

More Magic of Metaphor



**Stories for Leaders,
Influencers and Motivators**

Nick Owen

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of Metaphor
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Influencers and Motivators*

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Introduction

I've been fascinated by stories ever since I can remember. My parents used to tell me long stories at bedtime. I'd always fall asleep before I realised that their intention was to put me into a trance. It took me a long time to learn that stories were actually meant to have endings. They say boys are slow learners. And some say they never catch up.

By the time I was five, I was making my own stories. I never realised at the time, of course, that my own stories and fantasies were deep metaphors representing my core values. Looking back on one set of stories that I still recall vividly, I'm amazed to recognise how little these values have changed over decades.

These were tales I constructed in my mind's imagination about a tugboat skipper called Jim. I'd stand on the seat of a high-backed upholstered armchair, barely able to see over the top, one of my father's pipes clamped in my mouth, and test out my sea legs in this "wheelhouse" of my construction. From this vantage point I'd scan the horizon of my parents' living room for waves, whales and armadas.

Tugboat Jim lived in a cottage, by himself, and he'd go out to sea at all times of night and day when summoned to rescue stranded mariners and stricken ships.

Looking back now, I can see I'm less like Captain Jim and more like the tug. In my work as coach, facilitator, consultant, I'm constantly nudging, pushing, pulling and wheedling clients towards the changes they want to make. It may be supporting them to achieve safe havens in the future, or assisting them to move away from current problems. It may involve figurative firefighting or metaphorical whirlpools.

Like most tugs, I'm functional rather than elegant, present rather than charismatic, and very not there when I'm no longer needed.

As for my connection with Jim, I still endeavour to emulate his skills at scanning the horizon for future possibilities, reading the

charts to seek out new depths and uncharted channels, scanning the almanacs for the most auspicious tides, streams and currents, and, whereas Jim used to rely on the stars and his sextant, I consult my metaphorical global satellite positioning system to find out where on earth I am.

Jim's values and the tug's values remain with me: be of service, get the job done with minimum fuss and attention, move on to the next challenge.

Water and solitude are both important themes running through my life. I live by water. I swim whenever I can. I get tremendous pleasure taking quiet walks along coastal paths. Water also gave me another, more recent, insight into the power of metaphor: the result of a discussion with friends about my long and sometimes fractious relationship with my father. As people with similar temperaments and attitudes often do, my father and I had fought for much of our lives, until we both mellowed and began to accept and respect our similarities as well as our differences.

The discussion centred on issues of space, challenge and identity. Where metaphorical images come from, I don't know. But I'm tempted to believe it's that part of our unconscious mind or higher mind that wants us to heal and be at peace with ourselves, if only we will be quiet enough to pay attention to it.

At any rate, an image materialised in my mind. My father and I were swimming in a pool, the same large, clean, blue pool, and had been all our lives. It was only then that I noticed we were swimming in the same direction, and we were swimming in different lanes. We could, if we chose, change lanes; one could join the other in his lane; or we could go our different ways, each with the acknowledgement and respect of the other. I can't begin to articulate with any precision what this metaphor meant to me. I can only report that it was incredibly liberating.

* * *

When my publishers asked me if I would write another book of stories as a sequel to *The Magic of Metaphor* (Crown House Publishing, 2001), I wanted to do something deeper and more

challenging, something that would stretch me more, something that would make me think more deeply about things that mattered to me, and things I was curious about.

I recognise yet another pattern in my life here. A significant part of my work in personal and professional development revolves around communication and relationship skills. Why do I teach these areas? Because I myself have so much to learn about them. As one of the most influential teachers in my life once said to me, “We teach best what we most need to learn.”

So I wanted this sequel to be a learning experience for me, and it took me two years to decide exactly what form this would take.

Personally, I like stories that stand alone and allow the readers or listeners to work out the meaning for themselves. But many people have asked me to apply stories to various contexts, and that’s an interesting challenge, too. I have endeavoured to avoid making the stories specific to particular contexts, and have preferred to explore some possible interpretations. These interpretations are by no means exhaustive, and they only partly belong to me, as they come from the diaries of a seventeen-year-old apprentice magician who developed a personality of his own.

