# The Power of Words:
# Leadership, Metaphor and Story

Heather Forest
Story Arts Inc.
PO Box 354
Huntington, NY 11743
631-271-2511
heather@storyarts.org

**The Power of Words:**

**Leadership, Metaphor and Story**

**By Heather Forest**

An effective leader must be a competent storyteller who can use oral communication skills to create a vivid and compassionate narrative. Since ancient times, sharing stories and unified metaphors has created commonality in our seemingly separate yet interpenetrating realities. It is the choice of shared language that contributes to shared meaning. Leaders who are aware of the power of story and metaphor to convey ideas can more effectively and responsibly guide the leadership and change process.

In reviewing Howard Gardner's *Leading Minds,* a book that tells the stories of eleven major contemporary leaders in the public sphere, Warren Bennis (1996) notes, "Uncommon eloquence marks every one of Gardner's leaders, but I have yet to see public speaking listed on a resume. . . .Effective leaders put words to the formless longings and deeply felt needs of others. . . They create communities out of words." (p.160). A leader can have a powerful vision for positive social change. But, if it is not well communicated and, therefore, no one can "see" it, there may be little impact.

Since ancient times ideas and values embedded in stories and metaphor have educated, inspired and motivated listeners. Martin Luther King did not just *have a dream*. "He could describe it . . . it became public and therefore accessible to millions of people" (Pondy, 1978, p.95). King communicated his dream in words, stories and metaphor. In doing so, he catalyzed a social movement.

*Emotional Content of Language and Metaphor*

Benjamin Lee Whorf's linguistic theories in his pivotal book of essays *Language, Thought and Reality* (1956) proposes that the structure of language is an important factor in the way a person perceives reality and then responds to it. He points out that "thinking is most mysterious, and by far the greatest light upon it that we have is thrown by the study of language. This study shows that the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious . . . These patterns are the unperceived, intricate systematizations of his own language" (Whorf, 1956, p.252).

Story is a complex form of metaphor. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003) point out that "new metaphors have the power to create new reality . . .  this can happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it . . . If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our action on, it will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to" (p.145).

Contemporary knowledge in the field of neuroscience, cognition, and linguistics has revealed that carefully chosen language, metaphor and story can shape and direct a listener's thinking, motivate, inspire, and initiate social change (Lakoff, 2004). "Because we reason in terms of metaphor, the metaphors we use determine a great deal about how we live our lives" (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p.244). "You don't have a choice as to whether to think metaphorically. . . metaphor is a neural phenomenon" (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p. 256-257). "Metaphors are among our principal vehicles for understanding and they play a central role in the construction of reality" (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p.159).

Neuroscientists have come to understand metaphor as a neuro-linguistic activity that is reflected in language use, which, in turn structures thought. By creating new concept linkages, communicators alter the neural maps of their listeners. "The frames are in the synapses of our brains, physically present in the form of neural circuitry (Lakoff, 2004, p. 73). Therefore, a new idea that can be incorporated into our prior knowledge, *physically* changes us at the neural level.

*The Power of Stories*

Through stories, the chaos of experience is put into a simple linear form by the storyteller. Ironically, real life is *not* linear. A multiple story reality with conflicting plotlines is closer to the truth of human interaction (Boje, 2001).

In his essay *Leadership is a Language Game* (1978), Louis Pondy writes, "The dual capacity to make sense of things and to put them into language meaningful to large numbers of people gives the person who has it enormous leverage"(p.95).  Pondy muses about the power this type of leverage has and wonders what to call this skill. In their book *The Art of Framing: Managing the Language of Leadership* (1996), Gail Fairhurst and Robert Sarr propose that the skill Pondy describes is "framing" and that it can be learned.

Framing is a "quality" of communication that selects and highlights certain aspects of a situation over others so that one meaning is accepted over others by listeners. (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996). This is an applied use of Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) description of how "categories" are linguistically constructed in the mind. Categorization is a basic cognitive process that occurs at an unconscious level that links similar items by "masking" or "hiding" others (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003).

From a constructivist perspective, the underlying assumption of "framing" is that there are many possible meanings that can be inferred from any situation. According to Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), a good "framer" carefully highlights the meaning in a situation that serves their vision best. "If we are going to frame well, our vision must provide a picture into which others can insert themselves (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996, p.53).

