in CT and CBT: "Cognitive Therapy has, as a central task, the aim of transforming meaning to further the client's goals and help journey towards a more helpful, realistic and adaptive view of the self and the world. Metaphor should therefore be a powerful companion" (p.14).

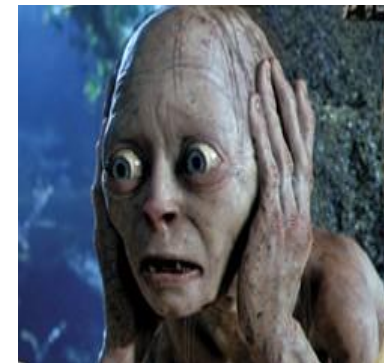


Whilst Stott et al. (2010) state good reasons to pay close attention to the client's own metaphor, they concede that the majority of metaphors are introduced by the CBT or CT therapist.

Indeed, the greater part of the publication prescribes useful therapist-generated metaphors for certain classes of psychological issues such as Eating Disorders, Psychosis, and Bipolar Disorder.

For example, the metaphor of a pressure cooker is suggested as useful for those clients suffering from anger issues as it illustrates the process of pressure building up during periods of in-assertiveness.

There are many 'empowering metaphors' suggested that relate to current scenarios in films and books that could be useful for clients. For example, Gollum's multiple internal voices heard at increased times of stress in The Lord of the Rings can be a helpful metaphor for those clients hearing voices



# Psychodynamic

---

Enckell (2002) suggests that the specific way the unconscious endeavours to represent reality is non-literal and is analogous to the theory of metaphor. Thus, a significant element of psychoanalytical investigation is comparable to the reading of metaphors.

Siegelman (1990, p.128) states that: “our inability to see the hidden or implicit metaphors can prevent patients from enlarging the meaning of their experience”.

Freud, (1917, p.295) provides us with a metaphorical description of the unconscious, conscious and the process of censorship:

“Let us therefore compare the system of the unconscious to a large entrance hall, in which the mental impulses jostle with each other like separate individuals. Adjoining this entrance hall is a second narrower room – a kind of drawing room – in which consciousness too resides. But on the threshold between these two rooms a watchman performs his function: he examines the different mental impulses, acts as a censor, and will not admit them into the drawing room if they displease him.”

The use of metaphor in psychotherapy enhances the exchange between the unconscious and conscious realms (the entrance hall and the drawing room) as the metaphor can bypass the client's censoring defences. Metaphors allow the client: "safe access to hitherto buried (*and guarded*) experience" (Cox & Theilgaard, 1987, p.69).

NOTHING  
**UNSAFE**  
• GETS IN •



Working with dreams can be an fundamental element of a Jungian Analyst's work with their client and can indicate unconscious wish fulfilment and latent transferential issues (Sharpe, 1988). Sharpe (1988, p.7) suggests that dreams indicate the individual psychical product of the individual:

“The dream-life holds within itself not only the evidence of instinctual drives and mechanisms, by which those dreams are harnessed or neutralised, but also the actual experiences through which we have passed...dreams are like individual works of art.”

Deep metaphorical visualisations that clients access during therapy, referred to in Rice (1974) as *evocative reflections*. I find that symbols, dreams, imagery, visualisation are all metaphoric messages from the unconscious that help us conceive the world in a meaningful and safe way, and connect our emotions with the visual.



# Negative Aspects

Potential pitfalls with using metaphors;

1. overvaluing
2. undervaluing
3. literalizing
4. an appealing metaphor may stand in the way of a less elegant more appropriate description
5. focusing on metaphors may take us away from deeper social meanings

**6. oversimplification can follow metaphors**

**the 'poorly timed' metaphor introduced by the therapist when the client is silent and 'creatively reflective' is regarded by some (C&T) as ill placed and contaminating**

**7. metaphors should have a therapeutic insightful element and not involve a "string of avoidance" .**

**a client may not wish to engage with metaphors, particularly if it has been introduced by the therapist, factors may include low self-esteem or a difficulty to visualise.**

**8. metaphors can be used by clients as a way of avoiding conflict or as part of a power struggle with their counsellor**

There may also be difficulties relating to certain mental health issues, for example, the following of client generated metaphors with those with Psychosis or Borderline Personality Disorders can make them become extremely anxious as they may experience metaphors as a form of direct revelation of a concrete, and often ruthless reality. I would add that a significant percentage of clients on the Autistic Spectrum can also struggle with the non-logical viewpoint that metaphors engage.

