

**Nature's Metaphors:
Finding Meaning in the Chaos of Life
Facilitator Notes**

Note: A version of this agenda was used to facilitate nature walks sponsored by EcoStewards Alliance, along the C&O Canal towpath outside of Washington, D.C. So, when you see EcoStewards Alliance mentioned, substitute your own words. In this agenda, I've attempted to change the language from first person to make it easier to use.

If you plan to use this agenda, or some variation, I'd suggest you get acquainted with the information listed under "Resources" at www.natureofheart.com.

Feel free to adjust this agenda to fit the group with whom you're working—or throw it away and start over. My hope is that, in some small way, you'll find it useful.

If you have questions, you can reach me through the Nature of Heart website.

--Wanda McGee

Nature Walk Intentions:

- **Objective Aim:** To use events from the natural world to develop meaningful metaphors that can be used to enrich our lives.
- **Experiential Aim:** To appreciate how we can build a deeper level of meaning in our lives by observing the natural world.

Materials Needed:

- *Invisible Currents* books
- PACE bookmarks¹
- Dialogue sheets (Developing Your Own Masterful Metaphors)
- Pencils and paper—make these available for those who need to write to remember.

Approximate Time: 3 to 4 hours

¹PACE bookmarks are available at www.braingym.com. Item #BKMRK. You can get a set of 50 for \$16.50. If you know nothing about Brain Gym, you can find out more about it at www.braingym.org. The book, *Brain Gym Teacher's Edition*, by Paul & Gail Dennison, available at www.braingym.com describes how to do the Brain Gym activities listed on the bookmark.

Facilitated Nature Walk

I. CONVERSATION: WHILE WAITING FOR PEOPLE TO ARRIVE

The purpose is to get to know the group as a whole without getting into particulars that will be repeated later.

- How many are active in Eco-Stewards Alliance? Nature lovers? Enjoy getting outdoors regularly?
- What brought you out for this event?

When people are assembled, set the context for the next few hours by talking about nature and how it influences our lives.

II. SETTING THE CONTEXT

- When you think about your experiences of being out in nature, what do you remember as the high point of those experiences?
- What was your feeling at the time?
- What meaning does nature give to your life? Or unique need does it meet?
- Remembering your “natural high” (high point), what one phrase or image would you use to capture the essence of that experience?
- If you could pick one thing to strengthen your bond with nature (or with the Eco-Stewards Alliance) what would that be?

III. OVERVIEW OF SESSION—THE PLAN

- Introduce ourselves to each other.
- Learn what it means to “think at the speed of nature.”
- Then take a walk—will have the opportunity to stop and really observe something of interest to you and to develop practical metaphors for life, based on a simple process.

IV. INTRODUCTIONS

- *Walkers*—name, where from, what came for. What would you need to get from today to make it a success for you?
- *Self*—(What you want to say about yourself that’s relevant to the situation.)
Personal vision and mission—Share your personal vision and mission with the group so they’ll know where you’re coming from.
Purpose of Invisible Currents—If you use *Invisible Currents—Nature’s Lessons for the Mind and Heart* as a resource, you might say something like this about it: The author’s intention in writing the book was to provide thinking people an opportunity to look at life’s challenges in a different way—by using nature as a learning tool. And to make it as simple, usable, and inspirational as possible.

- Invite everyone to do Brain Gym®² --Hand out bookmarks. Do **PACE** to activate circuits for learning. Do **Thinking Cap** as an exercise for listening. Using Brain Gym is a way to strengthen intentions by making them active in the physiology.

V. THINKING AT THE SPEED OF NATURE

After observing nature along the C&O Canal for more than 20 years, Wanda McGee decided to share the Canal’s metaphorical teachings in her book: *Invisible Currents: Nature’s Lessons for the Mind and Heart*. Her process for creating a metaphor is:

- Be disturbed or curious about something that’s going on in your life—some issue.
- If you can, name the upset.
- Go for a long walk in a beautiful natural setting to forget the whole thing.
- Observe some interesting “happening” in nature.
- Receive an insight as to how the “happening” relates to the issue.

