



# LIFE METAPHORS: AN EXERCISE IN CREATIVE THINKING

by

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Life can feel like a roller coaster - the highs and the lows, the fear and the exhilaration - all coming in rapid succession. Life can also be like an airplane - always self-correcting to stay on course. To Albert Einstein, "Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving."

What would be a good metaphor for you to describe the way you experience life right now? When we think in metaphors, we directly compare unrelated or dissimilar objects and situations. Metaphorical thinking has benefits beyond the poetic and aesthetic value of metaphors. Metaphors can improve our understanding and help us solve problems.

Metaphors expand meaning by transcending the literal and structural interpretation. The whole meaning is greater than, and often different from, the sum of its parts. According to research led by V. S. Ramachandran, director of the Center for Brain and Cognition at the University of California, San Diego, a region of the brain known as the angular gyrus is at least partly responsible for the human ability to understand metaphors. The angular gyrus is strategically located at the crossroads of areas specialized for processing touch, hearing and vision.

Metaphors reveal subtle patterns that can otherwise fall beyond our perceptive powers. But beware: because of their ambiguous, emotive and nonlinear nature, metaphors can confuse as well as illuminate. Be patient with yourself and the process. The idea is to probe and peel the layers and be open to what you may find.

To experience the creative power of metaphors, do the following exercise, adapted from the book "Thinkertoys: A Handbook of Creative-Thinking Techniques" by Michael Michalko:

1. Think of a challenge or a choice you faced.
2. Instead of describing it in words, browse some old magazines, newspapers or catalogs and cut out images that symbolize your challenge or choice.
3. Move your pictures around, exploring different patterns and associations. Continue until they form a collage.
4. Look at your collage and search for clues, insights and new ideas related to your challenge or choice. Ask yourself the following questions:
  - a. What was my challenge/choice like?
  - b. What does it remind me of?
  - c. What aspects of my challenge/choice are revealed through the collage?
  - d. What can I learn from this?