

Tamara Herl

inner wisdom coaching and retreats

Using Metaphor to Become Your Own Guru

by Tamara Herl

“Perhaps each of us has a starved place, and each of us knows deep down what we need to fill that place.”—Sue Bender in Plain and Simple

Women who are feeling “starved” in one sense or another often seek out my services as an expressive arts coach. In our coaching partnership, I help women learn how to use images and metaphors to discover the “starved places” within themselves and learn how to fill them. But why use metaphorical images?

In her book, Practical Intuition, Laura Day says that when people or issues are important to us, our emotions can get in the way. For example, a woman who is trying to decide whether to stay with a current employer or take another job may have a great deal of emotional turmoil that could cloud her ability to make a wise decision. She can become more clear about her dilemma by using metaphorical images to explore them. For instance, I might ask her to picture her choice to stay with her current employer as a chair. Let’s say she chooses a recliner to stand for this option. Then, I would ask her to imagine a different type of chair to symbolize taking the new position. There would be much less emotion attached when she asks herself “Which chair is right for me at this time” as compared to the question, “Which job is right for me?”

The next step in using images for guidance is to discover how the image relates to your life. I might ask the woman in the above situation to picture herself sitting in each of the chairs and journal about the feelings that arise. Or, I might ask her to write down things she associates with office chairs and with recliners. I would ask her questions to help expand her awareness, such as “Imagine yourself sitting first in the recliner, and then in the office chair. Which feels better?” With patience and persistence, we can discover what she needs at this point in her life.

Once these needs have been uncovered, the next step involves exploring what her needs. Let’s say that she has realized that she senses a need to sit in the office chair for now. I might ask her to describe her associations with the office chair—crisp leather covering, firm support, adjustable height of the seat, etc. Then I might ask her to ponder which job is the best fit for the characteristics she just described. Is her current employment more likely to provide firm support and a capacity to adjust, or would those things be more available in the new job she is considering?

The thing I love most about this approach is that the woman has sought within herself for answers to her questions, rather than going with the status quo of seeking answers outside of herself. As the woman's coach, I am not serving as an expert, but rather as another explorer, traversing her inner terrain alongside her to help discover the best path for her at this point in her life. We are accessing what I call "Inner Wisdom", which speaks to us in the language of metaphor.

The best place to start in developing your Inner Wisdom is with something small—something that is not a major life decision or too emotionally charged. For instance, exploring the possibility of attending a conference would be a better place to begin than would focusing on whether or not to stay in a tumultuous relationship. By beginning with smaller things, you can begin to learn to understand the way your Inner Wisdom uses metaphor to communicate. When you are fully "tuned in" to the ways in which your Inner Wisdom speaks to you, then you can tackle your more difficult situations and issues and become your own Guru.

Yet, even Gurus seek assistance from others from time to time. So, how will you know when it's time to go to someone else for help? If you have been seeking guidance from your Inner Wisdom and feel you are not gaining clarity, it might be time to seek outside assistance. Or, if you are involved in a highly emotionally charged situation, it might be helpful to work with another person. If you feel called to explore your issues by exploring your values and manifesting your potential, I would welcome the opportunity to travel with you on the journey!

www.tamaraherl.com
coach@tamaraherl.com
1-719-539-2061

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