

## CHAPTER 1

# MYSTERY AND METAPHOR

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## INTRODUCTION TO PART 1

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Sometimes, data collected in the study of human behavior are too intangible for quantification. And yet they can be grasped. Intangible data, such as environment, atmosphere, and emotion contribute a different kind of insight into our behavior than does quantifiable data. We all know this. Intangible data only become a problem because we want data to give us more than insight. We want usable information, or to say it in another way, we want to make the intangible into something that's tangible enough to be usable. The question is, how does insight become usable information?

The answer goes like this: the insight is expressed in symbols and words that are metaphors describing the intangible-unsayable something experienced during the insight. The metaphors are the first step in transforming insights into systems. Systems “routinize the extraordinary,” as Max Weber put it. They convert mystery into usable information.

Metaphors, then, are the primary tool for helping us turn insights into systems—intangible mysteries into usable information. I know this needs more explaining. But before I discuss metaphor, let me tell you what I'm trying to establish.

This book provides a system for understanding the field data gathered from the experiences of women superintendents of schools. The data are broad and complex so that they contain both quantifiable and intangible

information. In order to communicate insights based on the intangible portion of her data, C. Cryss Brunner adapts a system to help turn these insights into useful information. The system she adapts is from the one described by Carlos Castaneda in his series of books that began in the late 1960s. Castaneda developed his system by interpreting the intangible world of Indian seers from Mexico. Brunner's use of Castaneda's system helps her turn the intangible dimension of her field study with women superintendents into a useful set of disciplines based on how these women coped with their experience, survived, and sometimes even prevailed.

Brunner achieves this successful adaptation of Castaneda's system by treating it as a metaphor—the first step to systematizing her intangible data. Castaneda's system provides disciplines for living “impeccably” in a world of multiple realities.

#### HOW CARLOS CASTANEDA'S SYSTEM SERVES AS A METAPHOR

The “Carlos Castaneda” who narrates the story in his books is an anthropologist gathering field data. He discovers a teacher and “seer” or sorcerer named Don Juan and together they move in mysterious ways through the landscapes, deserts, and mountains of Mexico. The narrator Carlos learns something about dealing with the terrifying multiplicities of the natural world. He learns disciplines to survive fruitfully in the rich, mysterious, nonordinary world of the seer. A seer is a kind of visionary—when we demystify these terms, we're talking about a person who can combine intuitive and rational clear-sightedness with disciplined systems for success and survival.

Now, suppose *you* are in an unusual world of threats and challenges, and you need disciplines to succeed and survive. You need to see clearly. But do you need to go to Mexico, trip around the desert and the mountains learning to “impeccably” practice the system's disciplines? Do you need to learn those disciplines in relationship to that nonordinary context of behavior? Or can you read the conditions for achieving the system's disciplines as metaphors, meaning you can be impeccable in the way you survive any challenging and demanding environment. Castaneda's system helped Brunner see a pattern in her intangible data that can be interpreted as a set of disciplines useful for women superintendents of school. *The way Castaneda's system presents the disciplines is metaphorical—the disciplines described by the metaphors correspond to something that already exists in the experience of successful women superintendents.* That's why the application works.

Now, back to the meaning of metaphor.

#### METAPHOR: OUR PRIMARY TOOL FOR GRASPING THE INTANGIBLE

Imagine that you've interviewed all the mid-level lawyers who were sucked into the Watergate scandal—the ones who, in the end, were bewildered by the key roles they played. As data, their stories capture a very important truth about the effects of power, illusion, and ambition on well-meaning “small fish” who wage war for ideals. Something about the mysterious meaning of Watergate's effect on Americans can be understood from grasping Herbert Porter, for example—small fish lawyer—crying at the Watergate Hearings and advising young believers to stay away from Washington. The tears, the breakdown of the “little guy,” the hopeless bewilderment and trembling avowals of betrayal—taken together they are a metaphor that gives us insight into the unmeasurable results of a national scandal.

Metaphors are little tools. Their job is only to make initial order from chaos. Using a metaphor—as poet Wallace Stevens describes in his short poem “Anecdote of the Jar”—is like putting a jar in a wilderness as big as Tennessee. The formless, meaningless abundance of actuality will begin to arrange itself in relationship to that tiny jar. Physicist David Bohm would agree, but would add a caution: “Reality is inexhaustible and whatever we say a thing is, it is something more and also something different” (Bohm and Peat 1987, 210; see also 38 on metaphors). Metaphors can deceive us, but we are dependent on them as a basic resource for articulating insight.

#### METAPHORS DESCRIBE REAL PHENOMENA

Metaphors explain the *meaning* of intangible things by comparing them to tangible things. For example, when we say “love is a rose,” we are saying that something about the actual rose helps us understand the intangible feel of love—love blooms like a rose; it responds to warmth and bears the fertile secret of reproduction; it is fragile, beautiful, sensual, alive, and perishes easily. Love is as real as a rose. But it's also something more, something different.

