

Empowering Decision-Making Through the Use of Metaphor (The Case of Carol)

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My volunteer was a woman named Carol, who began by reminding me of when and how we had previously met. This case is featured in Chapter 21 of the textbook. I began the therapy session by asking Carol whether there was some goal or issue that she wanted to address today. She said, “I’m at sort of a juncture in my life, actually a rather important one. I’m trying to decide whether I should become a single woman at 61, or whether I should remain married.”

Sometimes, people find themselves in a forced choice situation where they need to make a decision, but none of the alternatives are attractive. Worse still, is when someone feels they must choose between alternatives that are not only unattractive but may even be painful. This is Carol’s dilemma: She is unhappy in her marriage and doesn’t want to stay, and she is afraid to leave her marriage. Neither choice is desirable for her, and both choices carry with them the potential for considerable emotional

pain. This is a classic “approach-avoidance” conflict. Carol needs to be able to decide and implement her decision realistically knowing that whatever decision she makes will have some negative consequences.

Carol instinctively knew that whatever decision she made it would likely be painful. By spending years exploring possible decisions, she was essentially avoiding making one. Carol wanted to avoid the pain of either staying married or divorcing yet continuing her life of ongoing indecision and stagnation was also painful to her. Thus, I wanted to focus Carol on the more realistic and empowering notion that if she was going to progress in one direction or another, her progress would come at a price. I especially wanted to get across the message that *anything* of value will have a cost associated with it, and the wisdom is in knowing that *the cost is justified by the outcome*. For example, a good education takes years of study and the frequent sacrifice of personal leisure time.

The metaphor taken from *Inherit the Wind*, one I paraphrased from memory, makes the similar point that as we advance our scientific and social knowledge, there is a price to be paid for doing so. Spencer Tracy’s character, Henry Drummond, is the attorney defending the teacher who

dared to teach the theory of evolution in a school in a deeply religious town whose citizens were quite literal in their interpretation of the Bible.

Drummond offers the observation that as our knowledge grows, it can mean we have to revise or even give up previously held ideas. Though that may be uncomfortable at times, he advises, our discomfort should not lead us to choose a more comfortable ignorance. Drummond's speech, summarized in the metaphor told to Carol, highlights the importance of having the foresight and the courage to pay the price of progress.

At the conclusion of the metaphor and some post-hypnotic suggestions to integrate the learnings, Carol was then reoriented. As she opened her eyes, her very first words were, "I can afford it!" When I asked for further comments, she said, "I wanted to say, I can afford it! I can afford it! as you were finishing." These comments, spontaneous and forceful, indicated to me that she understood from the metaphor that progress, any progress, has a price. Her decision-making strategy could change from the need to be comfortable to recognizing that she could afford it because of its eventual benefits regardless of which decision she chose.