Milioni (2007) points to the danger of the therapist using the client's metaphor as a 'silencing device'. In such cases the client's world-view is closed down in favour of the therapist's interpretation.

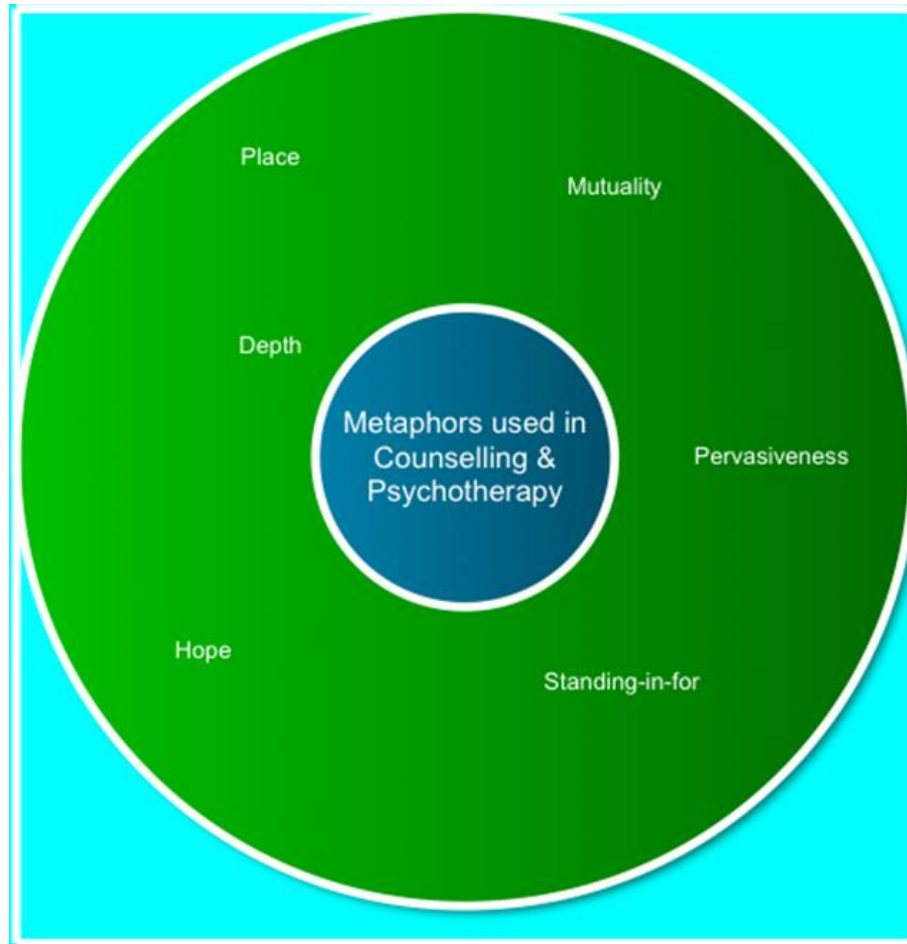
Cox & Theilgaard (1987, p.61) metaphorically describe this potentiality: "If the therapist is too predatory he may damage the humming bird with the lasso".



# FINDINGS

---

A BRIEF DISCUSSION









I am like....

I am like the wind  
I am the train on  
the tracks  
that runs and runs  
and runs

I am from you  
me  
us  
them

I am like the glue  
that binds  
the magnet that  
repels  
the missing in the  
fog

I am like my child  
I can play  
I can smile  
can cry  
I can find strength  
from here

I am like a bird  
I can fly  
I can drift  
as high as the cloud  
I can burrow deep into the cloud

I am always there  
ready  
on the shelf  
in the dream  
in this moment

I am like the creator  
I can change  
colour  
shape  
Your world and mine

I am like the gift  
the chameleon pathway to your  
mind

I am like the knot in your gut  
I rest in your heart  
I rest in your neck  
like the blade in your side  
I hold the dreams you cannot tell

