

## Metaphors

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

I recently knew someone who lost their house to a bank because they could no longer afford to make the payments. They had taken out a mortgage years previously that was just interest payments. At some point, the mortgage became interest plus principal and when that happened it was all over. The person had not planned for this and figured the value of the house would have kept going up over the years--it did not.

For months, the person was referring to the house as their "family home" and "the place where their children were growing up" and so forth. They had purchased the house they lost for around \$2,000,000 I think and they owed around \$1,900,000 on it but it was now worth maybe \$1,000,000 (if they were lucky). The person was obviously extremely upset about the situation and I was even talking to them about different banks and ways they might be able to get loans. I was on one of these conference calls with a banker and I heard the banker say something that I realized was ordinary to the banker but could make all the difference to my friend:

The banker called the house "an asset."

He did not call it the "family home" or a "house." He called it an "asset."

When I heard that language, I realized that he had used a metaphor to describe the house in cold, almost analytic terms.

Calling the house an "asset" took the emotional attachment away from it. After the call, I told my friend he should no longer call the house a "house;" instead, he should call it a "bad asset." Calling the home a "bad asset" made it less personal and the change was profound. He stopped being so upset about it and when I heard him talking to others he said stuff like "I have this bad asset I need to get out of."

He lost his house and it was not easy. But going through the whole process, he changed when he called the house a "bad asset." The use of this metaphor is powerful.

When we are involved in a relationship with someone, we may call him or her our "boyfriend" or "girlfriend" or even "lover." When the relationship ends, we typically call them our "ex" or even something a little more severe like "asshole," for example. We use these terms, like my friend used the term "bad asset," to distance ourselves from the issue on a psychological level. The language and metaphors we use to describe people, situations, and our lives can have a profound impact on what happens to us.

Some people see life as a huge battle. Everything bad that happens to them is a fight and not a "challenge." They go into work and life every day thinking it's a battle. They think that people in their personal lives and relationships are out to get them and they need to win and beat them. They believe that every interaction is a test and a fight. This metaphor shapes their experience.

I once worked with a guy that believed life was a battle. He believed that the world was a dangerous place and he was at risk of being killed. He carried a gun (without a permit). He had panic alarms all over his house. He slept with a gun close by. He had cameras all around his house and large fences. He was very afraid of the outside world.

This particular man got this metaphor for his life because he grew up white in South Africa and his family had been attacked during race riots. He grew up in an area of the country where he felt like there was a war of sorts going on. He moved to Los Angeles and lived in a good neighborhood but he did not lose that metaphor for his life and existence. This metaphor ended up defining him and who he was. He saw the people he worked with as potentially out to get him as well.

This "metaphor" for his life negatively affected him.

Other people believe that life is an adventure and are excited about each new day and person they meet. This sort of metaphor for life makes people excited to do new things and meet new people. They are excited about new types of work and think that it's going to be fun. In contrast to being scared or paranoid about each new day, they are excited about it and believe it will be a new sort of adventure.

Some people feel they are imprisoned in life and view people around them and their environment as suffocating. They view new relationships and existing ones as suffocating. They view work, bosses, and others around them as suffocating them and holding them back. Obligations are viewed as something that imprisons them and holds them back.

Other people believe their lives are a roller coaster with good and bad things constantly happening to them beyond their control. They are scared about what lies behind the next corner. They may never take responsibility for their lives because they believe it is beyond their control.

Other people believe that their life is a mission to accomplish something and they are soldiers out to accomplish that mission. They see resistance as natural and something they need to push through and defeat.

We typically use metaphors to compare something to something else. In our lives and careers, we are using metaphors all the time. Metaphors influence our levels of success and what we are able to achieve. Most of us use various "global metaphors" to describe who we are and our existence. When we use these metaphors, they can often shape who we end up becoming.

We also use metaphors to describe others:

- A heart of stone
- Heart of a lion
- Light of my life
- Apple of my eye

- Friends in high places
- A light in a sea of darkness
- I smell a rat
- Run like the wind
- Strong as an ox

Once we ascribe a metaphor to someone, our perception of them and everything they do ends up being shaped in a permanent way and will affect our interaction with them.

We use metaphors so often that they are often subconscious. They are creations that can be imposed upon us by others or that we create ourselves to describe our lives and existence. Positive metaphors can help us see ourselves as resilient, see the world as a positive place, and make our lives more meaningful. Negative metaphors can harm us and limit us in all sorts of ways. Metaphors control how we think about the world and ourselves.

In 2011, a research project began at Stanford University to examine how metaphors influence our thinking.

The researchers had a large group of students read two different reports about crime in a city called Addison and then suggest solutions to the problem.

The first report called crime “a wild beast preying on the city” and “lurking in neighborhoods.” In reaction to this description of crime, 75% of the students suggested the problem be solved with solutions such as calling in the military for help, building more jails, and more enforcement and punishment. Only 25% of the same students stated that better education, fixing the economy, or making other social reforms should be instituted to solve the problem.

The second report was no different from the first, with only one exception: Crime was described as “plaguing” communities and a “virus affecting the city.” Here, 44% of the people stated there should be more social reforms and only 56% stated there should be more enforcement and punishment.

The obvious result of this study was that the use of a metaphor impacted how people believed they should be thinking about a given situation. Simply, the language being used ended up impacting everything.

When we use metaphors, we are shaping our thinking about the world. In fact, the metaphors we use for our lives often determine what ends up happening to us. In our lives, we do not experience reality; we experience our perception of reality and our perception is often guided and influenced by metaphors.

It is important that we are selective in the metaphors we use to describe our lives and others. Metaphors are something that distorts reality for us. You need to use metaphors in a way that serves you and helps you--not the other way around.

For example, if you use the metaphor “I’m at the end of my rope,” this is not something that is likely to serve you. Instead, a better metaphor would be something like “I’m on the cusp of a solution to the problem” or “I’m having an epic and fun experience solving this problem.”

It is your life and you are the one who gets to pick the metaphors for it. You get to choose what meanings you give people and situations. There are positive metaphors and negative metaphors. Do you describe yourself as “swimming upstream” or “on a mission”? Do you believe that “your ship has come in” or that “Life sucks and then you die”?

You need to choose metaphors for your life that empower you. Use words and metaphors to describe yourself that empower and do not disempower you:

- Centered
- A fighter
- A bull
- A warrior

In contrast, some people describe themselves as, “past their prime,” or “tired.” You cannot use metaphors like this. These sorts of metaphors harm you and serve to give you a negative self-image instead of a positive one.

Use metaphors to give yourself the most meaningful and successful life possible. Use metaphors to push yourself forward with excitement.