

Metaphor for Accelerated Healing

by Robert W. Fletcher

Therapeutic metaphors can often be combined with conventional medical treatment to speed up the healing process. What follows is a metaphor I have used a number of times very successfully. The story comes from an experience I had as a young man on a ship headed for the South Pacific during the Korean War.

Several years ago one of my assistants rushed into my office about 1:30 in the afternoon. Appearing very upset, he asked for the rest of the day off. His 21-year old daughter had just been involved in a head-on collision and was being taken to the hospital in critical condition. She had skin lacerations, two broken ribs, a punctured lung and considerable bruising. He knew I had just been through the Therapeutic Metaphors weekend with Tom Best, and asked if there was were anything I could do to help.

I said, "Tell me about your daughter." He said she earned her living as a model in a clothing store, that she loved to ski and go sailing. I created the following metaphoric story, we quickly jotted it down, and he went to her side and told it to her as she lay in the emergency room at the hospital. She was only semi-conscious at the time.

I was once on a journey from San Francisco to Japan by way of Honolulu Hawaii on a large ocean liner pleasure boat. Three days out into the ocean the boat encountered a storm front which soon developed into full-blown typhoon. The captain at first thought he could go through the storm, but soon found that the best he could do was try to outrun it. When he attempted to turn the ship away from the storm, it was hit by a wall of water which nearly capsized it. The back end of the ship was lifted up out of the water and came down with such force that it bent the 50-foot long 18-inch diameter stainless steel propeller shaft and bent it. Shifting cargo punched a hole in the side of the ship in one of the cargo holds, flooding the compartment and weakening the hull in several places.

The fast thinking Captain immediately called an emergency meeting of all the crew chiefs (including, but not limited to: the Chief Engineer, Chief Plumber and Boilerman, Chief of Maintenance, Chief of Sanitation, Chief of Passenger Health, and Chief of Ships Nutrition, as well as his Navigator and Radarman). He told them of the ship's immediate danger and of the severity of the storm. He then gave out instructions as follows:

"Chief Engineer, have your crew shut down engine #1 or the ship will be shaken to pieces. Check and tighten down all bearings, check and lubricate all oil fittings, and make sure that all moving parts are kept lubricated during the storm. Tighten all fittings, watch for stress, overheating, or malfunctions. Set up 24-hour watches on all systems.

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"Chief Boiler and Plumbing man, have your crew check each and every valve, tighten all fittings replace any cracked or loosened pipes, and set up a 24-hour watch on all gauges and valves. Keep all pressures within proper limits.

"Chief of Maintenance, set up a special repair crew. Go into the flooded compartment in diving gear and weld up the hole in the hull. Use whatever materials and equipment you need from the supply rooms to shore up the structure and make the ship watertight again. Then pump out the water from the compartment. Assign watch crew to make sure that the repairs hold throughout the storm.

"Chief of Sanitation, send crew into the damaged hold as soon as it is safe and clean up at the debris. Wash it down and dry it out. Accelerate your standard cleaning of all compartments emptying trash containers for the passengers several times a day. Make sure that nothing is left in the ship which could contaminate or make the passengers ill.

"Chief of Nutrition, change the diet of both the crew and the passengers to one which will be more suited to the energy requirement of maintaining health during the remainder of the storm. It won't do to have the passengers getting sick; and, of course, the crew must be kept in good health.

"Chief Navigator, plot a new course that will take us away from the storm as quickly as possible with the least amount of damage.

"Chief Radarman, scan the ocean and coastline for rock other ships or anything that would possibly get in the ship's way hinder its passage to a safe port."

As a result of the quick thinking of the Captain and the quick actions taken by the crew chiefs, the ship was able to move quickly out of the storm, make final repairs at the harbor at Honolulu and continue on its journey to Japan. All passengers were safe and were able to not only survive the adventure, but also enjoy the remainder of the journey.

The accident occurred on Tuesday afternoon. By the following morning, the hole in her lung had completely closed up. They released her from the hospital on Thursday, and she was back in the modeling line-up on the following Monday.

