Metaphors wanted, alive and dead

A Voyageur
By Norbert Hirschhorn
St Paul Pioneer Press
9 March 2012

Our language is full of metaphors, often elevated to sayings and cliches: The world is your oyster; you are my sunshine; he swallowed the story hook, line and sinker; the school was a beehive of activity; couch potato. The Bible is rich in metaphor, often relating human activities and behavior to the agricultural milieu of ancient Israel: "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink." (John 7:37). "Catch us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes" (Song of Solomon 2:15) to warn against heresies and false preachers. Poets make rich use of metaphor. In Sonnet 73, Shakespeare treats getting old to an extended series of metaphors: "... yellow leaves, or none, or few...Bare ruined choirs...As after sunset fadeth in the west...ashes of his youth." Emily Dickinson, in her poem number 320, uses both metaphor and simile to describe in wintery terms the theological notion of Despair: "There's a certain Slant of light,/ Winter Afternoons --/ That oppresses, like the Heft of Cathedral Tunes."

We can use metaphor to illustrate not only surprising similarity but also difference: It's apples to oranges; or as the British would say, as different as chalk and cheese. To refresh a metaphor that's gone to dull cliche, we might be cheeky and say, you're comparing apples to avocados - thus also making the alliteration exaggerate the comparison.

We often use metaphors whose origins were once fresh, but now are lost in the fog of time. Specialists in rhetoric and poetry dismiss these as "dead metaphors." Other specialists, disagreeing of course, insist that their use is so embedded in our language as to make for vibrant communication. Poets want to be original, not making the metaphor too obvious, as poet Wallace Stevens wrote, "The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully." Nonetheless, it's amusing to learn the origins of our common metaphors.

Take "kick the bucket," meaning to die. The image is of a would-be suicide standing on a bucket, noose around the neck and thrown over a beam, then kicking away the bucket. He'd likely actually use something more certain, like a chair. A better explanation is that "bucket" was a 16th century term for the beam that hung slaughtered cattle for butchering. Strung up like that, the victim of an execution would be kicking away. Another dead metaphor for, well, death is to "buy the farm." The origin is from the military, where a soldier's death brought insurance money to the family to pay off the mortgage to the homestead.

We often hear the expression "waiting for the other shoe to drop" - that is, waiting for something to happen so work or plans can proceed. My favorite story behind this is of the traveling salesman, exhausted from his rounds, tries to fall asleep in a boarding house with thin walls between rooms. The drunk next door comes in at midnight, drops one shoe, then slumps on the bed in stupor; the poor salesman stays awake, waiting.

A person with poor judgment is characterized in New York City - Brooklyn to be precise - as not knowing "s--- from Shinola." Shinola was a mid-20th-century brown shoe polish. Well, you get the idea.

"Only the tip of the iceberg," meaning much more is to come or be revealed, I once thought referred to the Titanic, but the phrase was in use well before that ill-fated ship encountered the nine-tenths of an iceberg below the surface. The phrase is so commonly used that I wish someone would come up with something fresher; perhaps pitcher Satchel Paige's "Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you."

“This is where I came in”, means ‘I’ve heard all this before, I’m leaving’; it comes from the time when movies ran in a continuous loop at your favorite film emporium. You paid admission, entered whenever you liked, watched the movie to the end, and stayed until the point when said….

A "loose cannon" - someone likely to do much damage if not kept in check - sounds as if it came from when wood warships had to tie down their wheeled cannons to prevent them from rolling out of control from their own recoil. In fact, here is where an original poetic metaphor, invented by Victor Hugo in French, entered the English language as a common cliche. But to "live on the wrong side of the tracks" is pure Americana, when railroads ran through the center of town spewing obnoxious coal smoke; the downwind side made for cheaper real estate, which is where the poor people could afford to live, reinforcing the segregation of the well-to-do living upwind from the have-nots that still exists in many of our towns.

Let me call it a day, having kept my nose to the grindstone. I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, which some wit said was just another train coming toward you. Keep an eye out.