

Reporter, Can You Paradigm? Metaphors for Mental Illness



by Randolph Fillmore

(Posted July 10, 1998 [Issue 34])

No breeze stirs in this cauldron, because there is no escape from its smothering confinement. . . . - William Styron, *Darkness Visible*

To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream. - Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

I can't think, I can't calm this murderous cauldron. . . . I understand why Jekyll killed himself before Hyde had taken over completely. - Kay Redfield Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind*

Psychiatrists are not doing a great job explaining what they do and, conversely, the news media are not particularly adroit at reporting on mental illnesses. This was the conclusion of participants at the [American Psychiatric Association's](#) Consensus Conference on Psychiatry and the Media held in March 1998 [1]. While the conference went on to examine such issues as the use and misuse of the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition](#), patient confidentiality, psychopharmaceutical advertising, and the efficacy of herbal remedies, the participants spent less time discussing how science journalists might improve their style and accuracy in the realm of mental illness.

Can medical writers approach mental illnesses with the acuity and verve they employ when reporting on other afflictions, such as heart disease and cancer? Improvement in this area may be a matter of seeking out better metaphors to describe the inner workings of mental illnesses. While reporters offer "facts," medical journalists illuminate issues by writing "stories." Writers of stories, news and otherwise, often use metaphors to give life and meaning to the facts.

Can medical writing on mental illnesses approach the acuity and verve used for other afflictions?

It is not difficult to find a plethora of metaphors (some hackneyed) in the news. Storms erupt in Congress, and dust settles after skirmishes there. Bureaucracy has rusty wheels, the nation's racial divide needs bridging, and the Middle East is a quagmire. Such are the metaphorical coins daily spent by journalists.

When exploring mental illness, science journalists don't have the strong figures of speech they utilize when writing about other diseases. Cancer, for instance, is a disease that doesn't go begging metaphors. Susan Sontag told us as much in her classic slim volume [Illness as Metaphor](#) (1977). Sontag called cancer a "ruthless, secret invasion" [2] from which emerge the "controlling metaphors for cancer," all cast "in terms of warfare" [3]. She also noted how metaphors describing aspects of cancer grew up around the mysterious nature of the disease. Sontag speculated that "diseases thought to be multi-determined (that is, mysterious) . . . have the widest possibilities as metaphors. . . ." She concluded that the language of cancer will change when the "disease is better understood and the cure rates become much higher."

Cancer is a disease that doesn't go begging metaphors.

Yes, one eagerly and easily employs militaristic analogies to talk about cancer's "invading cells," medicine's "arsenal of drugs" and a patient's "valiant battle." The warfare metaphor is a powerful analogue for three aspects of cancer: pathology, treatment, and patient experience. However, medical journalists don't have the luxury of such comprehensive and vibrant metaphors when writing about mental illnesses, especially in the realms of pathology, disease process, and treatment.

On the other hand, metaphorical language describing the experience of mental illnesses can be compelling, as seen in the above quotations by Styron, Plath, and Jamison. Medical journalists should not be shy about using patient-generated metaphors. But writers are sadly lacking in tropes to communicate adequately the pathology and treatment of mental illnesses, and they need to find some.

Medical journalists should not be shy about using patient-generated metaphors.

"We can't use the war metaphors with mental illnesses, just as we can't use them with diabetes, because there is no invasion," says Nada Stotland, chair of the APA media consensus conference and psychiatrist in the Department of Psychiatry and Substance Abuse Services at [Illinois Masonic Medical Center](#) in Chicago. "We need to get some mental image of how mental diseases work. Metaphors would rise from that imagery." Stotland raises an important point; until writers get clear visual images of the pathology and mechanics of mental illnesses, strongly descriptive metaphors will not develop, and writing about mental illnesses will continue to present obstacles.

Jamie Talan, a consensus meeting attendee and medical writer for *Newsday*, agrees with Stotland. Talan often covers neuroscience and mental illness, and she believes observation of a disease's physical activities in the brain is a good place to begin the search for adequate metaphors. "In fifteen years of covering mental illness I have not come up with a way to tell people, in a creative way, how behavior and biology work to create illness. I have to keep going back to the notion of brain illness, and such things as chemical imbalances," says Talan.

Observing a disease's physical activities in the brain is a good place to begin the search.

These days, imaging technology allows mental health practitioners to actually "see" some mental illnesses. Every issue of the [American Journal of Psychiatry](#) includes brightly colored images of the structural abnormalities in brains suffering a variety of ailments, including schizophrenia. With these pictures, one can pinpoint a brain's shrunken hippocampus, enlarged ventricles, and even chemical imbalances.