In his book *Don't Think of an Elephant* (2004), George Lakoff also refers to mental models as *frames* and states "Reframing is social change. . .Reframing is changing the way the public sees the world. . .because language activates frames, new language is required for new frames. . .Thinking differently requires speaking differently" (p.xv).

Problematically, the skill of "framing" could be used to further the agenda of both ethical and unethical speakers. A mitigating factor is that it is also only possible to "frame" when other people's "mental models" (Senge, 1990) are "permeable" enough to let in new information (Fairhust and Sarr, 1996).

*Stories as Metaphor*

If stories are metaphorical tools then they are *power* tools and must be used responsibly. Stories are a complex, multilevel form of metaphor and because of their engaging nature hold a listener's attention better than a string of disconnected facts. Stories are more easily remembered than facts. When someone hears a story, the tale is cognitively processed in the *spatial* memory section of the brain, an area that stores experience, unlike facts, which are processed in the *taxon* memory centers of the brain, an area where disconnected and unrelated information is stored (Caine, R.N., and Caine, G., 1991).

It is empowering for a listener to make a creative leap and connect the metaphor of a story to the story of his or her own life. Recognizing and creatively processing an analogy is a way of personally embodying information as experience. Experiential learning or "active processing" of connections (Caine, R.N., and Caine, G., 1991) contributes to the memorable nature of stories presented as metaphor to make a point.

*Choosing Stories to Tell*

Sometimes it is in the introduction or the contextualizing of the story that the practical application of a metaphorical story can be implied by the storyteller. Sometimes it is in the choosing of just the right story to make a point that the connective power of story is manifested.

A famous 18th century rabbi and storyteller, the Maggid of Dubno, was once asked how he managed to always have the right story to make his point in any given situation. His reply was to tell a story.

*HITTING the BULL'S EYE*

*A Tale from Eastern Europe*

*There was once a famous archer who entered a village and saw several targets drawn on a wall. In the absolute center of each target was an arrow. The archer asked the villagers, "Who has accomplished this amazing feat?"*

*The villagers laughed and said, "It was the village fool who did it."*

*The archer said. "Bring me to this "fool" for he is truly a great master.*

*The archer was brought before the village fool. He reverently bowed low and said, "Great master, tell me, how are you able to shoot a bull's eye every time?"*

*The village fool replied with a grin, "It is easy! First I shoot the arrow and then I draw the target."*

The Maggid of Dubno, it is said, explained, "It is the same with stories. First I introduce the topic for which I *have* the perfect story, and then the story helps me to make my point every time.

*(Retold by Heather Forest, based on a tale from Nathan Ausubel's "A Treasury of Jewish Folklore" (1948) and the oral storytelling of Peninnah Schram)*

*Building a Repertoire of Stories*

Mark Lakoff (2004), offering advice to those who would like to use stories to metaphorically support an idea, suggests that speakers "find stories where your "frame" is built into the story. . .Build up a stock of effective stories" (p.116). Wisdom tales such as Japanese Zen stories, Middle Eastern Sufi tales, Greek Aesop's fables, Chinese Taoist parables and Indian Jataka tales (Forest, 1996) have long been culturally used as teaching tools and are good sources for metaphorical tales. Personal experiential stories that embody applicable ideas can be useful when they rise to the level of metaphor and transcend the experience of a single person to connect to the experience of many. Written history holds is a wide realm of plot material from which to draw. It is the artfulness of the tale bearer to choose the appropriate story to support the communication needs of any given situation.

One of the most empowering advantages of using stories to communicate is that, "instead of directly telling someone to consider something, "stories present a series of images. . .The images incubate and later re-emerge as "spontaneous" insights" (Groth-Marnot, 1992). Throughout history stories have been used to indirectly present information, engaging the

listener in creative thinking. "An entertaining story can gently enter the interior world of a listener. Over time, a tale can take root, like a seed rich with information, and blossom into new awareness and understanding" (Forest, 1996, p.9).

The stories we hear throughout our lives help to shape the way we each perceive both our personal world and the complex context in which we live. "The narrative of any life is part of an interlocking set of narratives." (MacIntyre, 1984, p.218). We are each the central character in our own drama and bit players in each other's drama (MacIntyre, 1984). It is through narrative that we attempt to make sense of our lives as logically sequenced stories. It is ironic that seemingly solid stories shift and reconfigure as we remember, retell, and reinterpret our memories over time.