I am like  
what you are like  
change me you  
our hills caves and dance floors

I am like the monster sleeping in the dark  
that can lead to doors  
doors hiding smiles behind

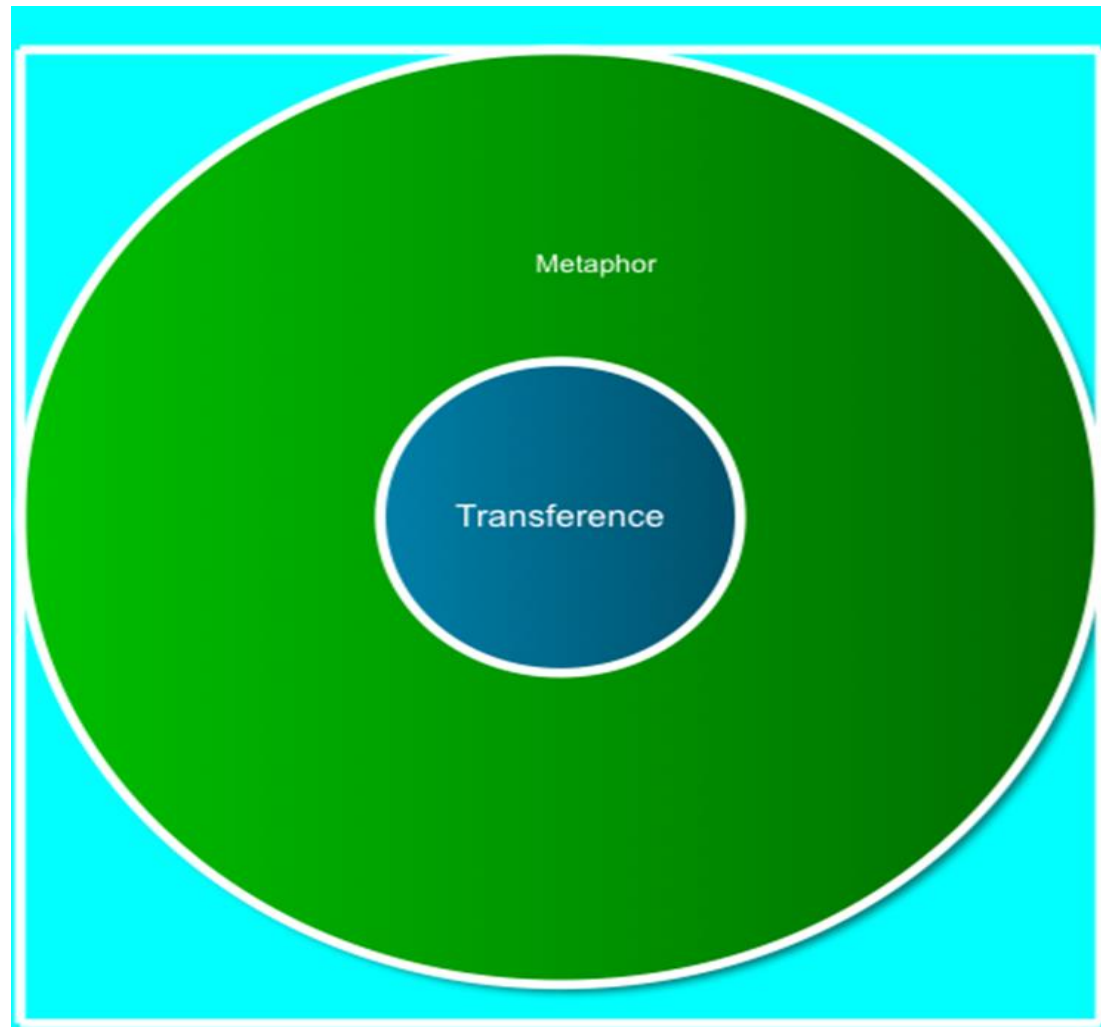
I am like the crack in the cult  
the safe dungeon  
the shiny hub  
the frozen rose

I am like the tissues in the box  
I am hope

I am like.

## STANDING IN FOR – THE METONYMS OF THE THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP

The therapist is a metaphor for a lover, a care-giver, a teacher, a maiden, a shaman. You are a shape shifter, a chameleon, "whoever your client needs you to be. While still being yourself".