Choosing Metaphors with Care

Writers must choose medical metaphors with care in order to avoid problematic shifts of meaning. In 1976, Karl E. Weick wrote that metaphors are "not just catchy phrases designed to dazzle an audience." [4] Instead, said Weick, they are one of the few tools that help writers create compact descriptions of complex phenomena. Similarly, in a 1995 article in *Science Communication*, Maasen and Weingart described metaphors as "messengers of meaning" and "units of translation" [5]. They warned that writers must use metaphors wisely, because "discourse changed by metaphor reorganizes reality"; metaphors transfer meaning "to produce effects that cannot be controlled in terms of potential shift of meaning" [6]. In other words, writers must exercise caution with metaphors because their meaning can take on a life of its own. "Reality reorganized" can be dangerous. Just as "the war on drugs" has had a long reach, attaching the wrong metaphorical message to mental illnesses could impact sufferers and even alter health policy.

Writers must choose medical metaphors with care because their meaning can take on a life of its own.

Metaphors are already numerous in medical literature, in medical practice, and in popular thinking about illnesses. G.F. Hayden examined the relationship between medical metaphors and the terminology of mechanics, and found both "screwy" and "nuts" were terms used informally to describe mental illness. [7]

When L.A. Rhodes wrote about figures of speech describing the effects of psychiatric medication, she noted how patients and staff use different sorts of metaphors to characterize the medication's effects. [8] Patients talk about being "zombified," "snowed," and having "crooked thoughts straightened." They speak of the mind as "a lid," something to be "fed" or as something "bendable." Staff, on the other hand, talked metaphorically in terms of "control." At the far extreme, psychologist [Thomas S. Szasz](#) refuted the reality of mental disease, claiming mental illness itself is a larger metaphor for socially deviant behavior.

Judy Segal drew attention to ways in which metaphorical language influences the health policy debate. "Metaphor is one means by which biomedicine controls the debate about health care," writes Segal. She sees three main metaphors at work in medicine today: the body as a machine; medicine as war; and medicine as business. The "medicine as business" metaphor just might be the most damaging, she adds, because it dehumanizes patients. [9]

Medical metaphors used today: the body as a machine; medicine as war; and medicine as business.

"At the consensus meeting, we tried to come up with language we could all understand," recalls Talan.

Talan says psychiatrists at the conference expressed fears that managed care ("medicine as business," according to Segal) may turn its back on mental illness sufferers. Metaphors fitting into the "medicine as business" category could have the same ultimate effect on patients as tropes (and beliefs) implying spirit possession as the cause of mental illness. The possession metaphor led to inhumane treatment of the mentally ill. Do writers and practitioners run the risk that the "medicine as business" analogy may have a similar impact on the mentally ill? Writers must take care that newly generated metaphors for mental pathologies and treatments do not lead down a comparably dark, demon-filled (or accountant-filled) hallway.

Could the "medicine as business" analogy generate inhumane treatment of the mentally ill?

Can We Create New Mental Illness Metaphors?

In their classic work [Metaphors We Live By](#) (1980), Lakoff and Johnson discussed a figure of speech called the "orientation metaphor". The authors found orientation metaphors to work best with concepts and systems. Since mental illness is both conceptual and systematic, they concluded that this type of metaphor could prove a powerful device in communicating aspects of mental illness. Their orientation metaphors include "container metaphors" and "journey metaphors." Container metaphors, wrote the authors, are concerned with space, density, amounts and boundaries; journey metaphors use paths and goals. Lakoff and Johnson found these two types of metaphor have "shared entailments," or rather commonalities that link them conceptually. [10]

In their respective personal explorations of mental illness, authors Jamison and Styron relied upon both container and journey metaphors. Jamison [11] compared her manic episodes to trips to Saturn and its icy rings. Both authors drew upon images of darkness and the color black. Styron [12] utilized tropes of weather, saying that a "storm" swept him into the hospital - a storm of murk, a black cloud. Jamison envisioned darkness weaving itself into her mind.

Author Jamison compared her manic episodes to trips to Saturn.

John Barnden, professor of artificial intelligence at the University of Birmingham (United Kingdom) and a "metaphor theorist," keeps a [Web databank](#) devoted to metaphors describing states of mind. Barnden includes categories such as "mind as animate being or living body," "mind as physical object," and "emotional mind as physical space." Though these kinds of metaphors may help characterize mental illnesses, Barnden cautions against some of the metaphorical models therapists use.

"Therapeutic ideas like getting in touch with one's inner child are highly metaphorical," he says. "I suspect that many people would tend to take it too literally, and really almost think in terms of there being a separate, hidden person inside them. There's scope here for musing about the dangers of metaphor in therapy."

