

## What is a Metaphor Anyway?

**W**hether attending a group or family session involving stepfamilies that I facilitate, you would without a doubt hear conversations about momma bears and cubs, teaching 15-year-olds to drive, red lights, traffic rules, Nebraska and Iowa farmers to Texas, nickel flipping games and many other seemingly off the subject conversations. For those stepfamily members involved, they have come to know these analogies, metaphors and word pictures as a representation of different aspects of stepfamilies and stepfamily development. Although I have a tendency to think in metaphors and analogies (I was called the "analogy man" as young as 19), it wasn't until late in my undergraduate program that I saw their usefulness in promoting other perspectives. While taking a class on marriage, we read a book "Marriage and the Family through Science Fiction" (Clear, Warrick, Greenberg and Olander, 1976) that contained short stories or metaphors to describe "the nature of family organization, cross-culture family perspectives, the sociology of courtship, the sociology of marriage, the sociology of family dissolution and alternative family forms." I don't recall if any of them spoke directly to stepfamilies, however I do remember that I found it a fascinating way to present issues without actually starting the issue itself. Milton Erickson defines the therapeutic metaphor as "a story with dramatic devices that captures attention and provides an altered framework through which the client(s) can entertain novel experience."

Over the years, I have found that the use of analogies, metaphors, and word pictures are extremely helpful in moving stepfamily members to more effective states (not one of the fifty) as they move through stepfamily stages of development. As we know, stepfamilies encounter times of intense emotions and feelings. Patricia Papernow, describes the Mobilization Stage of Development as a time where there is "an atmosphere of highly charged emotional conflict which results as the stepfamily moves into more openly airing differences and more actively influencing each other over step issues." Furthermore, she indicates that the tasks during this time are "to actively confront differences between family cultures, between insider and outsider needs, and between adults' and children's experiences of the family without shaming or blaming; to begin constructively influencing each other for changes without breaking the family apart." Scott Browning shares in his presentations that enactment as a therapeutic tool with

stepfamilies can be ineffective at best, and lead to disastrous outcomes because of the significant stress and emotionality that already exists in stepfamilies. Metaphors, analogies and word pictures allow individuals, therapists and others to convey concerns and share messages instead of using damaging words. These connections between stepfamilies and seemingly disconnected worlds allow stepfamilies to become unstuck, problem-solve, or create new ways of describing their current situations.

So when working with these families and the numerous complexities attached to intense emotions bring on the analogies, share a word picture, and remember, "what a metaphor is for." The Erickson construction of a metaphor utilizes these six elements: define a specific therapeutic goal for this metaphor; construct a reference picture that contains the necessary components for the unfolding story line; construct an end picture to provide closure to the story line; check that the resources needed to reach a goal will be possible, use the element of metaphoric drama; and observe and incorporate a client's response to the metaphor. Although analogies and word pictures attempt to make more direct comparisons than metaphors, they all have the same purpose. Analogies, metaphors and word pictures change the language of the current situation in order that a different perspective can be used to address the issue at hand.

Let's take an example: a common interactive metaphor I utilize to describe biological, stepparent and stepchild issues around discipline involves the use of three chairs. These chairs are lined up with two placed side by side and the third behind the other two. We have just created the front and back seat of a car, or in this day and age that of a minivan. I will sit in the driver's seat and "be the fifteen year old" while the biological parent sits in the front passenger seat. The stepparent then gets the backseat. From here we can have a dialogue about the effects of a backseat driver; when it would be most acceptable to discuss any concerns and observations of the backseat passenger; and, that the stepparent could even "ask the fifteen year old to go for a drive" without the biological parent to develop the relationship. This metaphor or analogy or word picture is effective in giving the family a different perspective of similar events involving stepchildren, stepparents and biological parents and the potential hazards of "backseat driving"

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# CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS FOR SUMMER 1998

By: Gloria Clark

**C**HAPTER LIBRARIES, BOOK REVIEW. One of the things that we at the Pittsburgh chapter of SAA have offered to our chapter members over the years is our growing library. Members are encouraged to take out books, tapes or videos and return them at the next meeting. Some of these resources have been gifts and others the chapter has bought from the SAA Resource Catalog or from literature displays at SAA Conferences. Recently we have acquired two new books by Fred Rogers of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood called "Let's Talk About It: Stepfamilies" and "Let's Talk About It: Divorce." SAA co-founder Emily Visser was asked by Mr. Rogers to look over the manuscript for the stepfamilies book to be sure that it had accurate stepfamily dynamics. These books are published by G. P. Putnam's Sons and are available in some bookstores. We hope that they will eventually be listed in the SAA Resources Catalog.

We were asked by Mr Rogers' assistant, Hedda Sharapin, to give them feedback on children's reactions to these books, so recently we lent the books to parents with young children and asked them to report back to us at the next meeting. We and the parents were delighted with the results. Initially the children seemed reluctant to be read books with such titles but after hearing the stories and seeing the pictures they told their parents "that book is about me!" It opened up conversation

about what was going on in their lives and helped them to put words to their emotions. One of the children who had begun to act out some of her feelings in school, started asking her Dad some of the questions she hadn't been willing to talk about before. Talking about feelings seems to help young children make sense of the changes in their lives and give them permission to ask questions.

**CHAPTERS.** Recently I received a list of some chapters that had closed during 1997 and I started wondering why they closed. The need for support and education for stepfamilies is even greater today than ever because of a growing number of people divorcing and remarrying. Of course, people's lives are busier and there is a lot of information available these days that weren't around in the 70's and 80's. Information is helpful but it is my experience that the support people get from talking face to face with other people who have similar problems is invaluable.

If any of you who are leading chapters or have led chapters have suggestions about how SAA could help you, please call the SAA headquarters at 1-800-735-0329. The SAA board is thinking about formulating a training program to assist chapter leaders and would like your input. If any of you would like to write a column about what's happening in your chapter please send it to SAA in Nebraska for approval.

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when there is already a responsible adult in the front seat.

This is only one example of the many metaphors used in my work with stepfamilies. What I find most useful is the de-escalating effect they have for the members of these complex families. Metaphors, analogies, and word pictures help create a new language that this new family can begin to share together to describe their experiences and to effectively take on the challenges of moving through the developmental cycle. The ability of these interventions to take on multidimensional applications in the context of therapy, or group processing, or an educational setting is substantial, and are invaluable when working with the emotionally laden issues surrounding stepfamilies.

Analogies, metaphors and word pictures take our old mental system struggles that often fail to distinguish the relevant from the trivial, and create a new way of thinking about a situation to become more effective, and thus more constructive in our ways of handling the challenges that stepfamilies face. So the next time you run into a stepfamily (metaphorically speaking), and feel stuck (never mind), or like you have no place to go (this is getting ridiculous), move (now I've done it) the family into a different world that they can work together and establish a new family—one that is healthy and effective in meeting the challenges of stepfamily life.

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