

Take-Home Packet

# Metaphors

*The Powertool in a Narrative Therapist's Toolbox*

Theme: Client-generated metaphors as tools for externalising, re-authoring, and faith-sensitive reflection.

*A Metaphor is...*



**Facilitator: Davina Rossouw-Stephan**

**Duration: 2 hours**

## What Is a Metaphor?

A metaphor is a way of describing one thing in terms of another to make meaning clearer. It connects inner experiences to something visible, familiar, or sensory — for example, ‘I’m under a cloud,’ or ‘Hope feels like a small candle.’

In therapy, metaphors help people see and speak their experiences in new ways. They act as bridges between emotion and understanding. By exploring and reshaping a metaphor, a client can begin to reshape their story.

*“Every time we ask a question, we’re generating a possible version of a life.”*

— David Epston

## How the Brain Processes Information Through Images and Metaphors

Metaphors work because they speak the brain’s native language — imagery. Neuroscience and cognitive linguistics show that our brains understand experience largely through sensory symbols and mental pictures, not abstract words.

**Dual coding:** The brain encodes information both verbally and visually, activating more neural networks and deepening emotional connection.

**Embodied simulation:** Hearing ‘carrying a heavy burden’ lights up motor and sensory areas as though the body is experiencing the weight.

**Amygdala-hippocampus link:** Emotional imagery connects feeling and memory, giving metaphors power to access deeply held beliefs.

**Prefrontal integration:** Metaphors help integrate emotion and thought, opening cognitive flexibility and compassion.

In practice, metaphors bypass defensive reasoning and engage imagination — the site of transformation. When a client says ‘I’m walking through fog,’ their brain is already visualising uncertainty. By exploring that image (‘what helps the fog lift?’), we invite both emotional and logical brain regions into healing dialogue.

### **Diagram: How the Brain Lights Up with Metaphor**

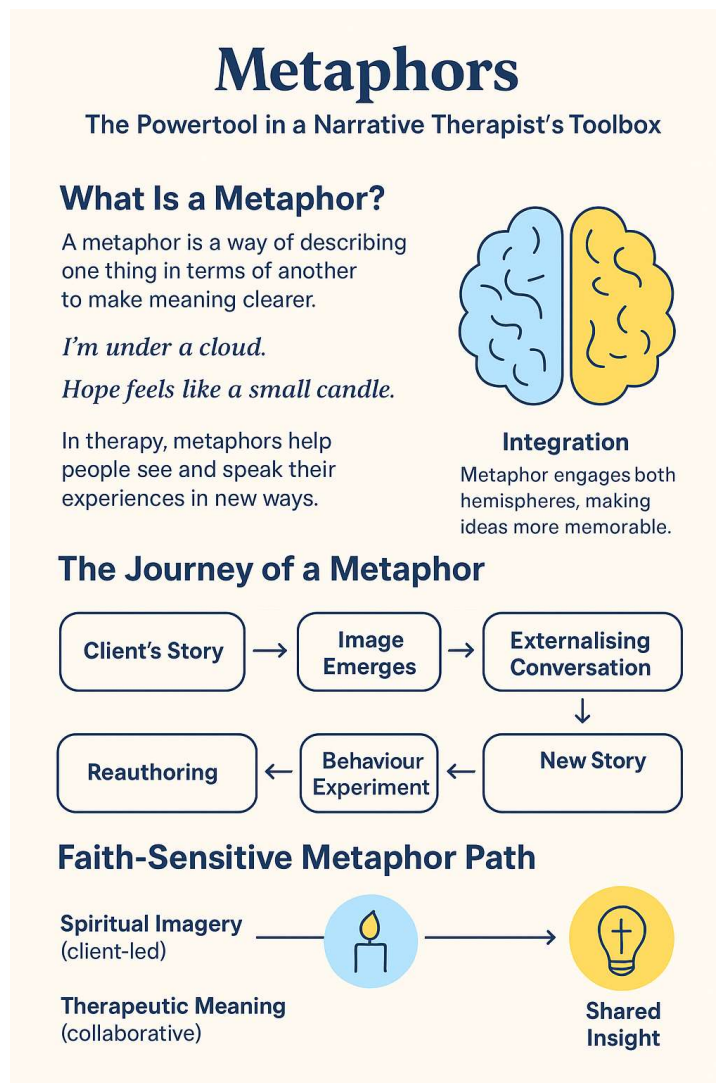
Left Hemisphere (Language) + Right Hemisphere (Imagery/Emotion) → Integration and Insight

## 🔄 Diagram: The Journey of a Metaphor

Client Story → Image Emerges → Externalising Conversation → Reauthoring → Behaviour Experiment → New Story

## ✨ Diagram: Faith-Sensitive Metaphor Path

Spiritual Imagery (client-led) ↔ Therapeutic Meaning (collaborative) → Shared Insight



## Personal Reflection Prompts

Use these prompts to deepen awareness of how metaphors shape narrative practice:

- What metaphors have you heard recently in your client work?
- How did each metaphor shape your understanding of the client's experience?
- How can you keep metaphors in the client's language and worldview?

Example: When Jay described a 'tightrope between pleasing others and pleasing God,' exploring what widening the rope into a bridge might look like helped reframe the metaphor toward grace and agency.

## Suggested Reading & Resources

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Stubley, J. (2024). *Imagination and metaphor in narrative therapy and collective practice*. Dulwich Centre Publications.

Zimmerman, J. L., & Dickerson, V. C. (1994). Using a narrative metaphor: Implications for theory and clinical practice. *Family Process*, 33(3), 233–245.

