

Reflections on illness and metaphor, 30 years after Susan Sontag.

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Sontag's project:

“the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified, most resistant to metaphoric thinking” (Sontag, 1991, p. 3)

There are some metaphors that “we might well try to abstain from or to retire” (p. 91).

Cancer (and before it, tuberculosis) have been “spectacularly and similarly encumbered by the trappings of metaphor” (p. 5), and these encumbrances have cost lives.

Cancer “is just a disease” (p. 100).

Sontag's situation

“When I became a cancer patient...what particularly enraged me—and distracted me from my own terror and despair at my doctors' gloomy prognosis—was seeing how much the very reputation of this illness added to the suffering of those who had it” (Sontag, 1991, p. 97).

Sontag's case

1. There are master illnesses (these change over time)
2. Master illnesses have controlling metaphors.
3. Some metaphors are mortifying, they make the experience of illness worse.
4. The best way to be ill is a way free of metaphor.

In 1978 – the master illness was cancer and the controlling metaphor was a military one.

Changing “Master illnesses” from Small, Froggatt and Downs 2006. (See Patterson,1987)

| <i>Phase</i> | <i>Defining characteristic</i> | <i>Prevalent fear(s)</i> | <i>Dread disease</i> |
|---------------------|---|---|----------------------|
| Early modern | Industrialisation / urbanisation | Enforced proximity Being unproductive Being cast aside | Tuberculosis |
| Modern | Promise of science/technology, Reason and progress intrinsically linked. | Being out of control / the irrational / not being able to solve problems | Cancer |
| Postmodern | Acceptance of contradictions | Loss of intellectual capacity and capacity to choose | Dementia |

Understanding metaphor

- The function of metaphor – rhetorical/ semantic/ conceptual/ ontological
- The variety of metaphor
- Is metaphor always “bad”?

1) Function

- Rhetorical : Aristotle – metaphor is “giving a thing a name that belongs to something else.
- Ontological : Foucault – metaphors of space and vision.
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2) Variety

Metaphors of the body/ of topography/ of journeys.

3) Positive or negative

For who – patients/family/staff/society?

From the battle to the journey.

- **Arthur Frank: Narratives of restitution, chaos, and quest**
 - Narrators are “wounded storytellers.”
 - “Critical illness offers the experience of being taken to the threshold of life, from which you can see where your life could end” (Frank 1991, p. 1)
 - “The ill person who turns illness into story transforms fate into experience; the disease that sets the body apart from others becomes, in the story, the common bond of suffering that joins bodies in their shared vulnerability” (Frank, 1995, p. xi).
 - “Sooner or later, everyone is a wounded storyteller. In postmodern times that identity is our promise and responsibility, our calamity and dignity” (1995, p. xiii).
- **Metaphors of choice and self-determinism, journey metaphors**
 - “metaphors are as much a product of the lived experience of disease as they are a transforming influence on that experience” (Clow, 2001, p 295).

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