"So What's a Meta For?"

Klaus Schenck, Ph.D.

Abstract

Metaphors are precision tools for the talking professions like coaches, therapists, and consultants. Metaphors simultaneously use language and images and by this they bridge between different domains of experience like identity and relating, cognitions and emotions. Using metaphors is simply unavoidable, they are ubiquitous. Their conscious use allows for subtly balancing difference and similarity, and by this providing descriptions of solutions that may be both attractively different from some "problematic", undesired, current or dreaded state, and feasibly small.

Bridges between sources and targets

With language and images being THE prominent tools of communication in collaborating, coaching, and consulting, using metaphors is simply unavoidable (for example, the above abstract already contains a considerable collection of metaphors, including "tool", "bridge", "domain", "balance", and "attraction" in non-literal meanings, to name a few.) Far beyond being "decorative element only", metaphor use is fundamental; whenever we try to describe the unknown with the help of the known we introduce metaphorical meanings of words used for (other) literal meanings so far. We carry meanings over from one domain of meaning (called "source domain" by linguists) to another (the "target domain"). That's where the term comes from: in Greek, "meta pherein" means "to carry over", to carry to some other place (literally. . .).

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As distant as source and target may be, metaphor, at the same time, creates and plays with very close neighbourhood, with almost-identities. Where "opposites" describe maximum difference (or, topologically, distance) between two terms, "metaphor" describes the minimal difference.

"I is an other", an old quote by French poet Arthur Rimbaud and also the title of a quite comprehensive book (Geary, 2011) about metaphor, exemplifies this: here, the description of "I" lies just on the verge of difference and identity, using what something IS NOT to explain what it IS.

Metaphors, polarities, and SF

Now what is that good for and, especially, what has it got to do with Solution Focus (SF)? Well, a lot actually. Let's start with the most obvious "opposite" in SF, and with one of the best known tools of SF, namely, the difference between "problem" and "solution". Whenever you take a closer look at opposites, you notice two things: 1. Somehow they relate to each other or, you might say, they have a relationship (that consists of opposing each other). 2. Complete opposites are an abstraction. In "real life", there are shades of grey in between them, more or less of either end of the spectrum that spans between the abstracted opposites.

"Differences" and "relationships", and "polarities" all seem to be similar in that, if you display them graphically, they might be shown as two ends or "poles" of a structure representing two extremes and the relationship between them. And then there's a line in-between those poles representing, somehow, the "difference" or "relationship". The poles and the line linking them would, together, represent a "polarity".

## SF-scaling: ladders and rungs between difference and similarity

One well-known form of polarity is the SF-"scale", the name being literally derived from the Latin word for ladder ("scala"). The two poles of the SF-scale are "zero" and "ten",

standing for "problem" (worst case, complete lack of a desired state, "zero solution") and "solution" ("no problem" at all, ideal state or "future perfect" ...), respectively. This ladder can be used to describe many useful aspects of solutions: clarity, hope, and other measures of progress that may develop over time. Between zero and ten there are nine "rungs" of the "ladder", at lesser distance from each other than the poles, marking different intermediate states.

The scale helps to "measure" – in some very subjective way – any differences and changes that may occur. "Distance by numbers" is a metaphorical measure of degrees of difference: between zero and ten would be "polar opposites", between two and eight, for example, would be "pretty different", between five and seven would already be "pretty similar", and between six and six would be "no difference", or "identity".

Scales – between differences and similarities
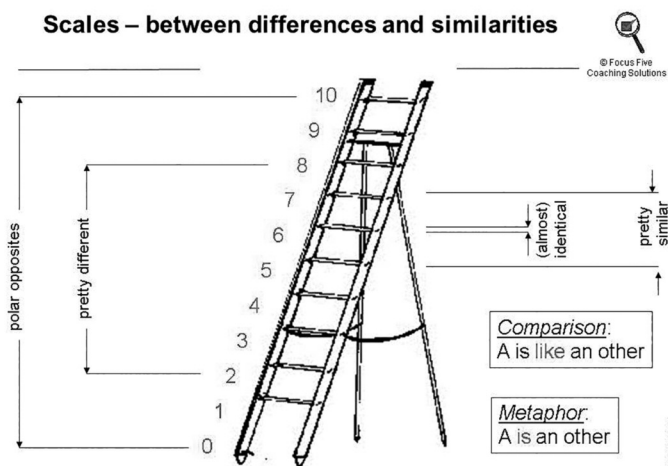
Now a metaphor is something that uses difference to describe identity. It says what something *is* by using something else, something that it *is not*. It says what something is *like* – and then even drops the word "like". Some powerful person may