I told this story to another woman who was going into surgery for gallstone removal. She went in on Wednesday, had her surgery (with an 8-inch incision just under her rib cage), and returned to work on the following Monday.

I used this story with a woman in her early 50's who needed a surgical hysterectomy. The doctor told her that she would have to anticipate a 6-week to 6-month recovery period. When she went back for her 3-week checkup, the doctor in a delighted voice announced that she

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was completely healed and could resume full activities. Before the operation, she had been planning a camping trip up into the high Rockies just south of Estes Park by horseback, so she asked how long it would be before she could do that. He replied, "Anytime you want. Whatever you feel up to is fine." She reported that she accompanied her husband up into the mountains on a 2-day journey without discomfort at all from her surgery.

A final example using this metaphor is of a man in his middle 60's who was going in for quadruple bypass heart surgery. Again, he was released early and recuperated far faster than was expected.

I have used variations of this story with a variety of illnesses and have had accelerated healing in every case so far.

During the demonstration of a foreground/background allergy program at the January 5, 1989 Western States Training Association workshop for practitioners one of the students asked, "Why couldn't you do the reverse process on cancer?" This started me thinking. The result is the following metaphor:

In a country not far from here, there lived a great general. It was his task to protect the country and ensure that all residents lived in peace and harmony. To do this, he maintained a ready army and a reserve army which could be called upon for special needs. He also maintained a secret service whose job it was to detect any spies or outside invaders. All members of the army, the reserves, and the secret service had been carefully trained for the specific tasks each was assigned. The army and the secret service were full-time warriors, but the members of the reserve were civilians in civilian positions most of the time and were trained for war only in case of emergency.

For many years, this country lived in peace and harmony. The residents of each hamlet and town, as well as those in the great cities, worked and played together and enjoyed their life to the fullest. Everyone, that is, except some of the members of the army and the secret service. Since they were trained for war, they began to be discontented just sitting around waiting with nowhere to use their highly trained skills of warring. A few of them decided to go out into the countryside and stir up some excitement.

The army deserters went off into a little known part of the countryside and began to harass the local residents. The local residents were unschooled at war, and so fell easy prey to the skillful deserters. Other members of the army, seeing the excitement, sneaked off and joined in the game. They dressed up in the costume of the local residents and infiltrated into the activities of the community. They tried to fit into the community using their warrior skills, but always left havoc in their path. The invaders looked so much like the local residents that they were difficult to detect.

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Slowly at first, but increasingly rapidly, the work in the community came to a halt. More and more army deserters joined in trying to get their share of the spoils. The process continued from town to town until a great cry began to arise from the whole countryside - a cry of alarm. The governor of the area became aware of the problem and sent in all the fighters he could muster; but the army deserters were too many now and far too skilled. Besides, they could not tell them from the local residents.

Finally, the governor sent out a call to the general of the army. (The general had been unaware of the problem until now.) The general immediately tried to recall the deserters, but they would no longer obey him. He called the ruler of the country and the ruler tried to reason with them, but they would not listen. The deserters just continued to grow in numbers and destroy the countryside. A neighboring ruler suggested they place poisoned food throughout the countryside to try to poison the renegades. This did work a little and a few of them were killed; however, so were many of the local residents.

The general and the ruler thought and thought. At last they devised a plan. Secretly the general called his special secret service and gave them special training in how to tell local residents from war-trained deserters. They were taught that upon close examination there were small differences in their physical make up. The soldiers were stronger and quicker than the local residents. They had a different look in their eye and their breathing patterns were different. The special secret service were instructed to put on the clothing of the local residents and infiltrate the villages and towns, locate the deserter warriors, and inject them with a special serum (known only to the secret service and the general) which would put the warriors to sleep.

The secret service would then carry the sleeping warriors out into the countryside to a place of retraining where they would be rehabilitated to their original job. Those who could not be rehabilitated would be banished from the country. Special secret service guards were trained and placed to guard against any future recurrence of a similar nature.

Thus, peace and order were restored to the country making the local residents of villages, towns, cities, and the country in its entirety happy again. The ruler was happy, the people were happy, and the general and the army were happy.

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