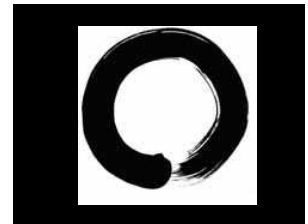


# Metaphor, Art and Understanding

Judith A. Johnson

A **metaphor** is a word or symbol which denotes one kind of object or idea, and is used in place of another. It is a way in which knowledge can be shared. Metaphors are found in every culture. Modern Western European ways of thinking are based on a *print culture* that tends to use verbal metaphors. The print culture primarily sees words and numbers, and has high regard for mathematics, science, and literary criticism. Indigenous groups share knowledge essentially by means of a *visual culture*, which includes oral tradition. Members of this culture value the graphic arts, music, and dance. They see visual patterns, shapes, colors, and moods. Each culture provides substantially different ways of 'knowing'. Many visual metaphors are spiritual. They convey information about human qualities and what it means to be a complete human being, in harmony with the group and nature. The Great Earth Tree and the circle are examples of spiritual metaphors that are shared by many indigenous groups. The *inukshuk* is a significant Inuit spiritual metaphor. It represents human emotion and connectivity. Placed in strategic locations in the wilderness, inukshuks direct travelers along the best and safest routes. I propose that legitimizing and comprehending knowledge processing by visual cultures must occur before humanity can be whole. We can help further the understanding of and respect for the visual processing of knowledge by learning more about it and incorporating a variety of art forms (singing, dancing, chanting, drawing, story telling, photography, and crafts) in our teaching activities, Ruhi Institute courses, children's classes, devotional meetings, Feasts and other gatherings. Spiritual metaphors can touch the heart and help us better understand the essence of human existence.

This presentation briefly gives examples of visual and spiritual metaphors in different cultures. It then exhibits the presence of visual metaphor in the art of a group of Inuit children that I met in northern Canada earlier this year. I'll begin with a short definition of the word *metaphor*, explain the differences between a print culture and a visual culture, discuss the relationship between metaphor and culture—showing examples of visual culture and spiritual metaphor in different cultures, and end by relating the importance of visual culture and spiritual metaphor to the world.



A metaphor is a word or symbol which denotes one kind of object or idea and is used in place of another. For example, the concept of "beauty" is often conveyed by the picture of a rose or the word 'rose'. Historians, linguists and cognitive psychologists have identified two distinct ways of conveying knowledge. In the heritage of the Western world (advanced nations), knowledge is shared essentially by means of a *print culture*. The print culture has a high regard for mathematics, science, and literary criticism. This culture primarily sees words and numbers.

Indigenous groups share knowledge essentially by means of a *visual culture*, which includes *oral* tradition. Members of this culture value the graphic arts, music, and dance. Members of this culture see visual patterns, shapes, colors, and moods. Each culture provides substantially different ways of knowing.

Actually, visual metaphors also provide a dominant mode of processing information in the print culture. Every day we see advertisements on television, in magazines, on billboards, the Internet and so on. Each is a visual metaphor. Unfortunately, they are aimed at persuasion rather than at sharing profound knowledge. When we turn to the use of metaphors among indigenous groups, we find that visual metaphors are used seriously to share cultural knowledge.

Metaphors allow people to identify with something outside of themselves. They tell

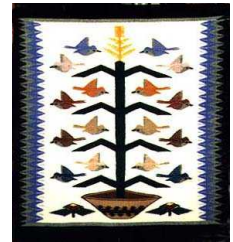
us a lot about the people who use them. They provide insight into how *they* view the world. I'd like to show some relationships between visual metaphors, and the individual and the group. I will focus on what I consider to be *spiritual* metaphors. A spiritual metaphor conveys information about human qualities and what it means to be a complete human being, in harmony with the group and nature. Spiritual metaphors have profound meaning and appear in different forms.

We express peace with the metaphor of a tree. The top reaches toward the sun and its branches extend so that they may be seen from a distance. The branches also offer shelter and rest. The world tree (a pine tree) is also known as the Evergrowing Tree, the Great Earth Tree, the Tree of Life, the Tree of Peace, and the Celestial Tree. It stands at the center of the world and some legends say it has both the sun and the moon in its branches. Other legends say it has luminous blossoms that provide light.

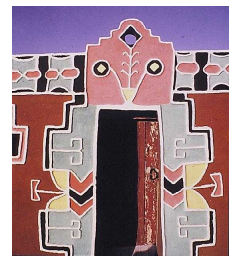


Metaphors function as visual codes or emblems and evoke a sense of artistic cultural and spiritual value. They can be used to understand cultural differences. They tell us how some cultures envision space. They tell us why some cultures have stories about the stars, and why some consider the land to be sacred.

In many parts of Africa house designs are used to symbolize a people's beliefs about the world. It is *their* way of organizing knowledge. This organization of knowledge is commonly referred to as *the way* of the people. The houses are generally painted by the women. The design is etched into the plaster walls before being painted. Designs usually refer to field plowing patterns and flowers, and together these symbolize fertility and creation. Women traditionally did agricultural work so the engraving is a replication of that labor. Designs show respect for the ancestors who will then help the household and honor the community with peace, rain, and abundance.



One dominant metaphor among most indigenous groups around the world is the circle represents the endlessness of motion. Some visual metaphors require a cultural context for interpretation. For example, the peyote cactus is much revered by the Huichol who consider it a gift from the gods. The plant symbolizes the essence, the very life, sustenance, health, accomplishment, good fortune of the Huichol. It is an essential part of the elaborate designs used in their work. Also present in their designs are animals, trees, flowers, and circles—metaphors common to other indigenous cultures.



So, the analysis of culture is carried out through a searching out of significant symbols, and clusters of significant symbols which are the material vehicles of perception, emotion and understanding underlying regularities of human experience. The Inukshuk appears to be an example of such a symbol.



The inukshuk is the Inuit symbol of human emotion and connectivity. It rises from the landscape, always in human form, directing travelers along the best and safest passages, land or water. Sometimes, even providing food that has been left by others.

Over the course of time, inukshuks have probably saved countless lives. Each rock must be perfectly balanced. No single rock is more important than another. Each Inukshuk is unique. What does this metaphor tell us about Inuit culture? Inuit children who attend Beth McKenty's painting sessions at Baha'i House in Iqaluit, never seem to tire of painting them. Inukshuks are spiritual metaphors which seem to help the children comprehend their identity within the contexts of family, friends, society, culture, humanity and nature. In the midst of the upheaval that is quickly eroding the traditional way of life, perhaps the children are struggling to hold onto this spiritual lifeline.

Print cultures are so involved in written language that they have not seriously studied how humans structure information visually. In fact, visual cultures are often considered to be "primitive". I believe that legitimizing and understanding knowledge processing by visual cultures must occur before humanity can be truly united. One way that Bahá'ís can, very naturally, help further the understanding of and respect for the visual processing of knowledge is to incorporate a variety of art forms such as singing, dancing, chanting, drawing, story telling, photography, and crafts in our teaching activities, Ruhi Institute courses, children's classes, devotional meetings, Feasts and other gatherings.

Visual and spiritual metaphors can touch the heart and help us better understand the essence of human existence.