I wondered how to put together a book that would allow readers to access it at the level that was right for them. Some readers will just want to read the stories and make up their own minds about what to do with them and how to use them. Or they may just wish to read them for pleasure and nothing more.

Other readers may be interested in the possible interpretations that are suggested, which will no doubt be a springboard for their own stories and interpretations.

Others still may wish to read the book because they are interested in the topics of the subtitle of this book: *Stories for Leaders, Influencers and Motivators*.

My childhood reading influenced me greatly here. Every Christmas when I wasn’t navigating my tugboat through the high seas of West London, I’d be avidly devouring Rupert Bear annuals.

These – for those who have never seen such a thing – provided one of the first mixed-ability texts. There were speech bubbles with simple dialogue for kids who preferred inference and brevity. But for those of a more literary bent there were rhyming couplets beneath each cartoon image, taking the narrative to a deeper level of exposition. And, for those six-year-olds who got a real buzz out of textual analysis and semiotics, there was a densely written paragraph of muscular prose that brought all the subtle nuances of characterisation and subtext into play.

This became the model for my book. You can read it at a variety of levels. You can dip into it, or read it sequentially. You can just read the stories, or you could read the general notes at the end. Or you can share the interpretations of the Young Magician as he attempts to make sense of what contributes to excellent leadership. You could also start with Appendix A if you're keen to explore some of the theoretical models used in the book before commencing on the narrative. It's up to you. There are merits in taking a sequential approach; there are merits in randomness and chaos.

* * *

The earlier book, *The Magic of Metaphor*, was subtitled *77 Stories for Teachers, Trainers & Thinkers*. Since that book was written I have become more and more fascinated by questions around leadership, influence and motivation. We stand at a crossroads in terms of the survival of this planet. And the crossroads is manmade. War, hatred, anger, genocide, pollution, deforestation and many other ecological and nonecological issues are omnipresent and almost universal.

What kind of leadership do we need to turn this around? How will such leaders identify the required and necessary changes, and influence and motivate others to make the required and necessary changes? What kind of leaders will these people be? How will they handle complexity? What maps and tools will they use to cut through the fog to bring light and clarity to factions bent on mutual destruction? How will they use these tools and models to influence the vast majority of ordinary people all around the world, who have no problem at all with peaceful coexistence on this paradise we share, to stand up and be counted?

And so the subtitle *Stories for Leaders, Influencers and Motivators* emerged. It may well be that the possibility of survival for the human race in the twenty-first century will depend upon the quality of these skills.

I don't mean by this that we should look to some distant leaders to save us. Change starts with ourselves and we are all leaders in some ways and at some times in our lives, whether as friends, lovers, teachers, parents, clinicians, coaches, managers or whatever.

This book is written with ordinary people in mind, as well as senior executives, politicians and other "important" people. It recognises that, while some lead from the front, many others can influence and motivate just as effectively from behind the scenes.

The stewardship of our planet is our shared responsibility. And this book is, in part, an attempt to make some of the most useful and effective tools for leadership and change available and accessible to everybody and anybody who cares. The future is in our hands and the future as ever starts now and continues always to do so. Now is a good time to start making changes.

* * *

Judith de Lozier is fond of saying, "There's no such thing as coincidence – it's just God's way of remaining anonymous." As chance or God would have it, the day I received my first five copies of *The Magic of Metaphor* from my publisher at the end of May 2001, I was booked to fly to California for a training programme that was to have a marked impact on my life and, as it turns out, on this book.

I spent a week studying with Chris Cowan and Natasha Todorovic in Santa Barbara, California. With Don Beck, Chris Cowan had taken a body of fascinating research into Levels of Existence theory, a theory that had originally been developed by Professor Clare Graves, and reworked it into a more simplified and accessible set of concepts and tools that they renamed Spiral Dynamics (SD). It is one of the most powerful change models I have come across. The title of their book, *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change*, clearly sets out the scope of the model. But

Story 11

A Close Shave

In the small town of San Martin de los Andes, in the heat of an Argentinian summer, Manolo, a seven-year-old boy, was recovering from an operation on a brain tumour. The treatment was working well but it had caused all of his hair to fall out. So, when he returned to school for the new term, Manolo wore a woollen ski hat to cover his embarrassment. Naturally, his classmates were curious about his unseasonal headgear and, after teasing him about it, pulled it off. When they saw what Manolo was attempting to hide, they became embarrassed themselves, and to hide their own embarrassment made fun of him instead.

