



MICHAEL POLANYI AND BESSEL A. VAN DER KOLK ON THE HEALING POWER OF METAPHOR



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ABSTRACT

*In this essay, I contend that Polanyi's view of metaphor as outlined in *Meaning* (1975), has important heuristic implications for understanding the way metaphor functions in trauma therapy. I also contend that in his seminal book on trauma, *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., although he rarely uses the term, relies on metaphor as a vital element in his treatment of trauma victims. Analysis of Van der Kolk's practice further confirms and extends Polanyi's view of the bodily roots of all knowledge. Juxtaposing Polanyi's theory and Van der Kolk's practice demonstrates how unspeakable trauma can be overcome through the embodied metaphoric/linguistic matrix of human speech.*

Metaphor is the great human revolution, at least on a par
With the invention of the wheel...Metaphor is a weapon
In the hand-to-hand struggle with reality.
—Yehuda Amichai

In this paper, I probe the use of metaphor as illuminated by Polanyi and Prosch and as evident in virtually all of the cases cited by Van der Kolk. My aim is to show the fundamental importance of metaphor, especially in trauma where self/body awareness is only moment to moment, based primarily on the neural substrate of physical sensations connected to emotions.

Arnold Modell, a prominent psychiatrist who has written extensively on the subject, says, "Trauma degrades metaphor, and massive trauma degrades metaphor absolutely" (Modell 2003, 113). However, as Van der Kolk says, "if we feel safe and are not rushed, we can find words to communicate that experience (of trauma) as well" (Kolk 2014, 236). Kolk and his associates' brilliant body/mind work offers superb examples of how this can happen even though he rarely mentions metaphor as a subject. Metaphor, whether spoken or enacted, is an integral part of the gestalt of the therapeutic enterprise.

As an example of metaphor(s) both enacted and spoken, I cite Kolk's treatment of a patient named Kathy (Kolk 2014, 256). Kathy had been severely abused by her father who used her as a child prostitute both for himself and other men, resulting in massive trauma. Twenty-one year old Kathy was first referred to Kolk by a local university after three years in a trusting but unsuccessful therapy and a third suicide attempt. The fact that she has been in therapy for three years signifies to me that she is well aware of her problem which is to *integrate* her feelings and memories so that they no longer threaten to overwhelm her.

Following Polanyi, I would say that the self-destructive traumatic experience of her childhood, including her emotional memories, are in the *subsidiary* realm. My use of the term "emotional memories" comes from the psychoanalyst and philosopher Donna Orange, who cites various aspects of Polanyi's tacit dimension extensively as a prime source for the concept, saying "knowledge by personal participation in the known, is an important conceptual foundation for what I am calling emotional memory." For example,

A child learns to tie his or her shoes, to tell time or to ride a bicycle...in a particular emotional environment which may be intimate or distant, supportive or scornful. The accompanying emotional memories may become articulable, but most frequently they just continue to form the underlying emotional tone of much adult experience (Orange 1995, 108).¹

The focal realm consists of those metaphoric intentionalities that lead her to construct increasingly adequate healing metaphors that emerge from her bodymind during the course of treatment. I have borrowed the term "metaphoric intentionalities" and "bodymind" from William Poteat (Poteat 1985, 220f)² to suggest the purposive stretching forth of metaphoric activity into consciousness by means of which a person through imagination and intuition explores the "more than we can say that we know" (*TD*, 4).

Kolk begins Kathy's treatment using a process called EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing). Although not fully understood, EMDR seems to induce a dreamlike state similar to the dreaming which occurs in REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep. The EMDR dreamlike state is induced in a patient with the instruction, "Hold that image in your mind and just watch my fingers moving back and forth" According to Van der Kolk, the key element in REM sleep that EMDR appears to emulate is the activation of "more distant *associations* than either non-REM sleep or the normal waking state." He adds that "Seeing novel connections is... essential to healing." Further, he maintains that traumatic *memories* of patients who received EMDR were no longer embedded separately in mind and body but *integrated* as an event which happened in the past (Kolk 2014, 260ff). Such novel connections, associations, and the integration of memories is the essence of metaphor as I will indicate in what follows.

