

An Extremist Position on Metaphors and Understanding

I was watching Netflix's rebooted *Lost in Space* with the kids (we love it!) and got thinking about metaphors.

A character suggested draining fuel tanks to remove a blockage. She said, "You know, like when you're trying to sip lemonade and a seed gets stuck in the straw a-" another character interrupted and said, "Yeah, I get it."

She was annoyed because she already understood the logic of the solution and didn't need the lemonade metaphor to get it. It's a pretty common annoyance to understand something plainly stated and have someone proceed to dumb it down with a metaphor. But the reason character two didn't need the metaphor is because she already had one. She could visualize the problem and proposed solution and translate the language into a mind-picture of what would result.

My friend and colleague TK Coleman and I talk about metaphors often. He's referenced George Lakoff's work on metaphors so much I feel like I've read him, even though I've only skimmed a chapter or two. I've come so far as to suspect that language and meaning are not possible absent metaphor.

Every conceptual breakthrough and big business idea I've had hasn't crystallized until the right metaphor could be formed around it. I get inklings of ideas and solutions, and beat my head against the wall trying to clarify to myself and others. Success only comes fully when I stumble upon the right metaphor. I don't think we ever *really* understand something until we have a good metaphor for it. Metaphors seem to be the bridge between the subconscious and conscious mind; between impressions/intuitions and coherent descriptions/implementations.