Manolo was overcome with shame, and after the end of school pleaded with his parents not to send him back. They did their best to give him strength and encouragement. They reminded him that his grandfather had been a gaucho, that he came from tough and hardy stock, and that it was a man's role to be a man, to take the rough with the smooth. They also reminded him of his duty to be a good and obedient son who had many things to learn at school. And they reminded him that the other students would soon get used to the situation, and that soon his hair would return, long, curling, black and glossy, as it used to be before.

Next morning was another scorchingly hot day. When the teacher entered the classroom most of the students were already there, looking at Manolo and exchanging knowing glances and furtive smiles. Manolo was trying to make himself look as small as possible, wishing the floor would open up and swallow him. The teacher greeted the children, and then they noticed that she too was wearing a woolly winter hat. Then she removed it. Her head was as shaved and shining as the moon. She sat down at the desk next to Manolo and put her arm around him.

After school finished that day, many of the other children went straight home and told their parents they wanted their hair shaved off, too. The next morning half the class had shaved heads, and by the end of the week only two out of twenty still had their hair. The teacher had translated solidarity into a daring new game of self-expression and all the kids had

joined in the fun. They had cut their hair together, and as it grew back their sense of comradeship grew with it.

Primary source: Claudia Moraes
Secondary source: Zander, R., and Zander, B.,
The Art of Possibility, Penguin

* * *

Leadership



The teacher in this story operates in all four boxes. At a personal level she demonstrates integrity and personal awareness. At a professional level she role-models desirable behaviours in such a way that everyone can take part, and no one needs to lose face or feel bad about their previous behaviour. This enables her at a team level to create a culture to which all want to belong, and in which all can thrive. She looks beyond diversity and difference to find what connects people. She notices what is happening within the classroom's social system represented by the infrastructure box and responds to it appropriately.

Influencing

Nothing separates people as much as perceived difference. Excellent leaders understand this and elegantly look beyond difference to find the commonality that unites us. The teacher finds a way of offering solidarity to Manolo in a way that neither patronises him nor confronts the rest of the class. Neither Manolo nor the other students have cause to be embarrassed by their actions.

The teacher *reframes* the meaning of baldness. She raises the question: What else could this mean? By the teacher's action, baldness no longer represents strangeness. Instead it becomes an act of personal expression, a gesture of solidarity, a fashion statement, a game to play. In so doing, she allows the class to explore issues such as compassion, curiosity and playfulness together.

Motivating

This story is likely to resonate with these valuing and thinking styles:



PURPLE:

creating a close bonding within the group, and a sense of safety and security.



BLUE:

the teacher asserts her natural authority and re-establishes order.



GREEN:

the teacher restores a sense of harmony and mutual respect to the group; inclusiveness is valued; no one is excluded, no one is shamed or humiliated.



YELLOW:

appreciates the commonality that exists beyond diversity; YELLOW also appreciates elegant, simple, functional solutions delivered without fuss, fear or fanfare.

My insights

- The importance of being present to what is happening around one, and responding to it in ways appropriate to those involved.
- The power of reframing: *What else could this mean?*
- Issues and conflict can be dealt with in nondirective, nonconfrontational ways.
- The power of story as one way to offer nondirective feedback.
- Giving feedback through action and modelling.
- Giving feedback through focusing on what is positive.
- Giving feedback at a behavioural, not an identity level.
- The power of just walking the walk.

* * *

“Possibly,” Al Sayyid added. And then, “The lightness of this woman’s leadership is like the elegance of the finest flying carpet, lifting effortlessly into the air.”

* * *

“It’s time for our sixth story. What do you have for me to meditate upon this time?”

“As we’ve started upon the theme of presence, let me offer you a timeless story from India,” replied Al Sayyid. “It is a well-worn story though by no means threadbare. Take a moment to contemplate its design and simplicity, as well as its message.”

