

# Language as Opportunity, Words as Images



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When we hear of an Opportunity we may immediately think of an opening, a possibility, something that gives us a chance. As professional caregivers, we often think of pain as an “Opportunity” for deep emotional healing, of cancer as a “turning point” and an Opportunity for personal change.

In our encounters with our clients we carefully listen to what they tell us. We engage all our senses and faculties, finely sifting through their narratives, looking for threads we may turn into Opportunities of re-storying and empowerment for them (White, 1995). But in our eagerness to spot these Opportunities, we may miss an important venue of the very Opportunities we are seeking—the value of looking at the etymology of the words that our clients choose to use in their narratives.

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*Sometimes what initially seems like “just a word” is found to hold hidden meanings and teachings that, when explored and brought to light, may truly enlighten our path and offer a new narrative that in its turn may lead to a new way of coping.*

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It is not that we do not listen to our clients’ words. We do, hoping to successfully fish a phrase that indicates the source of their difficulty. We are keen to notice a spontaneous Image that arises from their narrative that may lend itself to action, be it literal or metaphorical,

leading towards positive change. A simple and obvious example would be the client who arrives at your clinic with a headache and when asked how it feels, says “it’s like having the heaviest metal helmet glued on to my head,” or more commonly, “it’s throbbing like a hammer inside my head.” We may then use Interactive Guided Imagery<sup>SM</sup>, for example (and my favorite), to explore ways of removing or taking away the hammer. A literal action for this simple and more obvious example would be to use Autogenic Training for relaxation, while a metaphorical action to this situation would be to engage the client in his rich Imagination. Both of these processes

can change the client’s experience of pain, even reducing the pain itself. We certainly use the same literal and metaphorical approaches in the process, albeit more complex, of using Images, metaphors, and alternative narratives for issues that are more intricate and abstract in the clients’ lives.

Indeed, human language is a symbolic one that presumes the existence of an intricate inner world. It evolved from the need to represent abstract meanings that can’t be represented by a gesture or a signal, and is co-operational in its essence (P. Gärdenfors, 2002). I see it from two perspectives: communal meanings and personal intimate meanings. Communal meanings refer to common threads in our stories and histories that hold mutual or shared meanings to same concepts and words from either a universal meaning or a local cultural meaning. Personal and intimate meanings are gained through our lives and our numerous experiences. Both perspectives are interchangeable, and in fact both are ever-changing, and allow us through a form of narrative inquiry (somewhat like a researcher) to better understand the impact of the experience itself (Bell, 2001).

But there is an even deeper level of language that we can access and guide our clients into. If we, as therapists, allow ourselves to sometimes be archeologists of personal histories “excavating” for the roots of distress in our clients, and at other times to be archeologists of hope as Monk put it (Monk et al, 1995), to find the roots of their already existent strengths, then we can also at times be archeologists of language (linguistics), and look at the source, the etymology of words that our clients choose to use in their narratives.

If human language is symbolic, then words hide the source Image AND concept in them! Sometimes what initially seems like “just a word” is found to hold hidden meanings and teachings that, when explored and brought

*Continued on page 21*

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*Continued from page 20*

to light, may truly enlighten our path and offer a new narrative that in its turn may lead to a new way of coping. You might already be familiar with the play around the word “disease.” When read in this form, it tells us of a static entity, a set situation wherein all we may be inclined to hope for is some “cure.” But let us read it as “dis-ease,” and it no longer “feels” as static as before, and we may even image it as a state of constant movement, a give-and-take attempt to get rid of the “dis” and restore the “ease.” We can imagine more than one way to achieve this, and it is no longer necessarily about “cure,” it is about Wellbeing. Here is another similar familiar “play” with words: When we read the word “distress,” we think of a static situation of suffering in a broad sense, connoting negative feelings as they are experienced now. If we change it to read as “de-stress” we already leave the static state and move towards a solution or an alleviation.

Yes, there are risks in trying to explore language in this way. We may make mistakes when playing around with word forms and their hidden meanings and teachings... but I suggest that mistakes are an inherent part of exploration and they mostly help us to define and redefine the path until our (and/or our client’s) goal is reached. I further suggest that to delve with curiosity into the etymology of words is to enhance the concepts within our clients’ world of Imagery so that they can create even more enriched narratives to reach their goals.

Risk? Let’s see .... The word comes from a Greek navigation term *rhizikon*, *rhiza* which meant “root, stone, cut of the firm land” and was used as a metaphor for a “difficulty to avoid in the sea.” So if a client talks about “risks” in her or his path, we can explore with her or him how that root or stone looks, how truly big they are, or how far from shore they are encountered.