be addressed not only by "He is like a lion", but by "He is a lion". Which, of course, no human being is, in any strict zoological sense, yet the description evokes attributes that may also apply, in a metaphorical way, to the person.

Such scintillation on the edge of identity is applicable not only for some observable features or behaviours of a person that we lack better words for, but for all descriptions of domains not described before. We have to describe the unknown with the help of words that were developed for the known. We have to "carry words over", to new uses and meanings, to make any sense at all of the newly charted cognitive territory.

In a similar way, SF scaling plays with degrees of difference and degrees of similarity. It uses enough difference to make a difference, and enough similarity to allow for coping with the difference. It describes "steps" (again a metaphor, as coaches only seldom really use their feet to make those steps in a coaching session ...) that make a difference towards solutions, desired futures, and it takes much care to make those steps (or differences) small enough to make them feasible. If a first step from let's say "three" to "four" is too big, let's check a change from "three" to "three-point-five", or "three-point-zero-zero-one". In this way, size-adapted difference is being converted from an obstacle into a resource. Thus it helps to convert problems into beginning solutions.

Metaphors can help in just doing that, utilising their quality of being both different and same, of having at least one literal and at least one metaphorical meaning, or "denotation(s)" and "connotation(s)". Both will be further de- or re-fined by the current use and context of the conversation. Metaphors, even language itself, and by this our world-views are culture-relative (Nisbett, 2003). The range of possible meanings of metaphors changes over time and with changes in culture. Sometimes literal meanings get forgotten (like in "skyscrapers", or the "legs" of a table), sometimes metaphorical names change with changes in technology (the heart as the "seat of the soul" is reduced to a "pump", while the brain turned into a "massive parallel computer", and at the same time
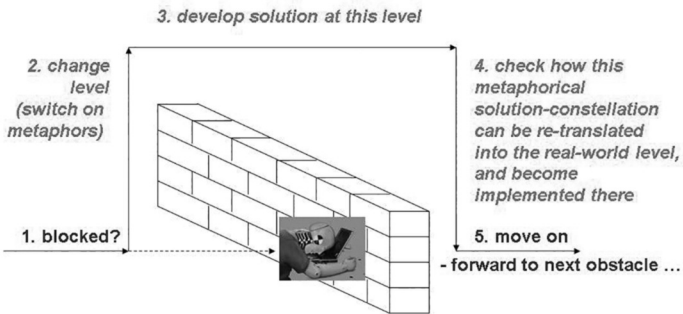
computers into "neural networks"). Attention of managers and culture in organisations also seems to be significantly organised by – often tacit – metaphorical concepts (Morgan, 1986 and 1993; Fuchs & Huber 2002;, Heath & Heath, 2010). Re-membering overlooked concepts, the forgotten, dis-membered poles and former parts of such polarities may offer some fuller range of options to choose from when trying to understand some term's meaning in a useful (e.g. useful-to-the-client) way.

This underlines again that metaphors, like words in general, have no "fixed" meanings. Meaning is negotiated, meaning-in-use. Still, as negotiations about the intended meaning of each word or phrase would be impractical and potentially endless, the "semantic field" of more literal and more metaphorical meanings offers both enough constraint and enough choice to explore and negotiate, should need be, useful meanings.

How could that be useful in practical SF-work?

