

BOOKS





WE SEE THE SAME SITUATIONS SO  
DIFFERENTLY. HERE'S HOW TO  
UNDERSTAND OUR DEEPER, SHARED  
VISIONS AND MOVE TOWARD PEACE.

**I**magine it: a language common to an educated urban professional and a Maori tribesman, an Iowan kindergartener and a farmer in Latvia, a gangbanger and a librarian, a terrorist and — you get the picture. It may exist: a language common to all of us, regardless of culture, age, gender, education, occupation, religion, and almost anything else. It's called deep metaphors.

After 12,000 in-depth interviews in more than 30 countries, as part of research done for marketing purposes, Harvard Business School professor and sociologist Gerald Zaltman, Ph.D., along with his team at Olson Zaltman Associates (OlsonZaltman.com) found that all people see the world through seven main lenses, plus four subsidiary ones. He calls these lenses deep metaphors, and he, along with his son, Lindsay Zaltman, have detailed their research in a new book called *Marketing Metaphoria: What Deep Metaphors Reveal about the Minds of Consumers* (Harvard Business Press, May 2008).

So far, deep metaphors have been used primarily for selling: companies want their brands to evoke positive associations, and deep metaphors put a name on those associations. For instance, beverages are a product consumed in social contexts, which would associate them with the “connection” deep metaphor (to be explained in a second). A



# OUR COMMON LANGUAGE

By BETSY ROBINSON / *Illustration by* KEN ORVIDAS



## CONTAINERS CAN PROTECT US OR TRAP US, BE OPENED OR CLOSED, BE POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE.

brand like Budweiser succeeds by showing a bunch of young men holding Budweiser beers and enthusiastically screaming “Whasup!” into their respective telephones. The telephone literally connects people, and the insertion of the beer prompts TV viewers to associate beer with fun social connectivity.

Deep metaphors have also been used to solve selling problems. *Marketing Metaphoria* recounts the story of a Japanese company with an innovative vegetable juice-processing system that they wanted to sell to Americans. Their juice is made without the high heat associated with conventional canning and pasteurization, which destroys some flavor and nutrient content. Through deep-metaphor research, Zaltman’s company found that Americans associate food processing with imbalance, so the company reframed its presentation. Instead of touting the processing, it presents its juice as made “without the high heat of conventional processing,” so as to associate it with balance.

But how else might deep metaphors be used? For conflict resolution among families, neighbors, or even countries? Might we use them to better understand ourselves? “Yes!” says Zaltman.

More about that soon. First, let’s lay the groundwork.

### WHAT ARE DEEP METAPHORS?

If you are a visual person, cut to the chase and take a look at the video at [youtube.com/watch?v=zexh6i6T6tg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zexh6i6T6tg). Simply put, deep metaphors are basic frames or orientations we have to the world around us. They are deep because they are largely unconscious and universal. They represent everything we think, hear, say, and do. And what we believe about these metaphors colors our every perception and opinion and how we detect and interpret differences. We cannot express ourselves without using deep metaphors. (In the previous paragraph, when I referred to this section as laying the “groundwork,” I was using the container metaphor. Then I said “cut to the chase” — the journey metaphor.) Here are the seven major and four subsidiary deep metaphors:

**BALANCE** equates to justice, equilibrium, interplay of different elements. There are many flavors, including physical balance, moral balance, social, aesthetic, and psychological balance.



## CONTAINER CONNOTES INCLUSION, EXCLUSION, THAT WHICH KEEPS SOMETHING IN OR OUT.

People express balance in phrases such as “I’m back on track,” “in the groove,” “centered,” or imbalance in phrases such as “I’m stuffed” or “She married beneath her,” or “He didn’t make the grade.”

**TRANSFORMATION** equates to change in state, status, substance, and circumstances. We are “laid low by a cold.” Or we’re “turning over a new leaf.”

**JOURNEY** is the meeting of past, present, and future. Many people characterize life as a journey — big or brief. We use phrases like “It was a marathon” or “an uphill climb.”

**CONTAINER** connotes inclusion, exclusion, that which keeps something in or out. Containers can protect us or trap us, be opened or closed, be positive or negative. They involve physical, psychological, and social states. We say “Get out of your cage,” or “I was wrapped up in a story.” Memories are one of our most vital containers because they hold our history and identity.

**CONNECTION** correlates to relating to oneself and others. Connection and disconnection encompass feelings of belonging or exclusion. One might say, “He kept me out of the loop” or “My kind of person/team/brand is . . .”

**RESOURCE** is a source of support. People, food, water, oxygen, information. People refer to a job as “my bread and butter.” An intelligent person is a “fountain of knowledge.”

