Book Review

Metaphor and Meaning in Psychotherapy
By Ellen Y. Siegelman
Guilford Press, New York, 1990, 206 pages
ISBN 0-89862-431-2, $25.00

Reviewed by James L. Titchener, M.D.

Early in this absorbing book the author suggests that metaphor may not be the royal road to the unconscious, but it is at least "a major thoroughfare"; she quotes Arlow as saying that in a therapeutic dialogue metaphor is almost always "an outcropping of unconscious fantasy." A point from Suzanne Langer completes the frame of this approach to psychotherapy: metaphor is "abstractive seeing," using concrete experience to express an abstract idea.

Reading this book reminds us how lucky we are to be in a field that permits, even encourages, immersion in poetry, literature, and the arts, with no guilt or shame at the self-indulgence of spending a lot of time reading Saul Bellow, Tess Gallagher, or Henry James. We are doing it for our patients. Gallagher writes that poetry is a means of expressing grief far better than everyday prose, which in most languages is used to isolate, negate, and in other ways avoid the painful affects of grief and mourning.

Body and its functioning are a major source of metaphors, but these figures are also enriching ways of expressing bodily feelings. The author describes this two-way situation as metaphorical matrix. Symptoms are failed metaphors of which the meaning is not getting through to the person or to his intimates. While the metaphoric symptom conceals, verbal metaphors get the meanings out.

Animals, too, their form and their behavior, are a rich source of metaphor, although the author does not give them a full chapter.

I think of Freud's porcupine, Frost's magnificent buck seen rising in the lake from a far shore, and John Keats's great poem on the grasshopper, written one night in a contest with Shelley and Leigh Hunt. When Hunt heard Keats begin, "The poetry of the earth is never dead," he already knew he had lost. The grasshopper takes the "lead in summer's luxury." His song and the cricket's in winter ensure the poetry of earth is never ceasing: something there about the rapture of life.

Metaphors used in therapy are not always vividly insightful, however. They can be frozen, fixed, and coercive when the therapist becomes too taken with his own creation while the patient becomes more and more confused.

Leading figures in the history of psychotherapy can be distinguished by their ruling metaphors, the author claims. Perhaps, but I found this concept overstretched so as to cover the whole range of each theoretician's contributions.

There is a paradoxical problem concerning readership. Most of us endorse the position the author takes, and many who will read the book do not need it, except for reinvigoration. Those new to the field need the book most. Will they risk reading it? I hope so, remembering what Theodor Reik's Listening with the Third Ear did for me.

The book is optimistic, expecting and finding creativity in the patient's working through of her or his neurotic problems. Winnicott, the author says, was haunted by a line from Tagore: "On the seashore of endless worlds children play." The endless worlds are imagination.

Dr. Titchener is Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Cincinnati and Training and Supervising Analyst at the Cincinnati Psychoanalytic Institute.