Both science and religion use metaphors to explain *relationships* between invisible phenomena. For example, subatomic waves/particles can be understood as metaphors for relationships between events in space/time. The metaphors describe the behavior patterns of invisible things and put names to the interactive building blocks of actuality. They

are meant to be precise symbolic representations of relationships that exist in actuality.

Religious metaphors describe relationships between people and intangible ideals. The revelation of Jesus can be understood as a metaphor for the particular moment in history when love's importance made an impact on human consciousness. The metaphor "god is love" means not only that participating in love gives people contact with the divine, but that love is reality's prime mover.

#### SUCCESSFUL METAPHORS BECOME PART OF REALITY

Metaphors that successfully describe a phenomenon also become part of the reality they describe. Think about how an interpretation of "historical" events becomes part of history itself. For example, our traditional description of how we "won the west"—based on the metaphor of "the frontier as virgin territory"—is only one possible interpretation of the movement west in American history. But, for a long time we didn't realize our idea of the west was a frontier metaphor. We thought it was "the real story." In the 1970s new historical information—from Native Americans in particular—forced Americans to reexamine the metaphor of the frontier. We learned to separate the metaphor from the events it described—and from the "good guy/bad guy, pioneer/savage, settler/cowboy" models of behavior it fostered. Nonetheless, the metaphor of the frontier west as virgin territory had a real part in the evolution of our everyday social norms, so no matter how we look at it, the metaphor will always be somewhere there mixed up in the real story.

Except in matters of faith, where insights can come to earth without the intervening agency of human interpretation, all descriptions of intangible realities are metaphors. They participate in the actual but they are simply not identical with it. That's why the "realities" of history, physics, psychology, medicine, the Church, and other such systems keep changing—even though historians, scientists, and clerics periodically claim that their latest metaphors are constants.

The idea that all scientific, psychological, theological, and historical descriptions of intangible realities are metaphors is not my own. It's a perspective that developed during the 1960s and 1970s. Of course, many scientific thinkers—as well as religious believers—object to this idea. Some call it a "popular New Age sentiment." For example, science interpreter Lawrence E. Joseph, who is not unsympathetic to New Age thought, says: " $E=mc^2$  is not a metaphor. It is a precise symbolic representation of

the relationship between energy and matter” (Joseph 1990, 117). But any metaphor can be a precise symbolic representation—and like all metaphors, this one is not the whole story.  $E=mc^2$  does not cover everything there is to say about the “relationship between energy and matter.”

Despite objections, many theorists in many fields have acknowledged that their descriptions of reality are actually metaphors. As a general principle, we might say that any single description of reality only provides a map of some aspect of reality. But in no case is the map either complete or identical with the reality itself—as many people have pointed out, “the map is not the territory.”<sup>1</sup> Any given event or phenomenon has many simultaneously true descriptions, and none of them entirely exhaust the truth.

Let’s say, for example, that country A invades country B. We can analyze and describe the event by using political, economic, historical, psychological, chemical, sociological, and moral descriptions. We can understand something about the nature of the event from each of these descriptions. But we needn’t decide which one is the “real” cause. That would obstruct a fuller understanding. We might say an economic event—scarcity of fuel—occurred at the time country A invaded country B; or a chemical reaction to medication and a political impulse had a combined impact on the neurosystem of country A’s leader when he contemplated ordering the invasion. That doesn’t mean the resulting violence was necessarily caused by an economic, chemical, or political reaction. It means no more than that the economic, chemical, and political reactions give us insight into what happened. No absolutely authoritative explanation is necessary or possible.

Like it or not, constructing metaphors and using them to explain a directly experienced insight are part of what happens when ideas—which are intangible—come down from the realm of direct experience to be made into useful information. If these interpretive tools weren’t necessary, we’d all be able to grasp our highest ideals and most profound perceptions without controversy. Instead, we are subject to something like a law of conceptual gravity: all descriptions, formulas, theories, and systems are attempts at truth and misrepresentations of truth at the same time.

#### THE VALUE OF METAPHORIC MEANING

All of the above is by way of recognizing the value of metaphoric meaning. Perhaps it is going a long way round to establish this, but here it is—intangible data that can’t be quantified can yield valuable, usable

information if we employ a metaphoric system to analyze the data. It doesn't have to be quantum physics, but that's a good example. The system of disciplines used by Yaqui Indian "warriors" to deal with the rich complexity of seen and unseen worlds is a good interpretive tool for understanding the disciplines that have helped women superintendents of schools survive and succeed. It is no romanticization. It is as valid as  $E=mc^2$ . Both bring a mystery to light and yield fundamental truths that cannot be pressed too hard without blowing up in our faces.

In a historical period where paradigms of explanation are being transformed by new knowledge in all fields of study, it is essential to recognize the value that comes from metaphoric interpretations of intangible data. We need to make use of new insights. Until we once again have a lens reliable enough to help us see the world clearly—and get some consensus on what we are seeing—we ought to look through every device we can that might yield insight and usable information.