Kolk reports that the fourth session in which he used EMDR with Kathy began with him asking her to bring a particularly painful memory to mind, not to speak it, just to hold it in her mind. Then he encouraged her to recall what she had heard, thought, saw, internal sensations, and traumatic memories. I assume to "speak" it would be so painful it would risk triggering a traumatic response. Elsewhere Kolk says that "what has happened (the literal traumatic events) takes a back seat to exploring the physical sensations and discovering the location and shape of the imprints of past trauma on the body," thereby building up "internal resources that foster safe access" to otherwise overwhelming sensations and emotions (Kolk 2014, 217ff). Following Pete Levine, Kolk calls this process *pendulation*, the "gently moving in and out of accessing internal sensations and traumatic memories," thereby expanding the "window of tolerance" for dealing with emotionally triggering responses (ibid.218).

Next, Kolk asked Kathy if she was now “in the memory.” When she said yes, he asked her how it felt on a scale of 1 to 10. I assume that Kolk is asking about the intensity of the feelings in her body whatever they may be whether fright, terror, anxiety, etc. When she said about a nine, he asked her to follow his moving finger with her eyes. After a set of about twenty-five eye/finger movements, he asked her to take a deep breath and said, “What comes to mind now?” She then told Kolk what she was thinking. When her body movements, facial expression or breathing patterns indicated an emotionally significant theme he would say, “Notice that” and start another set of up to twenty-five eye movements, during which time she would not speak. Kolk said nothing for the next 45 minutes.

This 45-minute period is a time when the associative memory process which occurs in a dream, in this case a dreamlike state, begins to take place and out of which hopefully begin to emerge healing metaphors. It is important to note here that in Polanyian view the focal imaginative intent of Kathy’s devotion to overcoming the effects of her trauma is aimed at achieving self-integration and coherence. The formation of healing metaphors encompassing her experience will accomplish that goal.

After the first series of eye movements when asked what she was thinking, Kathy reported a horribly gruesome gang rape. Koch made no comment except to ask her to keep those memories in mind. After another thirty back and forth movements, Koch noticed that Kathy was smiling. When asked what she was thinking, metaphors began to emerge. “I was in a karate class kicking butt, it was great! They were backing off. Don’t you see you are hurting me! I’m not your girlfriend.” Kolk said, “Stay there.”

He began the next sequence of back-and-forth eye movements. After those ended Kathy said, “I have an image of two ME’s—this smart pretty little girl...and that little slut” (notice the metaphors). She then made reference to her mother and grandmother, “who couldn’t take care of me or themselves.” In the next sequence of eye movements, she began to sob and when the sequence stopped she said, “I saw how little I was—the brutalization of the little girl. It was not my fault.” Kolk said “That’s right—stay there.” Then as this round ends, a profoundly moving integrating metaphor/symbol emerges. Kathy said, “I’m picturing my life now—my big me holding my little me—saying, “You are safe now.” This metaphor is a vivid illustration of the self-giving movement in Polanyi’s words where the

symbol, as an object of our focal awareness, is...established by surrendering the diffuse memories and experiences of the self *into* this object, thus giving them a visible embodiment. This visible embodiment serves as a focal point for the integration of these diffuse aspects of the self into a felt unity, a grasp of ourselves as a whole person, in spite of the manifold incompatibilities existing in our lives as lived (*M*, 75).

Kathy has “rescued” her traumatized self, giving herself back to herself! Metaphorically, she has become the mother who has recovered her child (hood). She has become her own caretaker! According to Polanyi, when a symbol/metaphor “fits” in the way I describe, a person may make significant discoveries by “indwelling” that metaphor as an instrument for further tacit exploration. It is interesting that one of Kolk’s associates has used a metaphor to describe the integrative process like Kathy has achieved as a “coming home to oneself,” *home* now as a safe, secure place in which to *dwell* and from which to explore further.³

Healing images keep coming. Kathy’s next metaphor is that of a bulldozer flattening the house she grew up in after which she says, “It’s over!” The images keep coming, although not without searing emotional turmoil and lapses into post-traumatic stress responses. Having established herself as her own caretaker and tacitly relying on that metaphor/symbol, Kathy’s images/metaphors turn next to interpersonal relationships

including a potential boyfriend, her father, her mother and grandmother. These metaphors tend to “fit” appropriate healing patterns.

Near the end of the session a wonderfully healing metaphor emerges of Kathy imagining her grandmother, whose husband, Kathy’s grandfather, had sexually abused Kathy’s mother, and Kathy saying, “I feel like it’s over. I felt my grandmother holding me at my current age—telling me that she’s sorry she married my grandfather. That she and my mom are making sure it stops here.”