The above process is described more fully at www.natureofheart.com.

While preparing to present at a facilitators’ conference many years ago, Wanda realized that understanding metaphors and dialogue could help clarify the process.

A. Metaphors: “The soul never thinks without a picture.” --Aristotle

Metaphors are a powerful way to bring about a shift in perceptions. Research indicates that managers who have the ability to use metaphors to communicate their ideas tend to be more successful than those who don’t have this skill.

Ask the group: How would you define “metaphor?”

Example: An excellent bird watcher might be a “spotting scope.” “Ask our spotting scope to identify that one.”

Ask the group: What metaphors are commonly used to describe people’s lives and the life of our country?

The group may give such examples as machine, war, game, society, organism, journey—others?

Give them time to think.

² Wanda’s Note: Being a Brain Gym® instructor for over 20 years, I feel comfortable using the Brain Gym activities in a variety of situations. A possible substitute for Brain Gym is a fun activity involving physical movement which is designed to stimulate brain function.

Following is a humorous poem if you choose to add a little humor to the occasion.

**A Poem of Metaphors:
Unsolved Mysteries of Anatomy**

Where can a “she” buy a cap for her knee, or the key to a lock of her hair?
Is the crown of your head where jewels are found?
Who travels the bridge of your nose? If you wanted to shingle the roof of your mouth,
would you use the nails of your toes?
Can you sit in the shade of the palm of your hand, or beat on the drum of your ear? Can
the calf in your leg eat the corn off your toe? Then why not grow corn on the ear?
Can the crook in your arm be sent to jail? If so, just what did he do? How can you
sharpen your shoulder blades? I’ll be darned if I know—do you?

From Senior Center Newsletter, Brewster, KS
Oct. 2005. Author unknown.

B. Dialogue is listening, without judgment and with questioning, to clarify our own and others’ thinking and perceptions.

Following are quotes, to be used at your discretion (others are attached, or you may have better ones):

“Sorcerers say that we are inside a bubble. It is a bubble into which we are placed at the moment of our birth. At first the bubble is open, but then it begins to close until it has sealed us in. That bubble is our perception. We live inside that bubble all our lives. And what we witness on its round walls is our own reflection. —Don Juan from Carlos Castaneda’s *Tales of Power*

“The real voyage of discovery consists not of seeking new landscape, but in having new eyes.” —Marcel Proust

Having new eyes is a way to shift our perception.

Together, dialogue and metaphors expand, even burst our bubbles of perception and invite us to think about our life and work in different ways. That’s where the book, *Invisible Currents*, comes in.

VI. DEVELOPING MASTERFUL METAPHORS

Hand out *Invisible Currents*, turn to pages 2-3. Meaningful dialogue creates meaningful metaphor. If a group decides there is a “right fit” between how ducks feed in the water and their need for mentoring or coaching, then they may start talking about mentoring or coaching in terms of ducks with their heads in (or out) of the water. Unlike Aesop’s Fables, the anecdotes in *Invisible Currents* are not designed to tell you what to think, rather to encourage the discovery of your own, and others’ thinking.

The process for developing metaphor-making anecdotes is fairly simple. It's a way to look beyond classifying/recognition, to meaning. It was adapted from a method developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs. This four-part method follows our natural thinking process and is used around the world to empower communities and individuals.

- **Observe**

Pick something that interests you and observe it. Describe your observations objectively.

- What are the colors, shapes, sounds, smells, movement, and other sensory information associated with it?
- What image does it evoke?

Objectively write or remember what you observed.

- **Reflect**

Check your gut reaction.

- What is my reaction to what I observed?
- What kinds of feelings does it stimulate?
- How does it remind me of life?"

Let's call the above combination—of objectively describing and feelingly reflecting—“**obserflection**.” Frequently the observation and reflection can be done as a whole-cloth experience and then you can wallow around in the metaphor for awhile as the rest evolves.

- **Interpret** your thoughts.

Explore the *obserflection* for meaning. This is the “heart” part of the process. Ask yourself:

- What does this tell me about life—meaning, values, significance, purpose, or implications?
- What are the similarities and differences between the *obserflection* and life?"