Metaphors of Treatment: Wage War or Accommodate Unruly Tenants?

Schizophrenia is a disease often characterized by auditory hallucinations through which patients hear voices. "Patients have described the experience of schizophrenia as not unlike being stuck in a elevator surrounded by obnoxious and threatening voices," says Stotland. When these noisy, disruptive "tenants" of the building (the mind) cannot be completely evicted, they must instead be soothed, accommodated, and placated. Many schizophrenia medications work this way, and so they may seem less newsworthy (and less fun to write about) than so-called "attack medications."

Psychiatrist Sandra Walker, who was a public television producer before she attended medical school, calls upon a number of noteworthy metaphors to talk about mental illnesses and treatment. For instance, Walker would ask how many miles per hour a patient's thoughts are racing, or what the "roller coaster" of mood swings feels like. She uses metaphors for treatment, as well, calling psychotherapy a "parenting process" to invoke the nurturing involved. She says patients (here's the container metaphor) report feeling permeable, full of holes. Furthermore, she says she provides a therapeutic environment not unlike a canvas on which the patient/artist can paint their experience.

A psychiatrist asks how many miles per hour a patient's thoughts are racing.

"The unconscious speaks in metaphor," says Walker.

Medical reporters should not be reluctant to employ metaphors devised by sufferers of mental illnesses. Psychiatrists do listen to patient-generated metaphors, but the kind of clinical attention they receive and how therapists use them may vary. Medical reporters might make better use of these accounts than do psychiatrists.

David Hellerstein is a psychiatrist who claims to observe patient metaphors both as a doctor and as a creative writer. He writes "as doctors we struggle to decode the most bizarre symptoms, or idiosyncratic metaphors, for purposes of healing." [13] The idiosyncratic metaphors of which Hellerstein writes are those the mentally ill use to communicate their experience. He says "the clinical approach, however empathetic, is cool and steady . . . the writers approach, in contrast, is hot, as he or she is plunged into the maelstrom of language and image, utterly ignorant of where this might lead." [14]

Hellerstein makes a point of saying that he speaks not to journalists but to "creative writers," who stand outside the journalist's requisite objectivity. But medical journalists *are* creative writers, in the sense they must creatively render medical facts. In this task, the metaphor is one of their best tools. Science journalists, of course, cannot (as Hellerstein suggests of creative writers) be "utterly ignorant" of where the chosen metaphors might lead. Ethically, medical journalists must insure the metaphors they choose not only explain mental illnesses, but also lead toward better understanding, and help support the humane treatment of those who suffer from them.

Metaphors for mental illness should lead to better understanding and humane treatment.

[Randolph Fillmore](#) is a freelance medical technical writer and science journalist who has written for Faulkner and Gray, Prudential Health Care, the Stars and Stripes, and the Baltimore Sun; he is also a part-time instructor in anthropology and sociology.

The image above depicts Phillipe Pinel removing chains from inmates of a lunatic asylum. He helped transform asylums from prisons into hospitals for the mentally ill.

Send us your comments and ideas for future articles.



Feedback

Endlinks

[Mental Metaphor Databank](#) - John Barnden's catalog of metaphorical descriptions of mental states.

[Internet Mental Health](#) - provides links to "sites providing more than 10 pages of free, scientifically sound mental health information." Sites are organized under subheadings for different disorders.

[Leaflet for Journalists](#) - a blunt request that the media be more responsible when writing about individuals with schizophrenia. From the Schizophrenia Media Agency, an organization of individuals with a schizophrenia diagnosis.

[Knowledge Exchange Network](#) - information about mental health via toll-free telephone services, an electronic bulletin board, and publications to the general public, doctors, policy makers, and the media. Maintained by the National Mental Health Service.

Previous Press Box Articles

- ▶ [Gene for a Day](#)
by Beryl Lieff Benderly (Posted June 26, 1998  Issue 33)
- ▶ [Tracking the Elusive Internship: Frustrated in Philly](#)
by Brian Vastag (Posted June 12, 1998  Issue 32)
- ▶ [Getting the Scoop at Scientific Meetings](#)
by John Travis (Posted May 29, 1998  Issue 31)
- ▶ [Checking Up on Alternative Medicine](#)
by Brian Vastag (Posted May 15, 1998  Issue 30)
- ▶ [URLs for PIOs](#)
by Jennifer Boeth Donovan (Posted May 1, 1998  Issue 29)
- ▶ [Breaking the Richard Seed Story: Must it Now be Fixed?](#)
by Jim Kling (Posted April 17, 1998  Issue 28)

[more](#)