Both Kolk and Polanyi agree that metaphor is not a mere figure of speech but a fundamental means of cognition and self-awareness. Based on his practice, Kolk links common metaphoric expressions such as “It made my skin crawl,” and “He makes me bristle” with strong emotions in the body (Kolk 2014, 87-102). He appears to agree with Modell that, “We unconsciously create metaphors from sensory inputs arising within the body. We form fundamental cognitive tools as a result of a metamorphic process that transfers meaning between different sensory domains” (Modell 2003, 76). Polanyi echoes this view when he says, “by elucidating the way our bodily processes participate in our perceptions we will throw light on the bodily roots of all thought” (*TD*, 15).

Although exclusively fixed on therapeutic outcomes, Kolk’s practice elucidates the way bodily processes participate in our perceptions for ill and good. After all, “the body keeps the score” between the two! Although not acknowledged as such, for Kolk metaphor is *the* means by which the unspeakable becomes spoken by transforming the embodied experience of trauma, which is concentrated in the literal aspects of the traumatizing event(s), into a new experience of the body/self by incorporating healthy, often unspoken, metaphoric experiences engendered within the therapeutic setting.

It is important to notice the way Kolk often initiates the use of metaphor(s) in the treatment process. For example, the “freeze” response (as in fight, flight or freeze) involves having the therapist’s nervous system “speak” to the client’s nervous system (notice this metaphor and others throughout). This means co-regulating the client’s nervous system by use of the therapist’s monitoring of her own nervous system concentrating on intonation, rhythm, melodic cadence, and breathing (a metaphorical and literal *bodily* reenactment of the soothing, calming, attuning aspects of the mother/child experience, the archaic natal matrix and infancy, appropriated anew by the client). Through this process the primitive, metaphorical/linguistic substratum of human *being*, vastly diminished by trauma, begins to be recovered. This is the genius of Kolk’s practice in which the prelinguistic body leads the way out of “unspeakable” trauma. As Poteat puts it, “language, our first formal system, has the sinews of our mindbodies which had them first; that the grammar, syntax, meaning, semantic and *metaphorical intentionality* of our language are preformed in that of our prelingual mindbodily *being* in the world...” (Poteat 1995, 220 italics mine). From here Polanyi’s “bodily roots of all knowledge” grow! For trauma victims recovering this ground brings language into *being* and *being* into language!

After a number of sessions, a narrative of the “freeze” response can be constructed by the client in which the client concentrates on the “freeze” response itself, not on the precipitating trauma. Metaphors are the essence of this kind of narrative beginning with the therapist saying to the client, “Ask your nervous system what you felt before the “freeze.” Then what do you and your nervous system feel when it happens? What is your nervous system’s response when coming out of freeze? Here begins a “new” story about the *body’s* response to freeze and how it comes about.

The next step is rewarding the narrative of this new story. The therapist may ask, “What do you detect in your memory of any intuitive preparatory response just moments before the trauma occurred when you

knew something was about to happen? What action did your body want to make?” One patient said that her body wanted to explode. A Kolk associate asked her to take two pillows, hold one in each arm tightly to her body while sitting on the therapist’s couch, then suddenly fling them away to each side (a metaphor of a body exploding). The client was then asked, “How does that feel?” For the client allowing herself to enact in metaphoric form what her body originally felt like doing brought a palpable sense of relief and pleasure that was appropriately affirmed by the therapist (Kolk 2014, 218 and endnote 3). In such a fashion, traumatized persons can begin again to “speak.”

With the bodymind approach outlined above, Kolk and associates have reached bedrock: the pre-verbal, unreflected metaphoric matrix out of which human speech and self-awareness emerge. Kolk’s recounting of Helen Keller’s awakening is telling (my paraphrase). With the tactual feeling of her teacher’s fingers spelling water in the one hand and Keller feeling a stream of water in the other, the moment she connected the two her mind awoke. Six months later she used the first person “I” (Kolk 2014, 334ff).

The eminent psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Robert Stolorow has said that “in the process of somatic-symbolic integration, the process through which emotional experience comes into language, the sense of *being* is born.” He quotes Heidegger: ‘language is the house of being. In its home man dwells’ (Stolorow 2007, 23). Stolorow calls the loss of the sense of being brought about by trauma, “ontological unconsciousness,” which in extreme instances of trauma can result in an experience of “personal annihilation” (ibid., 30ff).

