

## Good Metaphors - What They Do For Us

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A look at what good metaphors consist of and how they are useful.  
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Good metaphors, apart from just sounding nice to the ears, do at least two other things. First, they make it easier to think about something. For example, if you were to try to explain to a first-time computer user that bits of electricity create binary code which then... well, I can't explain it actually, except to say that a computer has "memory," at which point the user nods his or her head and says, "Oh, I get it." The metaphor "memory" immediately suggests that information can be stored and retrieved.

{bot\_wrgoogle}Good metaphors also expand our ways of thinking about things, and in so doing suggest new ideas. For example, if we say that time is a river, we think of it flowing along, perhaps with us in it. That suggests the possibility of swimming upstream, against the current of time - in other words traveling into the past. Most physicists think that time travel (in one direction or the other or both) is possible, and their theories are not unrelated to the metaphors they use to understand it.

If we think of time as a dimension, we might note that the measurements of things in other dimensions can change, as can their relationships to other things. We can make a piece of paper wider, taller, and thicker. We can also put it further to this side or that of a cup of coffee, or above or below it. This also suggests the question of whether events or things can be similarly moved around in time.

Now, if time is an eternal "book," with events each taking their place in its pages, we are less likely to imagine those events changing places. We are less likely to imagine moving ourselves around within the book. On the other hand, this metaphor of a book suggests a reader, who would be presumably outside of time - perhaps a god?

### Good Metaphors Are Tools

The subtitle above is a metaphor, of course, and a good one I think. Tools are something you use for specific purposes. When you have a new purpose, you reach for a new tool. If a better tool comes along, you drop the old one and use the new one.

This is why it is much easier to say which metaphors are "good," yet difficult to claim that one is "best." For example, if we want to explore all of the perspectives on time, as above, we need to use more than one metaphor. We want to use as many as we can think of that might add something to our understanding.

Let's look at one more example. What metaphors can we use for a fearful state of mind? We can choose to see that certain negative thoughts are seeds. Plant a fear seed and what grows? A fear tree. This suggests that there may be something nourishing the fears that grow within us, as water and nutrients nourish a tree.

Perhaps it is our attention to those thoughts that feeds them. This immediately suggests that if we withdraw that nourishment, the tree will begin to die. This, by the way, is not just a fanciful idea. My experience and that of others confirms that this is a good metaphor for how our minds actually work.

In fact, if instead of thinking of negative thoughts as your "self," you saw them as "invaders," "impostors," or even "conspirators against you," you might immediately trust them less. This can change your approach to life - and therefore your results in life - fairly quickly. That makes these not only good metaphors, but powerful tools.

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