

The following excerpt is from Chapter 6, A Whole New Mind by Daniel H. Pink.

THE METAPHOR MAKER

Suppose you're at the office one day and your boss says, "Lend me your ears." As we learned in Chapter 1, because the literal meaning of those four words computes only in a gruesome way, the left hemisphere will get a bit panicky and look beseechingly across the corpus callosum for assistance. The right hemisphere will then calm its partner, put the phrase in context, and explain that "lend me your ears" is a metaphor. The boss doesn't really want you to pull a Van Gogh. He just wants you to listen to what he's about to say.

Metaphor—that is, understanding one thing in terms of something else—is another important element of Symphony. But like so many aspects of R-Directed Thinking, it struggles against an undeserved reputation. “The Western tradition . . . has excluded metaphor from the domain of reason,” writes the prominent linguist George Lakoff. Metaphor is often considered ornamentation—the stuff of poets and other frilly sorts, flowery words designed to perfume the ordinary or unpleasant. In fact, metaphor is central to reason—because, as Lakoff writes, “Human thought processes are largely metaphorical.”⁷

In a complex world, mastery of metaphor—a whole-minded ability that some cognitive scientists have called “imaginative rationality”—has become ever more valuable. Each morning, when we rise from our slumber and flick on the lights, we know we’ll spend much of the day paddling through a torrent of data and information. Certain kinds of software can sort these bits and offer glimpses into patterns. But only the human mind can think metaphorically and see relationships that computers could never detect.

Likewise, in a time of abundance, when the largest rewards go to those who can devise novel and compelling creations, metaphor-making is vital. For instance, Georges de Mestral noticed how burrs stuck to his dog’s fur and, reasoning metaphorically, came up with the idea for Velcro.⁸ A computer couldn’t have done that.

“Everything you create is a representation of something else; in this sense, everything

“Metaphor is the lifeblood of all art.”

—TWYLA THARP

you create is enriched by metaphor,” writes choreographer Twyla Tharp. She encourages people to boost their metaphor quotient, or MQ, because “in the creative process, MQ is as valuable as IQ.”⁹

Metaphorical thinking is also important because it helps us understand others. That’s one reason that marketers are supplementing

their quantitative research with qualitative investigations into the metaphorical minds of their customers.¹⁰ For instance, a method developed by Harvard Business School professor Gerald Zaltman supplements polls and focus groups by asking subjects to bring in pictures that describe their feelings toward particular goods and services—and then to fashion those pictures into a collage. Through this technique, Zaltman elicits the metaphors customers use to think of products—coffee as an “engine,” a security gizmo as a “companionable watchdog,” and so on.

But the benefits go well beyond the commercial realm. Today, thanks to astonishing improvements in telecommunications, wider access to travel, and increasing life spans, we come into contact with a larger and more diverse set of people than any humans in history. Metaphorical imagination is essential in forging empathic connections and communicating experiences that others do not share. Finally—and perhaps most important—is metaphor’s role in slaking the thirst for meaning. The material comforts brought forth by abundance ultimately matter much less than the metaphors you live by—whether, say, you think of your life as a “journey” or as a “treadmill.” “A large part of self-understanding,” says Lakoff, “is the search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives.”¹¹ The more we understand metaphor, the more we understand ourselves.

¹⁰ See Gerald Zaltman, *How Customers Think* (Harvard Business School Press, 2003); Daniel H. Pink, 'Metaphor Marketing,' *Fast Company* (April 1998).

¹¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 233.