Both Polanyi and Kolk emphasize the role of the imagination in similar ways. Polanyi says that “integration requires an increasing measure of imagination” (M, 84) by which he means the integration of the subsidiaries of a metaphor into a focal whole. Kolk says that “EMDR can unleash the imaginative powers of the mind” (Kolk 2014, 257) and “Seeing novel connections is the cardinal feature of *creativity*; as we’ve seen it is also *essential* to healing” (ibid. 261, Italics mine). Further Kolk says that “The process freed something in her (Kathy’s) mind/brain to activate new images, feelings and thoughts” (ibid. 259). It is clear to me that it was Kathy’s *imagination* that was freed so that the novel connections of creativity, i.e., metaphors, embodying “new images, feelings and thoughts” gradually emerged in her treatment. For Polanyi, the *emergence* of new “ideas” comes about as the result of the interaction of “creative” imagination in ...two moves: one deliberate, the other spontaneous...the deliberate thrust is the focal act of the imagination, while the spontaneous response to it, which brings discovery...deserves to be recognized pre-eminently as *creative intuition*.” (Polanyi 1966, 103; italics his)

By successfully *integrating* metaphors over time, victims of trauma are capable of transforming traumatic images that prompt sudden fight, flight, or freeze into non-threatening memories of things past. I say *successfully* integrating metaphors because, as Polanyi says, “...integration, because it is the tacit *act* of a person, can be either valid or mistaken” (M, 39).⁴ For Polanyi the search for a solution to a problem is a process of trial and error and takes time for intuition and imagination to accomplish their task.

That is true of Kolk as well. The length of Kathy’s therapy was eight sessions and even so was the shortest EMDR therapy Kolk had ever conducted. It is worth recalling that prior to her EMDR therapy with Kolk she had spent three years of unsuccessful, although trusting, therapy elsewhere. It seems plausible to me that Kathy’s emotional memories of traumatic origin were, during three years of “trusting” therapy, being reshaped by new emotional memories originating in therapy. Although not sufficient to secure an ideal outcome, nevertheless they formed part of the gestalt of Kathy’s subsequent EMDR therapy with Kolk. As Polanyi said, the quest for discovery can go on for years. And so can the quest for recovery.

Polanyi presents the inner movement of metaphor as a continual going back and forth from subsidiary awareness (vehicle) to focal awareness (tenor) and back again to find an adequate metaphor/symbol to convey a person's hopefully increasing sense of "fit" towards a solution/resolution of a problem (*PK*, 113). Modell, an exceptionally perceptive psychoanalytic observer of the way metaphor functions, says, "by means of novel recombinations metaphor can *transform* meaning and generate new perceptions" (Modell 2003, 27). Quoting Gerald Edelman, Modell goes on to say that "every active perception is to some degree an act of creation, every act of memory is to some degree an act of imagination" (Modell 2003, 37). Following Polanyi, I consider this continual recombining process involving perception and memories to be part of a gestalt which is "the outcome of an active *shaping of experience* performed in the pursuit of knowledge" (*TD*, 6 italics mine). As an important reminder, I would add that for Polanyi this is always an active shaping by a *person*.⁵

This shaping process is what was happening with Kathy. In the fourth session described here, she first recalled literal elements of her torture, then metaphorically a "kick butt karate artist" fending off her attackers (a valid, but inadequately integrating, metaphor of skill and agency), then a "smart pretty little girl and that little slut" (dual metaphor with a valid but inadequately integrating first part and a mistaken second part). In the next sequence, she begins to sob with the realization that her brutalization was not her fault (thereby moving toward a valid narrative understanding/insight). She finally sees "my big me holding my little me," a valid focal integrating metaphor which "fits" as described above. Specifically, "my little me" represents all the traumatized aspects of her childhood which heretofore have been the subsidiary elements that she has been tacitly reshaping with new perceptions gained in the therapeutic process gradually forming a target metaphor spoken as "My big me holding my little me," a much more fully integrated self.

The next image of a bulldozer flattening her childhood house followed by confirmation, "its over" is a metaphoric transfer of present moment trauma awareness—symbolized by *house*—to autobiographical memory. Her house, where "unspeakable" memories lived and tortured her into her adulthood, is now demolished. It has become a story of a terrible event in her past which no longer torments her. Fortunately, the memory of it has been integrated into the autobiography of her life. Still further valid metaphors emerge in subsequent sessions related to ongoing interpersonal relationships suggesting further resolution of long held traumatic conflicts.