In a coaching conversation, new and maybe more solution-like perspectives may emerge from actively inquiring into client's words-as-metaphors. As a coach, you may want to listen for possible multiple meanings of words your client may use, address those with questions that bring them further into the focus of the conversation, explore what else comes "attached" to them (what is semantically close), and how that can be utilised to develop aspects of solutions.

In some way you switch levels: from a practical situation's level with a "problem", a perceived lack of options of how to "move on", to a meta-(phorical)-level where some of the restrictions of the practical level temporarily don't apply. On this level you can jointly explore and redesign the pattern, the constellation of related and interwoven aspects, until they somehow "feel better" for the client, until the pattern looks (more) similar ("isomorphic") to her desired state ("preferred future") or at least until the first obstacle seems overcome or circumvented. Then you may switch back and check how this could be mimicked on, or translated to, the practical level.

Obstacles and Levels of Solutions Thinking ...

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3. develop solution at this level

2. change
level
(switch on
metaphors)

4. check how this
metaphorical
solution-constellation
can be re-translated
into the real-world level,
and become
implemented there

1. blocked?

5. move on

- forward to next obstacle ...

Albert Einstein: "The significant problems we face cannot be solved
at the same **level of thinking** that we were at when we created them."

DoIHS 2010

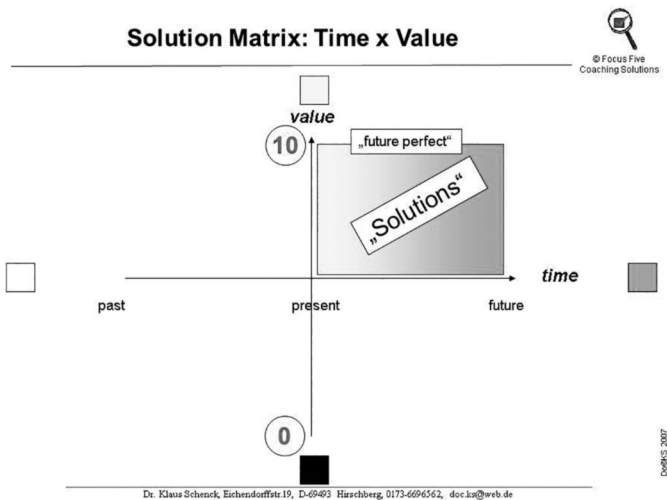Dr. Klaus Schenck, Eichendorffstr.19, D-69493 Hirschberg, 0173-6696562, doc.ks@web.de

Of course, "levels", "blocks", "moves" and "constellations"
are spatial metaphors themselves – but how else could we
describe what's on our minds? "The map is not the territory"
is a famous quote of Alfred Korzybski's "General Semantics"
(1933), but Gregory Bateson (1972) pointed out that "we only
have maps of territories, and maps of maps." In that way of
trying to look at "the world" we find that our "maps of the
world" are the best approximation to it we can get. Which
means that if we change our "mental maps", our understand-
ing of the practical situation, our "mindscapes", we may
convert a problem (-map) into a solution (-map).

Metaphors: maps, models, and a (SF-) matrix

Sure enough, maps are just models of the territories they
represent, and as George Box (Box & Draper, 1987)
commented: "All models are wrong – but some are useful."
Just like metaphors, maps gain their usefulness from their
specific combination of *highlighting* and *hiding*. Both
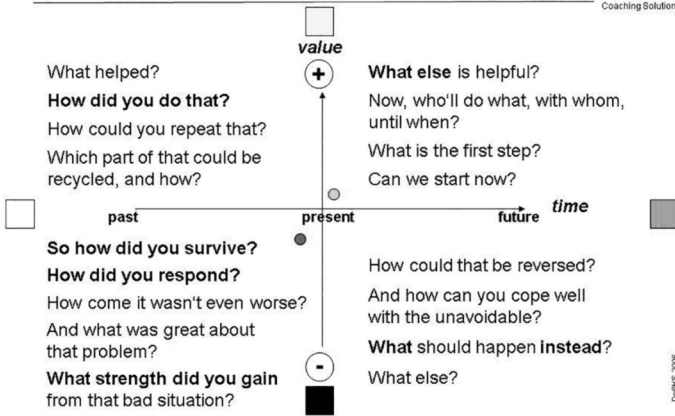highlight a few selected aspects out of some larger (potentially

