

Metaphors, Mixed Metaphors, and Similes

By Azalea Dabill

Theodore A. Rees Cheney in *Getting the Words Right* is enlightening on this subject of metaphors.

Because no two people are going to come up with precisely the same word combinations to express a particular thought, no two people are going to have identical styles—similar, perhaps, but not identical. . . . In the center of that trail [style] lies diction—or diction lies at the *heart* of style—or should I say that good diction lies at the *root* of style? As I try to decide which metaphor expresses most closely my idea about the relationship between diction and style, I'm going through a process central to writing—careful thought. A writer doesn't make word choices by tossing a coin or playing thesaural roulette; he or she can do it well only by thinking, and sometimes only by prolonged thinking.

A child, with its necessarily limited vocabulary, will have little difficulty selecting words for a purpose. The mature writer, however, with his wider and deeper vocabulary, will have to do a lot more selecting, i.e., thinking. He'll be able to convey his ideas more clearly because of the great variety of words available, each communicating a distinction, a nuance, a shade of meaning.

It is this persistent search for the exact shade of meaning that makes the writer professional. If she feels that her ready vocabulary is not producing the just-right word, she doesn't hesitate to pore through the dictionary and the thesaurus until she finds it. Her style will be distinctive if the word or phrase finally selected was not one listed under an expected entry, but one brought in from another field (provided it works well) and used metaphorically, perhaps in connection with an unlikely word or in a context where it has never been seen before.

One such phrase, now a tired cliché, must have been a stylistic gem when the word *glass* was wrenched from its traditional context and attached to an anatomical word: *From the way he fell, it was obvious that this giant had a glass jaw.* One can easily imagine the sportswriter rummaging desperately amidst his working words and flipping through his dog-eared dictionary for a term to express a jaw disastrously vulnerable to a sharp punch. . . . It seems to me a paradox, or at least an interesting realization, that the more important, the deeper, the more basic, the more truly essential a thought is, the less useful a dictionary becomes in trying to find words to express it. . . . All writers need to “get beyond” literal writing and turn to more figurative writing.

Using figurative language comes natural to us humans. We use it in informal speech every day; it's only when some people turn to the written word that they put aside the figurative. They've been taught—if not explicitly, then implicitly by example—that you can only write accurately by using dictionary-correct words. It's true that most ordinary matters can be adequately described [this way] . . . but there will be times when these literal definitions will be inadequate. . . . Figurative language is perfectly natural to us because we think largely by figures, i.e., images.

Here are some of my examples. A metaphor says one thing *is* another. Ex. 1 The river raged, a swift, tempestuous *beast*.

A simile admits it is a figure of speech. Ex. 2 The lake was *like* a mirror. (*As* can also be used.)

Personification takes an inanimate thing and gives it life. Ex. 3 Charity's heart is large as the sea.

Metonymy uses part of an idea or a thing to stand in for the whole. Ex. 4 The *horse* is prepared for the day of battle, but victory is from the Lord.

Hyperbole uses exaggeration to get its point across. Ex. 5 He was a *ghost* of himself.

At the other end of exaggeration and overstatement is understatement. Understatement is brother to irony. Ex. 6 The sword in his heart was not such a great pain.

There are dangers in metaphorical writing, or figures of speech. Anything good can be done to excess, or put in the wrong place, and then figurative writing becomes purple prose. The greater the capability for good, the more for destruction. But there is no gain without risk. And the gain is worth it. Keep alert for your own, unique metaphors and other figures of speech. Take the time to hunt for the right, elusive one. Metaphor is a mighty, living tool. Just look at Proverbs.

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson say,

. . . metaphors are not merely things to be seen beyond. In fact, one can see beyond them only by using other metaphors. It is as though the ability to comprehend experience through metaphor were a sense, like seeing or touching, or hearing, with metaphors providing the only ways to perceive and experience much of the world. Metaphor is a much a part of our functioning as our sense of touch, and as precious.

I second this. (Smiling.) If you haven't figured it out by now, from the examples I chose for my flyers, I enjoy poetic writing.

In this flyer where I use block quotes (if applicable), I have changed to single-spacing for readability.