Significantly, both writers strike a similar telic note. Looking back at the increasingly comprehensive and positive course of Kathy's recovery Kolk states that "it was as if her *life force emerged* to create new possibilities for her future" (Kolk 2014, 259, italics mine). Polanyi says that "the kind of emergence which I associate with comprehension is an action which creates new comprehensive entities. It resembles Bergson's *elan vital...*" (*TD*, 46, italics his). Such a purposive thrust is what I mean by the "metaphoric intentionality" mentioned throughout this essay. The therapy in which Kathy engaged resulted in emotional/intellectual self-understanding—the restoration of her sense of *being*, in short, the recovery of herself!

To assess more fully the unique contribution Polanyi has made to an understanding of metaphor, it is very important to note a passage in *Meaning* in which he says, regarding the functional structure of from-to knowing, the "pair is not linked together of its own accord. The relation of a subsidiary to a focus is formed by the *act of a person* who integrates one to the other. The from-to relation lasts only so long as a person, the knower, sustains this integration" (*M*, 38 italics his). It is this personal act of embodiment, of personal backing, of investing oneself in a metaphor or symbol that gives the symbol/metaphor its power and meaning, a

power propelled by the urgent intention to achieve coherence and meaning: Our mindbodies—resonating with metaphoric intentionalities acted or spoken—seek pattern, coherence, integration and meaning.

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The foregoing discussion of Polanyi's view of metaphor flows directly from his understanding of "personal knowledge" as *stated* in his *magnum opus* by the same name: "Throughout this book I have persistently followed one single endeavor. I have tried to demonstrate that in every act of knowing there enters a tacit and passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and that this coefficient is... a necessary component of all knowledge" (*PK*, 312). How passionate Polanyi understands this personal commitment to be is illustrated in his statement that "... we live in it as the garment of our own skin. Like love, to which it is akin, this commitment is a 'shirt of flame' blazing with passion..." (*PK*, 64). It is noteworthy that at this point in Polanyi's argument the age old philosophical opposition between emotion, understood as intuitive feeling and/or passion, and reason is overcome based not on some theoretical notion but on the experience and observation of his own and others' practice of the art and science of discovery.⁶

ENDNOTES

¹For a more extensive elaboration of Orange's use of Polanyi's concept of the tacit, see the entire chapter especially including her statement, "*such tacit memory continues to be the core of our knowing, not the precursor of representational, or symbolic, cognition.* I thus prefer Polanyi's 'inarticulate knowledge' or my 'emotional memory'..." (Orange 1995, 116 italics hers) and "My conception of emotional memory...intends to convey a positive regard for tacit knowledge as possessing its own truth and as sometimes diminished by our attempts to express it in words" (ibid. 122f; see also Orange's brilliant essay of 2011).

²These two pages are seminal as philosophical background for the presentation I make in this essay.

³From an internet presentation sponsored by the National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine (2020).

⁴For an extended statement of great import, see Poteat on Polanyi's view of gestalt as "... *the outcome of an active shaping of experience performed in the pursuit of knowledge...*" an aspect Polanyi contends has been neglected by gestalt psychologists. (Poteat 1995, 314 n. 10). Polanyi goes on to say, "The structure of Gestalt is then recast into a logic of tacit thought, *and this changes the range and perspective of the whole subject*" (ibid). This note is vital because the "active shaping of experience" implies an active agent of the shaping. As Poteat says, "The outcome of the dynamic process of *perception* is governed by an active, shaping experience, performed by the more fully realized *person* ..." or "*personal mindbody*" (ibid). The logic of this assertion inevitably undercuts both materialistic and idealist philosophical reductionisms.

⁵Monroe Beardsley supports Polanyi's view on the truth and falsity of metaphoric statements when he says, "if many of the properties are there—those most important to the context—we may say the statement is 'largely true'—(the way we would with a complex historical narrative that includes some errors but is right about the main things)—or, if one likes, 'apt.'" (quoted in Gill, 1991, 112).

⁶I am grateful to Sietske Dijkstra and Walt Gulick for their critique of an earlier version of this paper. Sietske was especially helpful pointing out the pivotal importance of the concept of gestalt in Polanyi's thought and explaining several of Kolk's concepts with which I was unfamiliar. Walt pointed out aspects of the subsidiary-focal, vehicle-tenor in Polanyi's view which I might otherwise have misrepresented. Of course, whatever mistakes I may have made are solely my own.

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