unlimited) collection of all features of some situation, and neglect or "hide" the rest. The extended Korzybski-quote says: "A map is not the territory it represents but, if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness." The *similar structures* of maps and metaphors, of "steps" in change efforts and steps on ladders are what makes them useful. (Whether or not we human beings use "maps" in the sense of "representations" or "simulations", in our cognitive processes, is a different question not addressed here; here I rather talk about more literal maps, on paper or on screens. Again, it is easy to see how difficult it may be to exclude possible further meanings selectively . . .)

For another useful SF model you may combine two polarities "orthogonally", which creates a matrix – another kind of map. If you combine "time" (between past and future) and value (between bad and good), you get my "SF-matrix". "Solutions" are being located in the upper right ("future x good") quadrant, as you hope to be able to reach them (so they can't be located in the past) and you hope for them to be positive (so above from the line of extrapolation of the present or of default expectations).

Solution Matrix: Time x Value

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value
10
"future perfect"
"Solutions"

time

past   present   future

0

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DoFKS 2007

How this matrix can be deployed, in the form of SF-questions, to support clients' focusing their solutions, and how it can display a "landscape" of management jargon, is illustrated in the next two figures, and has been described in more detail in my "CORFU"-model (Schenck, 2006).
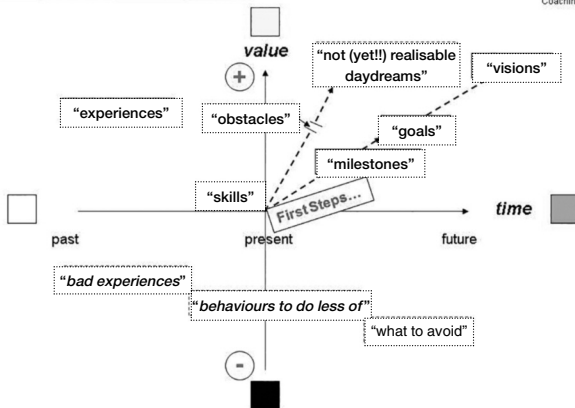
Solutions-Focusing Questions (examples)

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value

(+)

What helped?
How did you do that?
How could you repeat that?
Which part of that could be recycled, and how?

What else is helpful?
Now, who'll do what, with whom, until when?
What is the first step?
Can we start now?

past — present — future — *time*

So how did you survive?
How did you respond?
How come it wasn't even worse?
And what was great about that problem?
What strength did you gain
from that bad situation?

How could that be reversed?
And how can you cope well with the unavoidable?
What should happen **instead**?
What else?

(-)

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Multiple (management- and solutions-) Components in Time

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value

(+)

"experiences"   "obstacles"

"not (yet!!) realisable daydreams"   "visions"

"goals"

"milestones"

"skills"   *First Steps…*

past — present — future — *time*

"*bad experiences*"

"*behaviours to do less of*"

"what to avoid"

(-)

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Further potential benefits of metaphors for the practical work of helping professions

Skilled hearing and application of metaphors may support professional helping relationships in several ways:

- supporting understanding of clients' subjective experience
- diagnosing (should need be, for example for reimbursement agencies) using clients' understanding and language (rather than psycho-jargon . . .)
- reinforcing the relationship by finding joint language and joining images
- exploring and changing perspectives and frames of meanings increases diversity and choice. (That fits well with Heinz von Foerster's "Ethical Imperative: Always act as to increase the number of options!")

All these together enable and support creative solution-building. Hints, or "clues" to the clients' solutions are contained in their own descriptions, the metaphors in their language, and sometimes they need another person to start hearing them themselves.