Dulwich Centre — Narrative Practice Online Course: 'The Narrative Metaphor'.  
<https://dulwichcentre.com.au>

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## Beacon of Hope — Guided Imagery & Journaling

### Purpose

A short guided imagination & journaling worksheet to invite spiritual imagery and resources into therapeutic work. Use in session or as a take-home exercise.

### Guided Imagery (5 minutes)

1. Sit comfortably. Close your eyes and breathe slowly for 4 counts in, 4 counts out.
2. Imagine a light, place, or object that represents 'hope' or 'faith' for you right now. It can be literal or symbolic.
3. Notice: what colour is it? How big? Does it sound, smell, or feel like anything?

### Journaling Prompts (write for 5 minutes)

- a) Describe the object/place/light in at least three sensory details.
- b) What does this image want for you? (What is its intention?)
- c) If this image could speak, what would it say?

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### Integration

How might you carry a small action from this image into the coming week? Write one small, specific step:

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### **For Therapists — Facilitation Notes**

- Offer scripture options (e.g., Matthew 5:14–16) but emphasise alternatives for non-religious clients.
- Keep invitation optional; avoid pressuring clients into religious language.
- Use this as a bridge to strengths-based metaphors in reauthoring work.

## Spiritual Landmarks — Reflexive Mapping

### Purpose

A timeline exercise to help therapists notice how their own faith metaphors have formed. Use for reflexive practice and to consider boundaries for self-disclosure.

### Instructions

Draw a horizontal line across the page representing your life. Mark approximate ages (childhood → present).

Under the line, mark 4–6 'landmarks' (events, relationships, teachings) that shaped your spiritual/faith meaning.

### For each landmark, note:

Landmark (age/event)	Metaphor that captures it	How it shaped meaning	Ethical boundary for disclosure

### Reflection Prompts

- Which metaphors feel most available or tempting to use with clients?
- Which metaphors might be triggering or carry authority that could influence a client?
- What brief script would you use to share (or not share) a faith-based metaphor with a client?

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## Relationship Web — Metaphor Mapping

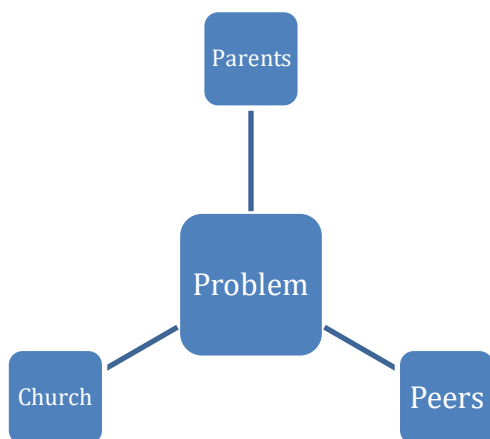
### Purpose

A visual mapping handout to identify relational nodes that influence a client's problem story — use metaphoric labels for each node.

### Instructions

1. Put the client (or client's preferred identity) in the centre circle.
2. Around them, draw 6–8 nodes (people, institutions, beliefs, spiritual images, communities).
3. Label each node with a metaphor (e.g., 'lighthouse', 'moat', 'tangled vines').
4. Draw arrows showing direction of influence (supports, constrains, ambivalent).

### Relational Web Template



### Prompts for Relational Reauthoring Questions

- Who or what helps the client keep their preferred story alive?
- Which node has been overstated in the client's problem story?
- If one node could change its role by 10%, what would that look like?
- What small action could the client take to strengthen a supportive node this week?

### Script Examples

'Who/what feels like a lighthouse for you right now? How does it help you find your way?'

'If the tangled vines loosened a little, what would you notice first?'

## Metaphor Potency — Observer Checklist

### Purpose

A quick observer checklist to help give structured feedback during role-plays or real sessions. Rate each item (0 = not at all, 1 = somewhat, 2 = strongly).

### Checklist

Item	0	1	2	Notes
Metaphor was client-generated (vs therapist-introduced)				
Therapist preserved client voice and ownership				
Externalising language used (problem named, separated)				
Re-authoring questions invited possibility (not forced)				
Behaviour experiment or small step co-created				
Faith integration was optional and client-centred				
Observer felt client's agency increased				

### Observer Feedback Prompts

- What phrase from the client felt most potent?
- Which question helped the client imagine something different?
- One suggestion to increase client ownership.

### Scoring (suggestion)

Sum the numeric scores for a quick potency index. Use qualitative notes to guide feedback.

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# One-Page Bibliography

## Metaphors — The Powertool in a Narrative Therapist's Toolbox

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Selected core readings and resources referenced in the workshop. Each entry includes a short citation and a clickable link.

1. White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.  
<https://wwwnorton.com/books/Narrative-Means-to-Therapeutic-Ends/>
2. Stublely, J. (2024). Imagination and metaphor in narrative therapy and collective practice. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work*, (1), 84–95.  
[https://dulwichcentre.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Stublely\\_ImaginationAndMetaphor\\_IJNTCW\\_20241.pdf](https://dulwichcentre.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Stublely_ImaginationAndMetaphor_IJNTCW_20241.pdf)
3. Zimmerman, J. L., & Dickerson, V. C. (1994). Using a narrative metaphor: Implications for theory and clinical practice. *Family Process*, 33(3), 233–245.  
doi:10.1111/j.1545-5300.1994.00233.x  
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/7828708/>
4. Dulwich Centre — Narrative Practice resources and practice papers (includes material on the narrative metaphor and metaphors in practice).  
<https://dulwichcentre.com.au/courses/what-is-narrative-practice-a-free-course/lessons/thenarrativemetaphor/>