# Standing-in-for – Discussion

---



# ORIGINATION & DEVELOPMENT

---

Therapist Generated  
Client Generated  
Co-Created

# Therapist Generated Metaphors – see following slides

---

‘Bank Metaphors’ or ‘off-the-shelf’ metaphors include:-

Castles

Trains

Wheels

Rivers

Trees (& Plants)

Desert Islands

Poems/Literature/Films/TV/Radio/Plays – cultural metaphors?

Shapes (Tomkins)

“Attend. Witness. Wait.

Discern, formulate, potentiate, and reflect mutative  
metaphorical material.

Attend. Witness Wait.” C&T.

## ***The Black Parrot***

*By Dorothy Nimmo*



*Kill the black parrot. Choke the sodding bird,  
it never said a kind thing or a true word,  
or if it did that wasn't what I heard.*

*I only heard it squawking in my ear  
things no-one in their right mind wants to hear  
that made me cold with shame and white with fear.*

*Behave yourself. Control yourself. You know  
you don't think that, you only think you do.*

*You can't just please yourself, I told you so.*

*You're being selfish. It's for your own good.*

*You must. You must not. But you know you should.*

*If you try harder, I am sure you could.*

*I'm disappointed in you. Never say I didn't tell you.*

*But you had your own way, you'd not be told. There'll be a price to pay.*

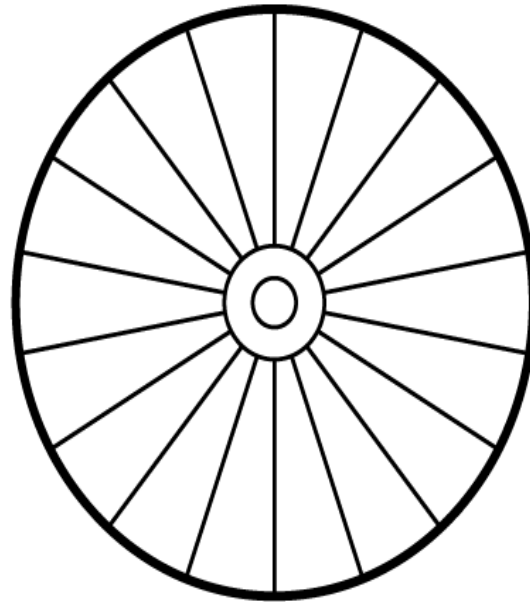
*Where was it polly learned that canting word?*

*It's time to wring its neck, the stupid bird.*

*What made us think that was the voice of God?*

# Wheel of Relationship

---





# Tree of well-being

---



# Experiential

---

In small groups discuss any metaphors that you introduce to clients and the context in which you will introduce them – any ‘case-studies’?

# Client Generated Metaphors

---



Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.233) note “In therapy, much of self-understanding involves consciously recognising previously unconscious metaphors and how we live by them”.

Further, as Ricoeur (1986) recognises, the metaphor needs to be isomorphic to the problem, the story and the situation of the client himself so that he can recognise himself in it and find out new ways to perceive his difficulties.