Multiple modalities of metaphors

The almost-but-not-quite-identical degree of similarity of metaphors and their meanings can refer to different aspects of relations: in space, time, logic, sound, or more complex sets of attributes, to name but a few. Each of these aspects may be further explored and may turn out to be a source of overlooked resources. To explore them, you may use variants of one of the most common SF-questions: "What else?" For example, if someone had been asked the "miracle question" and just found "the first sign that the miracle has happened", repeatedly asking "And what else would you notice that would tell you that the miracle has happened?" might help to expand the understanding of one's own solution. This could be further detailed by questions about:

- *Space*: What else is next to it ("it" being that first sign)? What is above, below, behind, to the left ... of it? ("above" and "below" here being orientations in perceptual space!)
- *Time*: What happened just before you noticed it? What might happen next?
- *Logic*: What's implied in it? What's a prerequisite for this to happen?
- *Sound*: What similar sounds could introduce different meanings?

This last one may need a little bit of additional information about sounds, language, and meaning. As our brains seem to scan incoming auditory signals for *ALL* possible meanings, ambiguity requires decisions. Did we just hear "a part" or "apart"? Did the other person talk about "a line" or "align"? Deliberately playing with those ambiguities and reinforcing those we hear in coaching conversations often supports and invites creativity to – if it helps – a) change directions and "levels of thinking" in surprising ways (riddles and jokes do just that!), and b) invite a sense of humour and playfulness that may itself be a helpful resource.

The Korzybski quote about maps mentioned above goes on with a caveat with respect to language: "... If we reflect upon our languages, we find that at best they must be considered only as maps. A word is not the object it represents; and languages exhibit also this particular self-reflexiveness, ... which introduces serious complexities... The disregard of these complexities is tragically disastrous in daily life and science."

With their multiple meanings, metaphors may offer just the right "requisite variety" (Ashby, 1956) to cope with "these complexities" – provided they preserve rather than damage the structural similarities between maps and territories, words and experiences.

Good, "minimally-invasive" questions are required that help to elicit the clients' own understanding rather than

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imposing the coach's way of seeing the world. The approach
of "Clean Language" (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000) has culti-
vated a whole set of such questions, related to the ones
mentioned above, that may be helpful to know about, and
useful for extending the toolbox of SF-questions.

- As "*sets of attributes*", you may make use of a variety of
  worlds as source domains for metaphors: professional
  worlds, theatre, movie titles, nature, sports, war,
  journeys, games, agriculture. Your solution may "hit the
  nail on the head" – then what tool will be appropriate
  next? You may be part of a winning team – is it playing
  hockey or tennis? (And when you find yourself with a
  tennis racket on a hockey field this might be strong indi-
  cation to change either your tool or your playground . . .)
  You may have "planted the seeds" – now do you water
  the seeds or the weeds (Peacock, 2001)? And are you
  looking for colourful flowers or tasty fruit as desired
  outcomes?
- You may include *different materials*, beyond language-
  only, to model sets of attributes. In coaching processes,
  coaches have used modelling clay to create "metaphors
  in 3D", and the coach added SF questions to develop
  "problem sculptures" into solutions. In one workshop
  (described further in Schenck, 2011), someone had
  modelled a "tree" with lots of "leaves" around it, and
  during talking about it discovered that part of her
  solution was to "leave" some things behind.

"The pattern that connects"

"Difference" and "relationships" are not only essential aspects
of metaphors but also two core terms of Gregory Bateson's
work. His famous definition of information is "a difference
that makes a difference". And he insisted that the smallest unit
of everything is not a "thing" but a relationship, just as the
smallest unit of life is not an organism, but an organism-in-an-
environment, in other words: the relationship and co-evolution

of an organism and its relevant environment. No surprise, metaphor was central to his thinking, too.