**CONTROL** refers to a sense of mastery, vulnerability, and well-being. We like to feel in control of our lives. When people “succumb to illness,” they may feel “powerless.” When we surrender control, we may say, “It’s out of my hands now.” Or we may feel “at the mercy of nature.”

Subsidiary deep metaphors are:

**MOVEMENT OR MOTION**, which has a lot in common with journey.

**FORCE** manifests as power that can propel or constrict.

**NATURE** represents that which does not come from human-kind; symbolizes growth and evolution.

**SYSTEM** connotes that which gives order or structure.

It’s important to remember that we often see things through more than one metaphor at a time, and the context in which we perceive metaphors colors them. Unlike psychologist Carl G. Jung’s archetypes (basic qualities of mind, personality types, or characteristics that operate in our “collective unconscious”), deep metaphors are basic categories of patterned thinking and decision making, broader than (but containing) Jung’s archetypal qualities as sub-themes.

## HOW DO DEEP METAPHORS WORK?

**A**s we interact in our social, cultural, and physical environments, we practice patterns of neural connections. With reinforcement, some become part of our everyday “wiring,” and others are discarded. We develop attractions, aversions, and beliefs in the form of these neural firing patterns.

In his research, Zaltman and his team discovered that all people use the same deep metaphors when addressing similar situations or solving problems, and our entrenched emotions and beliefs about these metaphors are triggered according to the neural patterns associated with each deep metaphor.

Before you can use deep metaphors for change or conflict resolution, you have to know what you believe or feel about them; you have to know that you *are* perceiving them consciously or unconsciously all the time. Olson Zaltman Associates has developed a patented interviewing technique called the ZMET (Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique) for unearthing the deep metaphors we live by. The basic ZMET steps are the same whether the process is used for consumer research or conflict resolution, but here’s an example of conflict resolution:

An individual explains to an interviewer what he or she believes about a contentious topic. The interviewer uses the individual’s language to sort out the beliefs, bringing to light those that are hidden, and helping to create a collage of metaphors representing the beliefs in relation to each other. This is followed by a “Show and Tell,” where interviewees share their pictures and reasons for making them the way they have with other members of their group — which results in some surprising discoveries of commonality. Once people become clear on what they agree and disagree on, they break into teams and, along with a Photoshop specialist, create a digital image that represents both sides of their conflict. Finally, the entire group comes together and, based on the insights they’ve obtained working in small groups, they sketch out a single image that’s a common vision for both contending parties.

“It’s the process of creating a common vision of what life would be like without conflict that’s important,” says Zaltman, because it’s during that process that people begin to see how much they have in common, and they develop greater tolerance for differences. “We do a content analysis of the last group,” says Zaltman, “and they’re saying things like, ‘You know, I see it that way too, but I use *this* lens to see it.’ As opposed to ‘I don’t see that at all.’ We’re not seeking to get everyone to agree on everything. That’s just not the nature of important social issues. What you want is an appreciation for the other person’s position.” When there’s an appreciation, people discover common bases for finding a way to solve differences.

“Deep metaphors allow us to look into the contents of our thoughts and feelings,” says Zaltman. “Once we’ve identified the dominant deep metaphors and our associated beliefs, we can start to see what’s constructive and what’s not.” But it isn’t necessary to have a ZMET interview to do this. All we need is a willingness to listen — to ourselves and others.

S&H

Betsy Robinson is managing editor of S&H.

## REAL-LIFE USES

### STUDY STORIES

- In two studies of the role of tobacco in people’s lives, Olson Zaltman Associates found that smokers and non-smokers viewed each other much the way mutually hostile racial or ethnic groups do: they had conflicting container metaphors and differing beliefs regarding the control metaphor. Often, these parties were from the same family or were close friends. Olson Zaltman concluded that once the contending parties understood the nature of their hostility, they would be able to find a common ground. Specifically, when nonsmokers understood that not smoking is not simply a matter of will power (control) but rather part of deeply ingrained rituals and required changing friends and even churches (containers, connections), then nonsmokers would understand that they needed to be more tolerant of family members who were trying to stop smoking. The smokers, in turn, would have to see that nonsmokers were not simply trying to curtail their freedom (control), but they had a real concern for their health.

- In an examination of a nonprofit health education agency’s physician-patient communications, Olson Zaltman discovered that there were conflicting deep metaphors influencing bad communications: The healthcare providers viewed themselves as resources. While many patients consciously shared this view, many of them also ignored medical advice and prescriptions. Why? Because unconsciously they viewed the healthcare workers as reminders that they were imbalanced and flawed containers. The notion of being flawed encouraged them to deny their problems and ignore medical advice. To improve communications, the patients would have to understand what they *really* believed.

- Although Olson Zaltman has not done diplomatic studies, it has worked with political conflict. In one case, a leading pacifist and a well-known military leader debated their country’s future. Soon, they discovered they shared beliefs about two deep metaphors about the future: journey and balance. Understanding their similarities helped them reach agreement on some differences.