Story 28

Courage

Shortly after the fall of Copenhagen to German forces in April 1940, Christian the Tenth, the King of Denmark, looked out of his palace window and saw the swastika flag flying above the government buildings.

The king immediately requested a meeting with the German commander. He politely asked that the flag be taken down. His request was denied.

The king was thoughtful for a moment or two, and then turned again to the commanding officer.

“And what if I send a soldier to remove it? What will you do then?”

“There is a simple answer to that question. I will have him shot on the spot.”

“I don’t think so,” replied the king, “not when you see the soldier I send.”

“How so, Your Majesty? Please explain yourself.”

The king looked squarely into the commandant’s eyes and replied in a calm, even voice, “I will be that soldier.”

It is said that the flag came down within the hour.

Primary source: Mette Theilgaard

* * *

Leading



The king's personal determination and integrity, demonstrated in his behaviours, would surely serve as a powerful model around which his people are likely to unite. He is prepared to risk his life so that he and his people, though defeated, can maintain their dignity and self-respect. In another story about King Christian X, it is reported that, when told by German commanders that all Jews would be required to wear the infamous star on their clothing, he replied that all Danes would in that case do so since no distinction was made between races in that country.

Influencing

As the representative of the Danish people, the king displays courage and selfless behaviour that is certain to influence his subjects. He represents the whole cultural group and therefore each individual too.

How exactly he influences the German commandant is not so clear. There is no reason why a man with so much power should respond to the threat made by the king. Perhaps it is the manner in which he states his intention that impresses itself upon the German.

Motivating

All the valuing and thinking systems can respond to the king's refusal to accept national humiliation:



PURPLE:

will appreciate the gesture of sacrifice for the "tribe".



RED:

will respond to the heroism of the gesture.



BLUE:

will acknowledge rightful authority and self-sacrifice in a noble cause.



ORANGE:

will applaud a calculated risk that succeeds splendidly.



GREEN:

will appreciate the gesture of noble sacrifice for the sovereignty and dignity of the people.



YELLOW:

will salute the integrity of the man, and the simple elegance of the solution.

My insights

- When a person is fully committed to something, they are much more likely to get it.
- Adversity frequently brings out the best in people.

* * *

“Possibly. There are many kinds of courage,” said Al Sayyid. “Exercising leadership when one is seen as an outsider, as different, as beyond the norm requires courage, dignity and creativity. These attitudes and their behaviours are more elegant and more likely to make subsequent integration possible than resorting to more confrontational methods such as force or the law. An old carpet may reject a new repair if it is done without skill and sensitivity. An excellent weaver finds ways to match the new threads to the old, and work within the existing framework. Hold tight, we’re on our way to an unnamed country where many peoples of different race and culture are learning to cooperate and coexist.”

**“... a magical source book for leaders, therapists,
trainers and the curious.”**

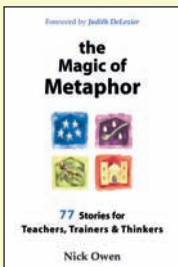
Martin Woods, Head of Leadership Development, Norwich Union Insurance

Our greatest teachers, artists and leaders all use story and metaphor to put across their ‘message’ in powerful and highly memorable ways. This follow up to Nick Owen’s best-selling *The Magic of Metaphor* explores the power of stories to inspire, inform and transform people’s lives. With a particular emphasis on leadership, the stories in this collection offer inspiration, inner knowledge and wisdom.

Presented as a metaphorical journey of discovery, *More Magic of Metaphor* explores the nature of leadership in everyday life and provides effective tools for influencing, motivating and leading others with elegance and integrity.



Nick Owen is Director of Nick Owen Associates, offering personal and professional development across a wide range of ‘soft’ skills and leadership contexts. He studied at Durham, Manchester and Oxford universities and is an NLP trainer and Master Practitioner.



Also available:

The Magic of Metaphor: 77 Stories for Teachers Trainers and Thinkers

Nick Owen

This volume presents a collection of powerful stories designed to engage, inspire and transform the listener as well as the reader. Promoting positive feelings, confidence, direction, vision, they supply a wealth of advice and information on the art of creating metaphor and storytelling.

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