Author and scientist Fritjof Capra recalls, *"Metaphor, according to Bateson, is the language of nature. Metaphor expresses structural similarity or, better still, similarity of organization, and metaphor in this sense was the central concern of Bateson's work. Whatever field he worked in, he would look for nature's metaphors, for "the pattern which connects."* (Capra, 1988; p.81)

And he quotes from one of his "conversations with remarkable people": *"'Logic is a very elegant tool,' he [Bateson] said, 'and we've got a lot of mileage out of it for two thousand years or so. The trouble is, you know, when you apply it to crabs and porpoises, and butterflies and habit formation' – his voice trailed off, and he added after a pause, looking out over the ocean – 'you know, to all those pretty things' – and now, looking straight at me – 'logic won't quite do.' 'No?' 'It won't do,' he continued animatedly, 'because that whole fabric of living things is not put together by logic.' . . . 'So what do they use instead?' 'Metaphor,' Bateson replied, 'that's how this whole fabric of mental interconnections holds together. Metaphor is right at the bottom of being alive.'"* (Capra, 1988; pp.76–77).

Applied animals

Nora Bateson, when asked about her father's understanding of metaphor (at the SOLworld conference 2010 in Hungary) started her answer also with a quote: "Metaphor is a slippery fish". (Trying to grasp that, I thought "metaphor – is there 'something fishy' here" . . .)

As a practical exercise, now that we have reached animals as a possible source domain for helpful (or slippery) metaphors, you may well apply those to solution building yourself, and right away. Just think of some animal as metaphorically representing (being in some way similar to) your "problem". Then another one as representing your aspired "solution" – and then have some solution talk and some scaling to try and bridge the

difference. You may use scaling with "zero" being your "fish" (if that were your "problem animal"), and "ten" being your "giraffe" (if that were your "solution animal"). You may ask: "And what would tell you you're one step closer to your 'giraffe' already?", and lots of "What else?" You may inquire about the animals' constellation in (metaphorical) space, change distances and angles, and see what difference that may make.

If you think progress on the scale is too slow, you may add further helpful (bridging) animals – the "missing links" the evolution of progress often speaks about. If you want to add an element of chance, you may pick a toy animal from a bag (your kids may share one) or from a set of cards, or from a dictionary or zoology text book, or from "memory" (yes, that game . . .). What does this animal resource have to add? Where could it be located with respect to the others? How does it make the transition from "fish" to "giraffe", or at least the next little "mutation" in the desired direction, any easier?

That's what we did as a group exercise at another workshop (Schenck, 2010), after some small theoretical input similar to parts of the above – and I was most grateful to the participants for the joy of watching their solutions emerge in "anim(al)ated" conversations!

Metaphorical orientation in spaces, spatial orientations in metaphors

Very often, inner and outer space (our body, and objects and their constellations in our environment) are "sources" for our metaphors: Someone "went under my skin", even "touched my heart" or got "my juices flowing"; someone else was "standing behind me" while I was "chasing an idea". . . Listening carefully to these metaphorical meanings of everyday expressions may open doors (another metaphor . . .) and provide shortcuts (yet another one . . .) to clients' experience. If those descriptions work well for them and as we SF-coaches like to "work with what works", then we might as well start right from here: right in the centres of clients' "mindscapes".

Some of the uses of metaphors have become so deeply ingrained that they have become "conceptual metaphors" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), like "up is good" (that's why heaven and hell have their orientation in space. . .), "life is a journey" (that's why we're "on our way" and have "goals". . .) or "time is money" (so we can "save", "invest", and "loose time". . .). Again it takes some – preferentially playful – training to rediscover the metaphorical grounds of those lingual everyday occurrences. But once you start noticing them, again this may be a starting point and catalyst of efficient and effective solution talk with clients.

Body and brain

Currently especially fancy are brain metaphors: those of "left brain" versus "right brain", and those of the "tri-une (or quadri-une)" brain for example (both originally from the 1970s). The left hemisphere of the brain is said to be more digital, analytic, numbers-oriented, the right hemisphere more analogue, holistic, image-oriented. (And sometimes, there is "nothing right in my left brain, nothing left in my right brain", as one postcard said. . .)

The "tri-une brain" theory by Paul McLean says that under our "monkey brain" (the "neocortex", the latest and largest addition to our human brains, processing cognitive functions including language in the left half of the neocortex) lies an "opossum brain" (the "limbic system" older part, prominently involved in processing emotions and decisions), and an archaic "reptile brain" (where vital functions like breathing and digesting are regulated, and where, under high stress, fight-flight-or-freeze reactions are initiated). A further, more recent distinction has added a "dolphin brain" (the "prefrontal cortex", where social functions are regulated and aggressive impulses censored).