Imagine the feeling of the client who came to you talking about being totally discouraged when, despite the difficulty in confronting a risky challenge, he or she avoided taking action that could potentially lead to the achievement of the goal. Imagine, too, how that client would feel if he or she discovered by looking at the etymology of the word “risk” and exploring it further with guided Imagery, that despite the risk’s size or shape or source, he or she is close enough to shore to actually leap over it!

To conclude, I am suggesting that we seize the Opportunity that

lies within the abstract meanings in language. But wait! Too often we think about “seizing the Opportunity” as if it is to be grabbed swiftly lest it dissipates or flees us. Is it, truly? Let’s explore the etymology of “Opportunity!”

Opportunity (date of origin 14th c.) has its origin in a Latin nautical term denoting ‘favourable winds’. This was *Opportūnus*, a compound adjective formed from the prefix *ob-* ‘to’ and *portus* ‘harbour’ (source of English *port*). It was used originally for winds, ‘blowing towards the harbour’, and since it is good when such advantageous winds arrive, it developed metaphorically to ‘coming at a convenient time’. From it English got *Opportune* (15th c.) and the derived *Opportunity*. (Source: <http://www.word-origins.com/definition>)

Ahh...so an Opportunity gives no guarantees, but does offer “favorable winds.” And it is not instant, but takes a while. And it seems that it is not necessarily to be “seized” as in “quickly grabbing in order not to lose,” but rather is portrayed in the sense of tying our boat to the favorable winds, to safely arrive ashore. Exploring with our clients to discover the most favorable direction in their seas is to help them sail to shore. So I encourage you, do take the risk to think of the words your clients utter as an opening to their rich Imagery world. Offer your clients your own insights to what their words convey to you as an Opportunity to explore further and wider within the notion that there is no instant coming to shore... it takes a while, but with favorable winds – they’ll get there.

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*Continued on page 22*

# Language as Opportunity, Words as Images

Continued from page 21

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Fania Chazen is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, graduate of NYU, certified in Interactive Guided Imagery<sup>SM</sup> by AGI and trained in hypnosis. Fania uses GI as a powerful clinical tool in private and group sessions, lectures and

workshops with diverse populations. Since moving to Israel with her family, Fania has translated and narrated Belleruth Naparstek's "Relaxation and Wellness" Guided Imagery CD in Hebrew. She practices in her private clinic "Lev Shalem (Whole Heart)" in Tel Aviv, and is a therapist at the Integrative Medicine (MindBody) Unit of Davidoff Center for Cancer Care and Research, Rabin Medical Center. Fania believes that the process of continuous reclaiming of one's Wholesome Self is a major path to one's Health, and it can be done in many ways.

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## Pathway to Freedom



**By Randy Kasper**  
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Addiction is, in short, enslavement. One's world spirals downward until all of one's thoughts and actions revolve around the object of desire. Many approaches are used in service to freeing people from this virtual prison. Popular nowadays are cognitive and behavior-based interventions. Much attention is also given to debates on the role of genetics in the study of addiction. This is all well and good. In fact, I spend considerable time teaching these approaches to graduate and postgraduate level students. However, it is important to recognize that these approaches are primarily linear and logical and therefore limited.

Mental Imagery is, in short, a pathway to freedom in that Imagination is expansive and unlimited. Offering us ideas, thoughts, feelings and options for behaviors that were previously elusive, Imagery is rife with Opportunities to discover, through our senses, new options and experiences. Imagery shows us "what is," bypassing the tricks and rationalizations of our intellect and ego. The Imaged picture (or taste or smell or touch) informs us of what is going on in our inner world. The Mental Imagery pathway empowers us to connect with our true self, the self that is elusive when one is affected by addictions, obsessions and compulsions.

Working with the concept that "Beliefs Create Experience," we know that if someone is suffering addiction, there is a false belief at

the helm. How do we know this? We know because our true self always leads us to healing...period. Suffering is the result of false beliefs. We use Imagery in part to discover belief. Using a short guided Imagery exercise, we start from the point of pain, and then we change the Image, thereby changing the belief and changing the experience. Imagery is belief "concretized" as mind pictures.

I have found it very important to use the frame of "false beliefs" when working with clients, because people suffering with addiction are plagued by guilt and shame. When we shift to discovering their inner worlds and inner wisdom, a weight seems to lift from their shoulders. Imagery is a work-form that has no place for judgment. I work with my clients in a phenomenological way. We look at "what is," not what "should be." And always—we work with "What Does the Client Want?" Always ask this question, whether in service to yourself or others. Always start with "What is your intention?"

I use short guided Images to make quick corrections, and longer forms to discover elements of the client's inner consciousness. In creating short guided Image exercises, I will often use Dr. G. Epstein's books. I will also listen closely to the specifics of a client's language to create Imagery exercises during the session. For example, people commonly

*Continued on page 23*