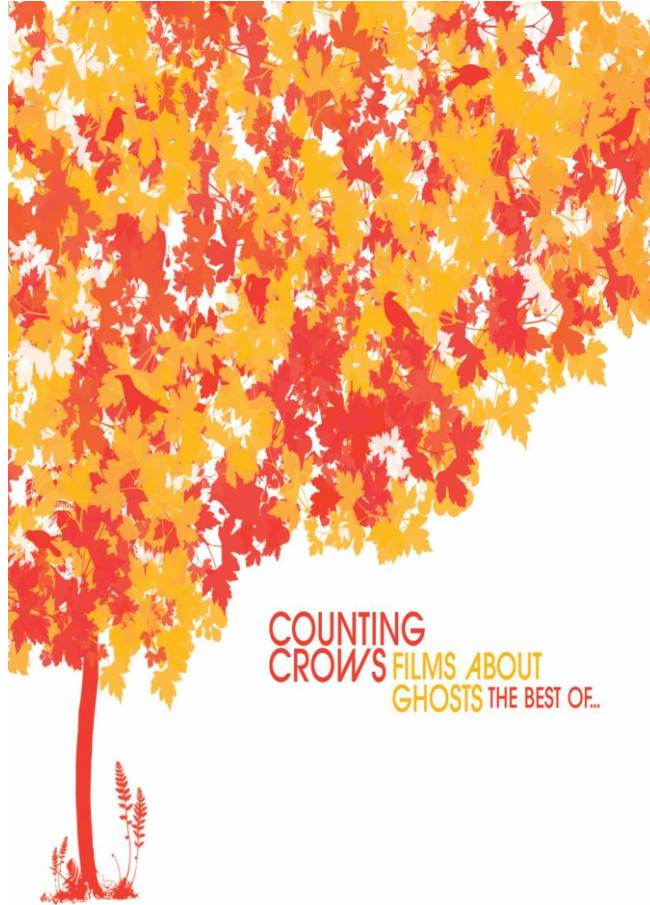
**Samuel Beckett's 'Happy Days'**





# Experiential – Mrs Potter & Case Study

---





## "Mrs. Potter's Lullaby"

Well I woke up in mid afternoon cause that's when it all hurts the most  
I dream I never know anyone at the party and I'm always the host  
If dreams are like movies then memories are films about ghosts  
You can never escape, you can only move south down the coast  
Well I am an idiot walking a tightrope of fortune and fame  
I am an acrobat swinging trapezes through circles of flame  
If you've never stared off into the distance then your life is a shame  
And though I'll never forget your face sometimes I can't remember my  
name

Hey, Mrs. Potter, don't cry

Hey, Mrs. Potter, I know why

But, hey, Mrs. Potter, won't you talk to me

Well there's a piece of Maria in every song that I sing

And the price of a memory is the memory of the sorrow it brings

And there is always one last light to turn out and one last bell to ring

And the last one out of the circus has to lock up everything

Or the elephants will get out and forget to remember what you said

Oh and the ghosts of the tilt-o-whirl will linger inside of your head

Oh and the Ferris wheel junkies will spin there forever instead

When I see you, a blanket of stars covers me in my bed

Hey, Mrs. Potter, don't go, I said

Hey, Mrs. Potter, I don't know, but

Hey, Mrs. Potter, won't you talk to me

Well all the blue light reflections that color my mind when I sleep

And the lovesick rejections that accompany the company I keep  
All the razor perceptions that cut just a little too deep  
Hey, I can bleed as well as anyone but I need someone to help me sleep  
So I throw my hand into the air and it swims in the beams  
It's just a brief interruption of the swirling dust sparkle jet stream  
Well I know I don't know you and you're probably not what you seem  
Aw, but I'd sure like to find out  
So why don't you climb down off that movie screen  
Hey, Mrs. Potter, don't turn  
Hey, Mrs. Potter, I burn for you  
Hey, Mrs. Potter, won't you talk to me  
When the last king of Hollywood shatters his glass on the floor  
And orders another  
Well, I wonder what he did that for  
That's when I know that I have to get out cause I have been there before  
So I gave up my seat at the bar and I head for the door. Yeah.  
We drove out to the desert just to lie down beneath this bowl of stars  
We stand up in the Palace, like it's the last of the great pioneer town bars  
Aw, we shout out these songs against the clang of electric guitars  
Well, you can see a million miles tonight  
But you can't get very far  
Aw, you can see a million miles tonight  
But you can't get very far  
Hey, Mrs. Potter, I won't touch and  
Hey, Mrs. Potter, it's not much but  
Hey, Mrs. Potter, won't you talk to me [3X]

# Case Study discussion

---

- Mutually developed.
- Clean Language was used.
- I would talk to the metaphor.
- Meredith grows up from a small child through to perhaps a teenager who is able to discuss relationships in a more adult way and needs less protection (glitter).
- You could also argue that I was represented as the fish, the talking fish which occupied the liminal space in-between her reality and her 'utopia', freedom (or preferred scenario).
- The metaphors flowed from session to session (fortnightly in Meredith's case).

