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# Practicing Metaphors

Featuring the work of Nihir Shah, with inspiration from Jane Hirshfield

In creative work you routinely venture into the unknown. You make big leaps to figure out what your work will do, look like, or feel like when it's done. Can you get good at describing where you're headed even before you fully know it yourself? You can! And reaching for a metaphor can point you in the right direction. A metaphor serves as a cognitive bridge that helps you leap ahead but still feel like you're standing on familiar, solid ground, not hovering precariously in thin air.

Metaphors allow you to experience or understand one thing in terms of another. In a beautiful short video called "The Art of the Metaphor," poet Jane Hirshfield notes that if you've ever felt like you were *drowning in paperwork*, you've done more than simply describe a large volume of documents; you've offered a visceral feeling of the experience. Metaphors help you think with your imagination, your feelings, and your senses all at once. Here's another one: *it's raining cats and dogs* conjures an image of torrential downpour and perhaps even the smell of damp fur or the sound of hissing felines.

Metaphors are more than just colorful language to describe something already

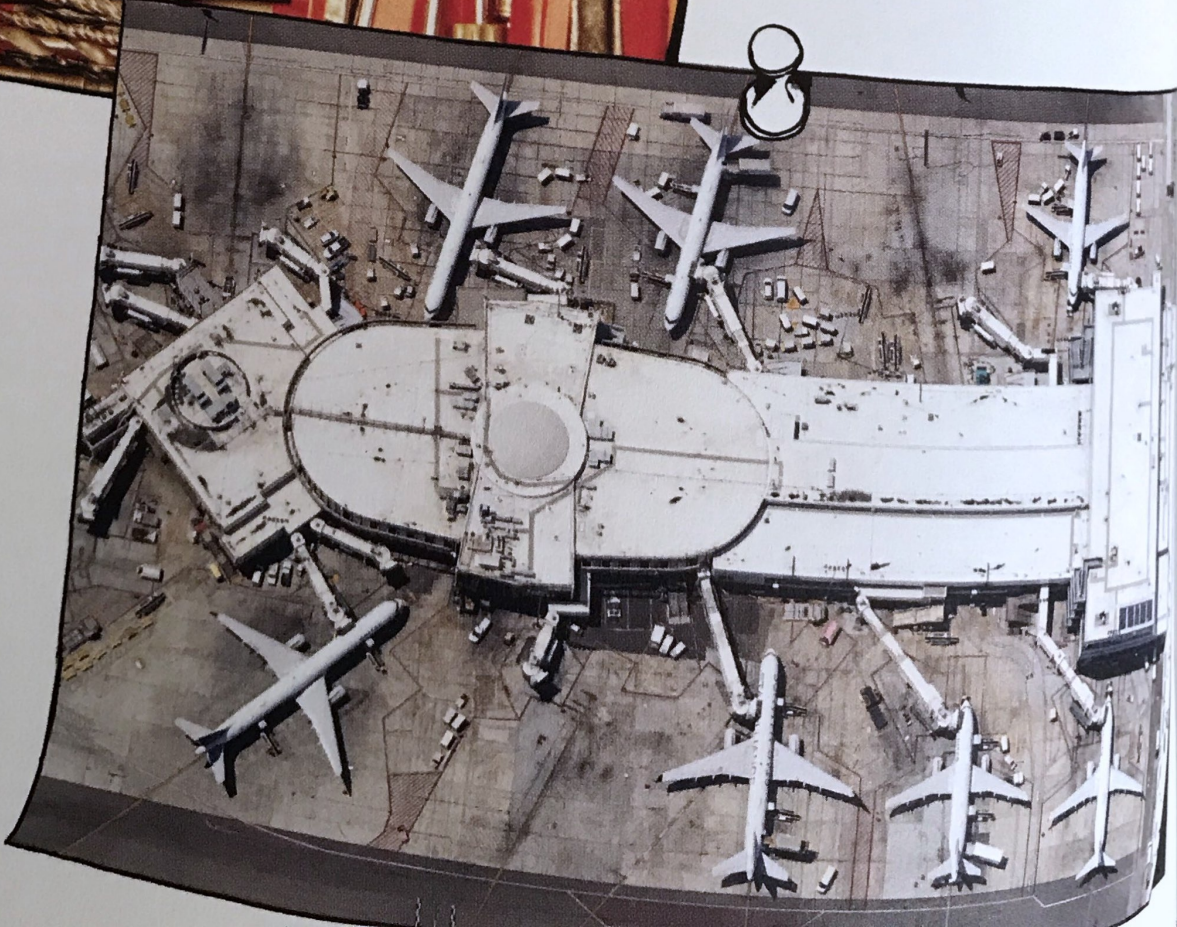
known. You can also use them to express emerging ideas or come up with new perspectives on complex challenges.

This assignment helps you use metaphors to understand the problem you're trying to solve or to define the opportunity for your creative impact. (There are many other ways to creatively use metaphors: check out *The Solution Already Exists* on page 114 to work with metaphors to come up with ideas, or *Tell Your Granddad* on page 181 to use metaphors to communicate abstract concepts.)

You can do this entirely on your own or with a group of people to develop common language around the thing you're trying to discover together. »









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Think about a challenge that you are currently facing in your life or work. Look at the photos opposite and pick an image that captures the essence of your current problem in some way.

If you're struggling, try picking the image—or metaphor—that:

*Best captures how you feel about the current situation*

*Best captures how you want to feel (or want others to feel) after you've designed a solution to the current issue*

*Seems like it's the closest to what your intervention or design might be like*

Once you've chosen an image, start by making a list of as many different parts of the system or object as you see or can imagine. For example, for the airport, you might list lots of different jobs and roles, like pilots, food service workers, and baggage handlers; types of equipment, like engines, trucks, and conveyor belts; types of experiences, like delays, anticipation, earaches, fears; and types of formal and informal relationships, like concessions contracts, gate allocations, and seatmates. This list barely scratches the surface; each of these illustrations has been chosen for its richness and the huge array of interactions it can describe. Potential metaphors abound; if another one comes to mind, feel free to use that one.

Now try to connect the different components on your list with the aspects of the challenge you're working on. In your world, who or what is represented by the pilot-copilot relationship or the experience of watching your luggage disappear after you check it? What would you want those elements to represent in your solution? You might find yourself immediately connecting the dots: *Oh—I know exactly what that endless line at airport security represents*

*in my project!* or you might have to push yourself by methodically going down your lists and making connections. Do this for fifteen to twenty minutes, making as many connections as you can.

Then step back and ask yourself three questions:

*What new insights do I have about the challenge I'm addressing?*

*What new ideas do I have about the types of solutions I need to consider?*

*How can I use parts of this metaphor to more easily describe what I'm working on?*

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Bringing creativity to any challenge involves looking at it differently. Metaphors are a quick and easy way to look at something through a different lens. And they help you organize fuzzy thoughts into a familiar frame. If you're ever feeling stuck or overwhelmed by the ambiguity of the challenge you're trying to address, thinking with metaphors will help the different tumblers fall into place as you strive to unlock the problem. Metaphors can also inspire you to build solutions based on deliberate, positive models. What would it be like if walking into your doctor's waiting room felt like walking into a coffee shop? How about an auto repair shop that takes care of your car the way a spa takes care of you?

If you'd like to build your own set of metaphors to use in your work, just look for images of systems. Ecological and natural systems almost always work well, as do transportation hubs, collections of objects, or highly designed experiences (like the circus, a fancy hotel lobby, or a professional basketball game). Print these images and make a set of metaphor cards you can use in your current and future work.