The answers to these and other similar questions will form the “thinking pool” for the next level. Thoughts arise, words and ideas form, understanding occurs, we think about what's going on. It opens a channel to the gestalt brain where the whole picture resides.

- **Decide**

This is the action part of the process. Use all your previous thoughts, notes, and doodles to prepare the anecdote for its public debut. The idea is to capture the essence of the *obserflection* in as few words as possible and then design questions for dialogue. Here are a few approaches for you to explore.

- Since the anecdote is no more than a paragraph long, easy to remember, and objective, you might skip the objective level question and design questions for the reflection, interpretation, and decision parts of the dialogue.
- In developing the anecdote, resist editorializing. The objective information, presented well (in oral, written, or image form), can stand by itself. It’s fun, however, to include a “punch line” that summarizes one way of looking at the objective information. That’s what the “one-liners” are under the illustrations in *Invisible Currents*.
- Make the questions as open to interpretation as possible in order to harvest more perspectives during the dialogue.

VII. PRACTICE CONVERSATION

- Ask individuals for an issue bubbling to the surface for them, or pick one randomly from *Invisible Currents*.
- If selecting one from the book, read it and discuss “Points to ponder . . .:”

Notice how the group handles the activity, and ask for feedback.

VIII. WALK AND LEARN

- Give participants time to independently take a walk and observe what catches the spotlight of their attention.
- In advance, agree when and where the group will reconvene. Some participants may be “late” in reconvening. Late comers may actually be doing, what is for them, the most meaningful part of the process at this time. Honor their process and after a reasonable wait, proceed with those who are present.

IX. SHARING--CLOSING

- Hand out conversation sheets, “Developing Masterful Metaphors,” and invite people to share in pairs. Give them enough time to have a real dialogue. Invite brief report outs.
 - As an alternative, if the group is small and you are an experienced facilitator, you may choose to process individual learnings on a more personal level.
- Closing dialogue with participants. Questions you may choose to ask:
 - If you were making a presentation about what you learned today, how would you summarize it in a sentence or two?
 - What was your reaction to using metaphors to think about life?
 - What did you discover about your own life metaphor(s)? The one(s) that run your life?
 - How do the metaphors we use communicate our image of the world?
 - How can we consciously re-examine, redefine, adapt, or change the metaphors we use in our life and our work?
 - What did this morning mean to you in terms of how you might want to live your life in the future?

Developing Your Own Masterful Metaphors

- What words, images, and sounds were prominent during your walk in nature?
 - What was the easiest part of this “walk” for you? What frustrated or challenged you?
 - What was your greatest learning or insight during our time together?
 - How would your life be different if you acted on the wisdom of what you learned?
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Additional Quotes:

If you would learn more, ask the cattle, seek information from the birds of the air. The creeping things of earth will give you lessons and the fishes of the sea will tell you all. Speak to the Earth and it will teach you.

--The Bible, Job: 12, 7

As I get older, I burrow more and more into the hills. The Great Spirit made them for us, for me. I want to blend with them, shrink into them, and finally disappear in them . . . All of nature is in us, all of us is in nature. That is as it should be.

--Pete Catches, Sioux medicine man

The natural world is the larger sacred community to which we belong. To be alienated from this community is to become destitute in all that makes us human. To damage this community is to diminish our own existence.

--Thomas Berry

We are not human if we can no longer experience awe and wonder at the beauty and mystery of life.

--Charlene Spretnak

Coherence is personal power through increasing one's integrity, understanding, and capacity for compassion.

--David Hawkins

The love of god, unutterable and perfect, flows into a pure soul the way that light rushes into a transparent object. The more love that it finds, the more it gives itself, so that, as we grow clear and open, the more complete the joy of heaven is. And the more souls who resonate together, the greater the intensity of their love, and mirror-like, each soul reflects the other.

--Dante Alighieri (1265-1321)

We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature—for we will not fight to save what we do not love.

--Stephen Jay Gould

If you have something to say and do not say it, then the world will be the poorer.

--Anonymous