- My work with Meredith was long term (over several years) and whilst she used metaphors in her communication this type of mutual development work did not start until a number of months in, when a strong relationship had been formed.
- Meredith was very creative and enjoyed working in this way.
- The mutually developed metaphors improved our communication and rapport.
- There was no obvious remedy to her issues in the metaphors, only an increased self-awareness which in turn led to behavioural and relational changes.
- The metaphors helped bypass her defended past. It was easier to talk about the monster than all her traumatic experiences.

# Clean Language

---

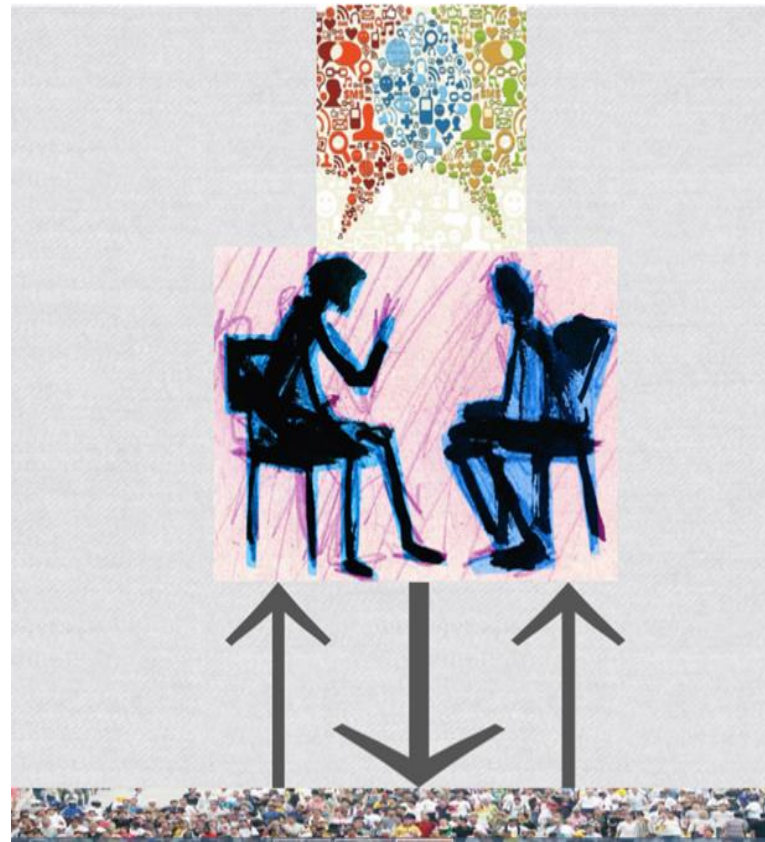
David Grove DVD (10 mins) & Explanation

Example of working with Mrs Potter metaphors

Experiential of working with each other.

# Social & Cultural Aspects of Metaphors in Therapy – The Co-Created/Moving Metaphor

---



“The meaning of metaphor is revealed within a personal and cultural context, within a society of utterances”

(Hobson, 1985, p.60)



Cox & Theilgaard (1987, p.49): (Client) “because I don’t begin. You induce beginning in me”.

“It is the impact of the inner world of the patient on that of the therapist and vice versa which promotes movement”.

I would tentatively offer my view on this phenomenon that metaphors arise from the therapeutic relationship and for them to be therapeutically useful they need to be mutually understood and developed (they need to impact on each other’s ‘inner world’). Counselling and psychotherapy is about dialogue and conversation in a given context (Hobson, 1985). Even in person-centred circles it is now accepted that the therapist inevitably influences what is said, it is a co-constructive, contextualised process (Worsley, 2002).

“the reflection of being and object of reflection are defined through each other, they are co-constituted. We are actively involved in any experience and what we experience is co-constructed by us and by the object/person that we encounter – any experience of relationship says as much about me as it does the other, it is a co-constructed relationship.”

(Van Deurzen & Young, 2009, p.208).



# Time to practice .....

---

Deep metaphors

Co-constructed/Client  
Generated/Therapist Generated

Mutual Development

Moving

State?

# References

---

A full list of references is available along with a copy of the thesis by emailing me at [jonathan@calmminds.com](mailto:jonathan@calmminds.com)

Or call 0161 439 7773

# Conclusion

---

**Feedback**

**Final Questions**

**Future workshops**

**Hopes & Fears**