"Quadrune Brain", Connie Barlow; http://www.thegreatstory.org/charts/triune.html (091211)

Facing this collection of animals in the brain, the title of the first book about "Clean Language" seems well chosen: "Metaphors in Mind".

"Hard core" (another metaphor! . . .) neuro- and cognitive scientists may dislike this simplified and probably outdated use of brain topology and those fancy, figurative names for its functional areas – while your clients nevertheless may love both, and find it useful to explore with the help of just those concepts and that language.

Bridges to decisions

A frequent trigger for asking for coaching support are conflicting internal and external views of choices, creating the need for, and at the same time hindering, decisions. Brain research nicely shows how decisions are *not* created in the more logical, rational parts of our brains (for example see Damasio, 1994, or Gigerenzer, 2007). The more reliable, integrative, clear decisions are all made intuitively first, based on emotions ("gut feeling"), and only rationalised afterwards. A well known metaphor explains: If the brain were a company,

the executive board would certainly not reside in the neocortex, but in the limbic system – the location for the processing of emotions. (In the neocortex, maybe the public relations manager would have a say, long after the executive board has come to terms with the decision making . . .) This has an interesting consequence for coaching: as the limbic system does not even have a language processing centre, we have to use images to reach our (and our clients') "centres for emotions and decision". The ideal tool to create images with language is – metaphor!

Still, two last caveats with respect to brain metaphors apply. First, none of these descriptions intends to indicate that decisions are "made in the brain" (and nowhere else). The body is not "just there to take your brain from one meeting to the next", as one manager once put it. Rather, all our cognitive processes are embodied, with the brain being but one part in the whole "orchestra" playing our minds' "symphonies". Again, any use of "the brain does X" or "the limbic system processes Y" is only a shorthand, but risks gaining a life of its own. Already the "conceptual grandfather of SF", Milton Erickson warned of inappropriately "losing quotes", of forgetting about the metaphorical aspects in all descriptions. (More detail about the many intermediate steps or "layers" between neurons and language, persons and decisions may be found in Feldman, 2006.)

Second, the "monkey brain" is not to be confused with the "monkey mind", a Buddhist metaphor for inner dialogue, for the constant chatter of our minds that might benefit from some practice in meditative silence, both outside and inside our skin and skull – while even that practice might involve lots of metaphor (c. Allione, 2008) . . .

So for your coaching work I wish for you, as the movie puts it (almost):

"Me-ta-phorce be with you at all times!"

Of course, being a good SF coach you may stick closely to SF questions and have excellent results. Then again, as you can't avoid metaphor anyway, you might as well explore its world further, map it with curiosity and care, and then use and

utilise it wisely for the benefit of both yourself and your clients. Good luck with that!

Notes

There's lots of literature available on the topic of metaphor. As entry points for further understanding and examples of application, I'd recommend the following authors and books, to name but a few: Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Feldman, 2006, Geary, 2011; Lawley & Tompkins, 2000 (including their comprehensive website: www.cleanlanguage.co.uk); Morgan, 1986 and 1993; Nisbett, 2003; Heath & Heath, 2010; and (in German language only) Fuchs & Huber, 2002, as well as Schenck, 2010.

The title of this article is a quote from the title of chapter 17 of Bateson & Bateson, 1987.

The "Bateson on maps" quote is taken from Bateson, 1972: "We say the map is different from the territory. But what is the territory? Operationally, somebody went out with a retina or a measuring stick and made representations which were then put on paper. What is on the paper map is a representation of what was in the retinal representation of the man who made the map; and as you push the question back, what you find is an infinite regress, an infinite series of maps. The territory never gets in at all. [. . .] Always, the process of representation will filter it out so that the mental world is only maps of maps, ad infinitum."

"The Quadriune Brain" graphic is quoted from Connie Barlow: http://www.thegreatstory.org/charts/triune.html

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