

windstar journal



CREATIVITY

The failure to recognize the constancy of change denies our evolution.

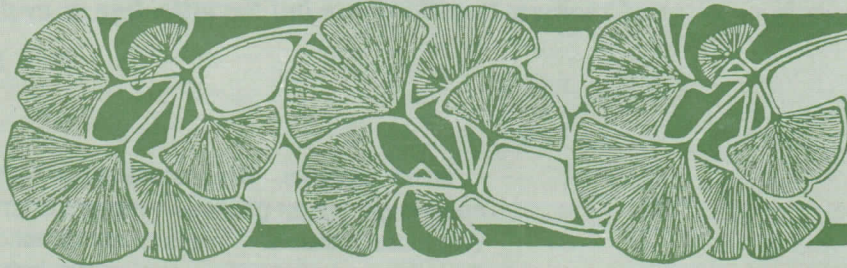
John Denver

FIVE DOLLARS

SUMMER 1988

Samples

on Metaphors



The metaphors we choose affect the ways we see the world. Metaphor—the language of creativity—has the capacity to both liberate and confine.

One of the most exciting voices in the study of creativity, W. J. J. Gordon, reminded us in his early book, *Synerctics*, that the kind of metaphors we use influence our creative perception. Gordon suggested that mechanical metaphors generate less perceptual creativity than natural metaphors. For example, if I said that something was working like a finely-tuned engine, I would be using a mechanical metaphor. If I said that something was working like a hive of bees, I would be using a natural or biological metaphor. Biological metaphors are open, connected to the living world, and have inherent within them the characteristics of regenerating life. They also tend to be self-regulating, rather than externally limited. As a result, they have advantages for stimulating and enhancing creative thinking.

By comparing some phenomena to a hive of bees, I invite the listener to feel the presence of social order, pollen sources, seasons, energy conversion, photosynthesis, the production of honey, and so on. A finely-tuned machine has very few degrees of freedom. It is a system that requires management and maintenance. Mechanical metaphors are almost always closed systems; the engine is a perfect example of closedness.

Once I was a consultant for a company that was doing fundamental research to determine how to get rid of nuclear wastes. The problem they had, as they saw it, was that they were doing everything right—but they still had this problem with waste disposal. When I arrived, I did several exercises to determine the kinds of metaphors they were using. At once it became clear. They used only the metaphors of mechanical systems. They worked very successfully to create mechanical solutions. Each solution failed in the same way that the previous solutions failed. Their metaphors were basically metaphors of containers—garbage cans, storage bins, etc. They never included within their equations the site in which they dumped the waste. Each time, they made better barrels—and then tossed them into ecosystems that were naturally adept at destroying barrels. They simply let themselves become imprisoned within the metaphors of barrels rather than exploring the healing metaphors of ecology. Without realizing it, they were perfecting failure. My job throughout the consultancy was to get them to open up their metaphors. By considering natural systems metaphors, they were more likely to be able to find the kind of natural systems solutions that are essential in order to solve the problem of nuclear waste disposal.

Metaphor is the language of creativity. It is derived from every shred of experience that we have. Its richest form is found in nature. Natural systems are the most effective creative systems that we can observe. Evolution is choreographed creativity. To protect and conserve natural systems is to preserve the richest domain of creative inspiration.

Jonas Salk reminds us that not only is nature a profound source of metaphor, knowledge, and wisdom—but that we have much to gain by “looking closely and deeply into Nature’s workings. . . as these bear on the question of survival and the quality of life.” He feels that we must attend to metaphor as diligently as we pursue reason. Both are needed for the survival of life on this planet.