To bring this work into a world arena, Gerald Zaltman would love to do a study on the meaning of home in the context of homeland. If you or someone you know would like to sponsor such a study, you can contact Zaltman through [OlsonZaltman.com](http://OlsonZaltman.com).

### CONTEMPLATION EXERCISE

A PERSONAL STORY: I was in the middle of reading *Marketing Metaphoria* when I took a break to go for a walk with my dog. As I approached my favorite place to play, I saw a line of movie trailers parked head-to-tail all the

(continued on page 76)

## Uses *(continued from page 53)*

way up the road to *my* hill. Instantly I felt resentful: they were taking up *my* space, and I would not be able to play. *Ding-ding*, went my head. What just happened? I tracked my resentment back to my first glimpse of the line of trailers and realized I'd seen the connection deep metaphor. From self-examination, I know that my initial distorted belief when I see group connection is that I will not fit in, I'll be shut out. Faster than the speed of thought, I'd made up a story to justify the patterned firing of neurons connected to this belief. And the instant I realized it, my story fell apart and resentment evaporated. P.S. There was nobody on my hill, and I had a lovely time with my dog.

To have your own experience, try this:

- 1) By yourself, contemplate the seven deep metaphors (page 52). For each deep metaphor, list all your associated emotions and beliefs.
- 2) Contemplate these emotions and

beliefs. Without judgment, get clear on them and take special note of any negative associations.

3) The next time you have a knee-jerk negative reaction to something, breathe, slow your thinking, and try to track back to the trigger — an image you might have glimpsed, sounds, smells, etc. Name the deep metaphor represented by the trigger.

4) Can you see how your reaction might be due to something other than the story to which you instantly attributed your reaction? If so, you may experience the sudden dissolution of your negative reaction.

## CONVERSATION EXERCISE

IMAGINE TWO PEOPLE HAVING AN ARGUMENT: One says, "I think it's air-tight. It's open and shut." Or "Your argument is full of hot air. There are holes in your logic." This is expressive of a container deep metaphor. And it's not a very constructive use.

If you or people you know are arguing, listen to the language being used.

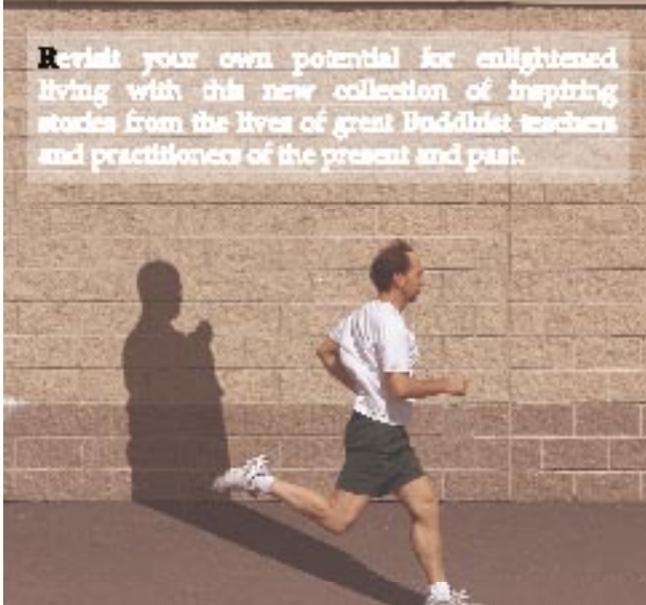
Try to shift frames by shifting the language — in the former case, from a container to a balance deep metaphor. For instance, you might use expressions such as, "Let's just weigh the pros and cons." Or "Let's look at both sides. I can see your point. I hear you, even if I don't agree with you." Or employ a journey deep metaphor; instead of saying, "Those are fighting words," you might say, "You've lost me there. Could you explain and help me follow your argument better?" By shifting the rhetoric of an argument, conflict can be de-escalated and people will begin to drop their defensive postures.

In the former example, the shift becomes possible once you have recognized the container deep metaphor and realized that a balance or a journey metaphor would be more constructive. You will recognize the deep metaphors at work where you're at a dead end. You can then choose another one. You can encourage another person, through your own language, to begin to shift his or her way of discussing an issue.

B.R.

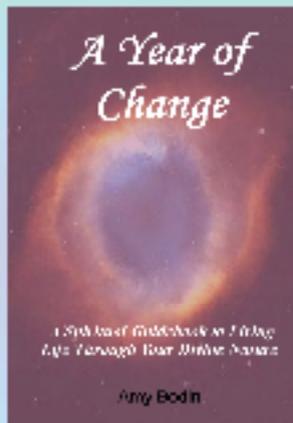
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