*Story Chaos: Antenarrative*

Although it is comforting to reduce the dynamic chaos of life into an intelligible sequence of events that makes chronological sense, human organizations from the nuclear family to the global empire do not always reduce down to neat plotlines. David Boje, the author of *Narrative Methods for Organizational and Communication Research* (2001) is not interested in the neatly structured linear tale so useful in making sense of roles and reality. He writes about what he calls, *antenarrative* the "non-linear, incoherent, collective, un-plotted, and pre-narrative speculation" (Boje, 2001, p.1) when stories are "still in flux." (2001, p.4). Boje explores what he calls the "story soup," the pot of "microstoria" that is omitted from the official tale gelled by the hegemony.

Boje's thoughts on "un-plotted" narrative were metaphorically inspired by the long running Los Angeles experimental theatre play, *Tamara*, in which the audience follows, runs

8

after, and chases, the actors through a house to discover the ever-changing ending of a mystery story. The play's chaotic and totally unstructured narrative plotline inspired Boje's (2001) theory of "plurivocal" interpretation of organizational stories. His focus on "multi-stranded stories of experiences that lack collective consensus, seeks alternatives to the fiat of the single-voiced, single-authored narrative dictating organizational memory" (Boje, 2001, p.9).

Boje's theory of the antenarrative story of reality allows for the deconstruction and reinterpretation of social and political events to include voices that have previously not been included in the official version of any tale. It allows for the revisioning of history as well as the broader telling of current events. It permits simultaneous and contradictory versions of reality to coexist. Sharing and accepting contradictory stories may be the first step to justice and peace.

*Why are Stories So Powerful?*

Rabbi Jacob Kranz, the Maggid of Dubno, an 18th century Eastern European rabbi, was once asked, "Why are stories so powerful? Why do they have an impact and penetrate to the heart of every matter?" His legendary reply was to tell the following story.

*NAKED TRUTH AND PARABLE*

*Naked Truth walked down the street one day.*
*People turned their eyes away.*

*Parable arrived, draped in decoration.*
*People greeted Parable with celebration.*

9

*Naked Truth sat alone, sad and unattired,*

*"Why are you so miserable?" Parable inquired.*


*Naked Truth replied, "I'm not welcome anymore.*

*No one wants to see me. They chase me from their door."*


*"It is hard to look at Naked Truth," Parable explained.*

*"Let me dress you up a bit. Your welcome will be gained."*


*Parable dressed Naked Truth in story's fine attire,*

*with metaphor, poignant prose, and plots to inspire.*


*With laughter and tears and adventure to unveil,*

*together they went forth to spin a tale.*


*People opened their doors and served them their best.*

*Naked Truth dressed in story was a welcome guest.*


*(Forest, 1996)*

References

Bennis, W. (1996). The leader as storyteller. *Harvard Business Review, 74*(1), 154.

Boje, D. M. (2001). *Narrative methods for organizational and communication research.* London ; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Caine, R. N., & Caine, G. (1991). *Making connections: Teaching and the human brain.* Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Fairhurst, G. T., & Sarr, R. A. (1996). *The art of framing: Managing the language of leadership* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Forest, H. (1996). *Wisdom tales from around the world.* Little Rock: August House.

Gardner, H., & Laskin, E. (1995). *Leading minds : An anatomy of leadership.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Groth Marnat, G. (1992). Past traditions of therapeutic metaphor. *Psychology: A Journal of Human Behavior, 29*(3-4), 40-47.

Lakoff, G. (2004). *Don't think of an elephant! Know your values and frame the debate: The essential guide for progressives.* White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green .

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2003). *Metaphors we live by.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

MacIntyre, A. C. (1984). *After virtue : A study in moral theory* (2nd ed.). Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press.

Pondy, L. R. (1978). Leadership is a Language Game. In McCall, M. W., & Lombardo, M. M.(Ed.), *Leadership: Where else can we go?* (pp.87-99). Durham, N.C: Duke University Press.

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization* (1st ed.). New York: Doubleday/Currency.

Whorf, B. L. (1956). *Language, thought, and reality; selected writings*. Cambridge: Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology.