
Beginning the World Again: Metaphor in the Early Literature of AIDS

by Chuck Anderson and Yvonne Oxford Hickey

Metaphors shape, reflect, bring meaning to and sometimes determine the course of experience. Because the reality of AIDS was almost beyond the power of everyday language, writers in the early AIDS community depended on the resources of metaphor to cope with the effects of the disease. They drew metaphors from ordinary events and from larger patterns intrinsic to Western culture to define, interact with and feel their way into the world after AIDS. This article begins by explaining the three dimensions of metaphor. Then it explores both large and small metaphors in an attempt to understand how they shaped and reflected the early AIDS community's experience and to show how they brought that experience into the lives of those outside the community.

Dr. Paul Volberding had never seen anything like this in such a young patient. Emaciated and covered by lesions, the young man looked like a patient who was, perhaps, in the advanced stages of stomach cancer. It was hard to look more advanced than this fellow, Volberding thought; he looked like someone who was going to die (Shilts 75).

Over a period of roughly five years, the American gay community journeyed from the uncloseted freedom of Fire Island and the San Francisco bath houses to "the death of a generation of gay men" (*Love Alone* xii), a journey that entailed the loss of virtually everything the community had gained over years of political, social and personal struggle. Writing by members of the AIDS community, which we define as persons with AIDS and persons directly affected by it (family members, caregivers, partners), during this period is characterized by a literal and symbolic struggle to make sense of the disease and articulate its consequences, and to maintain personal and communal integrity in the face of overwhelming loss.

Our argument is that metaphor became a central resource in the AIDS community's struggle to live in a world radically transformed by almost unimaginable forms of death. In fact, we believe the early writing about AIDS cannot be fully understood without attending to its metaphors and understanding their conceptual, imaginative and affective dimensions. Together, these three dimensions of metaphor empowered the AIDS community to understand what was happening and to bring the epidemic closer to the lives and hearts of all people.

Diagnosis is that bold arrow on a map
at the elevator: "You are here."

And so I am, I am here.

And I don't know what will save you
or what will save me. I don't know what will
keep me

From a less intensifying chill as each report
comes in, as each statistic lingers
to enact its monstrous number of blood
gripping memory, gripping fact-finding cell.
I just know that in another life

We might have been lovers,
a life pre-diagnosis, a life where there'd
be enough wood for a fire, enough time
to tell you how a rough day became steadied
with part thought, part dream

(Michael Klein, "Positive," *Poets for Life* 124)

The Conceptual Dimension

In its most direct and powerful form, metaphor works to name things. This is the sense of metaphor that Susan Sontag invokes in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, a sense that comes from Aristotle's *Poetics* (1457b): "Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else." In this definition, A (the literal term) is displaced by B (the

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figurative term). This displacement, which linguist Owen Thomas in *Metaphor and Related Subjects* calls "feature transfer," forces the features of B on to A. The result of such a feature transfer is a one-way movement: B becomes A. "Diagnosis is that bold arrow on a map/at the elevator: 'You are here.'" The metaphoric movement is from "that bold arrow on a map at the elevator" (B) to "diagnosis" (A). The effect is to transfer the attributes of the bold arrow to the diagnosis, redefining an unknown experience (being diagnosed) by connecting it to one all readers know (the arrow on the map at the elevator). Definition is a logical process that engages powers of reasoning.

The Imaginative Dimension

The imaginative dimension of metaphor is rooted in what Aristotle calls proportional metaphors, which "must be drawn from things that are related to the original thing, and yet not obviously so related" (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1412a). In such metaphors, power and influence move both from and to each of the terms. "When Homer calls old age 'stubble' he creates understanding and knowledge through the genus, since both old age and stubble are species of the genus of things that have lost their bloom" (*Rhetoric* 1410b). In this dimension, one word doesn't simply substitute for another. While the terms are related by genus or similarity, the metaphoric influence is bi-directional: our understanding of stubble may be changed as much as our understanding of old men.

Because the terms of a proportional metaphor are both alike (A is B) and different (A is not B), they struggle, pushing away at points of dissimilarity, pulling together at points of likeness. This interaction engages us in a problem solving process that draws upon individual experience to create the sense or meaning of the metaphor. Because we bring our experiences to the text and because these experiences comprise the interpretive frame within which the metaphor becomes meaningful, we are not passive recipients of metaphoric definitions. We participate in the metaphoric process through the creative powers of imagination. We become third "terms" in the metaphor, and how we construe a given metaphor will vary from one person to another. Two people reading "Diagnosis is that bold arrow on a map/at the elevator: 'You are here,'" will experience significantly different understandings.

The Affective Dimension

Though most of us have never stood at Klein's particular elevator and seen his particular bold

arrow, our conceptual and imaginative involvement invites us to experience the event in all its force all at once—now. In the affective dimension, metaphor intensifies what we can imagine by moving us out of our present lives into the symbolic events revealed by the text. Aristotle calls this complex set of affective phenomena "making them see things" or "bringing-before-the-eyes" (*Rhetoric* 1411b).

In this dimension, metaphor completes the work of the imagination through feeling, the function of which, says Paul Ricoeur, "is to abolish the distance between knower and known without canceling the cognitive structure of thought and the intentional distance which it implies. Feeling is not contrary to thought. It is thought made ours. . . . felt participation" (Ricoeur 156). Feeling draws us in the way a dramatic presentation or a powerful story draws us. It opens our lives to experiences beyond daily living. We become attuned to "aspects of reality which cannot be expressed . . . in ordinary language" (Ricoeur 157-158). In Aristotle's terms, we experience a catharsis, which is not a purging of emotions, but a movement out of ourselves.

Writing by the AIDS community reflects their struggle to maintain integrity in the face of overwhelming loss.

When we fully understand "Diagnosis is that bold arrow on a map/at the elevator: 'You are here,'" though we have not been diagnosed, we are *here* in reason, imagination and feeling, and because we can be *here* at any time, we will always be *here*. Each time we stand before our own bold arrows at our own elevators, suddenly, the loss of diagnosis, the loss of what we might have been in another life, will become real to us.

While there are literally hundreds of "local" metaphors such as "that bold arrow on a map," each of which takes us by surprise and changes us forever, our reading suggests that larger, more systematic metaphor patterns provided the early AIDS community with networks of terms through which to communicate their stories, to endure the lives they had been handed, and to bring those lives into the presence of all readers and hearers. While there are many systems, the two we will examine are War and Helpless Child.

The War Within—The War Without

In *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag deals at length with the war metaphor and its application to the AIDS community. She says:

Not all metaphors applied to illnesses and their treatment are equally unsavory and distorting. The one I am most eager to see retired—more than ever since the emergence of AIDS—is the military metaphor. . . . It overmobilizes, it overdescribes, and it powerfully contributes to the excommunicating and stigmatizing of the ill.

No, it is not desirable for medicine, any more than for war, to be "total." Neither is the crisis created by AIDS a "total" anything. We are not being invaded. The body is not a battlefield. The ill are neither unavoidable casualties nor the enemy. We—medicine, society—are not authorized to fight back by any means whatever. . . . About that metaphor, the military one, I would say, if I may paraphrase Lucretius: Give it back to the war-makers (182-183).

While we are sympathetic to Sontag's concern for the AIDS community, our reading of their literature reveals that various war metaphors supplied the conceptual, imaginative and emotional building blocks from which persons with AIDS and those who loved and cared for them created new lives amidst the ruins of their old ones.

The grisly, violent imagery of war is what first attracted the attention of writers in the AIDS community. They write of being "pale and exhausted from the battle" (*Borrowed Time* 93), of "enemies within [that] have multiplied and are winning" (Peabody 246), and of themselves as "the arrow / . . . moving/faster than you know, a shrill/projectile through the neutral air/above a world war, headed for the flesh . . ." (Tim Dlugos, "Retrovir," *Poets for Life* 65). They describe the disease and its consequences in graphic, battle terms:

It comes like a slowly dawning horror. At first you are equipped with a hundred different amulets to keep it far away. Then someone you know goes into the hospital, and suddenly you are at high noon in full battle gear. They have neglected to tell you that you will be issued no weapons of any sort. So you cobble together a weapon out of anything that lies at hand, like a prisoner honing a spoon handle into a stiletto. You fight tough, you fight dirty, but you cannot fight dirtier than it (*Borrowed Time* 2).

But it is not the usual imagery of war, either the one within or the one without, that most directly affects the AIDS community's response to the disease. Instead of attacking, excommunicating or stigmatizing, war connects individuals, shapes action, and provides meaning through a symbolic transformation of killing into caring, a transformation that makes the war metaphor central to the community's discourse.

In *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, Richard Weaver says that every society creates rhetorical signposts of value. He calls such signposts "ultimate terms," and defines them as carriers of complex sets of propositions, some positive, some negative, most of which are so deeply embedded that they can be explicated

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only with great difficulty. Ultimate terms generate immediate, automatic responses in the culture for which they are signposts. Such terms are organized in a hierarchy established through negotiation and reflecting shared agreement about the value of the propositions for which they stand. Examples include "freedom," "democracy," "progress," "racism" and "fascism." To be associated with a particular term is to take upon oneself the qualities of that term—to be racist is to be condemned, to be an advocate of democracy is to be praised.

Conventional hierarchies may be displaced by situations that create dissonance between what people "believe" and what they "do." In such situations, accepted hierarchies of value can become inverted. Weaver cites what he calls "GI rhetoric" as an example. In GI rhetoric, because war is so dangerous and demanding, normal values become displaced and, in what he calls "an apparently universal psychological law," positive terms become negative and vice versa. Specifically, terms usually associated with love, hope and charity are displaced by terms associated with excretory and reproductive functions, which become terms for violent exploitation and for killing (225).

In Sontag's comments above, we see both a "normal" response to the propositions embedded in the word "war" and a rejection of the violence of GI rhetoric. In writing from the earliest years of the AIDS epidemic, we see some of these same responses, but because the war being fought within and without is metaphoric, we also see important inversions of the propositions war represents. these

inversions are as powerful as those producing Weaver's GI rhetoric but move in opposite directions, transforming violent exploitation and killing into a community of love and connecting that community to the larger outside culture which it must join if its members are to survive the terror, grief, and ultimately, the disease itself.

For Paul Monette and Roger Horwitz, the war against AIDS was one of ultimate violence resulting in the literal and symbolic loss of everything. But, because war for them was a multi-dimensional metaphor, it demanded a response equal in depth and complexity to the experiences and feelings they

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brought to it. Throughout Monette's writing, we see him working through the war metaphor, testing its dimensions, seeking a way to say what must be said.

A man who has been to war will never be the same, for he has lost the virginity of living around the edges of life, and in the long gray waste of combat has had crushed his belief in smaller things. . . .

That is what a whole generation of gay men are doing, as they care for each other and bury each other and take what respite they can in between (*Borrowed Time* 282).

In the act of fighting an "all out" war against the internal forces of AIDS and the external forces of social and medical establishments that seem more intent on interference and punishment than relief, Monette and Horwitz find themselves bonded ever more tightly to each other, a bonding that creates a community out of which meaning can begin to arise.

. . . if I have any sense at all of how we persevered so long, it comes down to an equal measure: an unwavering goal to beat it, and the group of two for an army. In combat Roger had no choice but to battle the physical side, while I engaged on the metaphysical front. A simplistic formulation if you take it too far, I know, but it took us further than either of us could ever have gone alone. "The pals," as Roger used to call us, nudging me shoulder to shoulder (*Borrowed Time* 101).

While the camaraderie of soldiers is a well-studied aspect of war, it is only in the realm of metaphor that it can transcend the violence of killing. Instead of excommunicating and stigmatizing, war, through the symbolic inversions made possible by the multi-dimensional nature of metaphor, creates the possibilities of continuation. Having completed its work within the AIDS community, the war metaphor provides the power to bring the AIDS experience into the lives of outsiders with an insistence that cannot be easily ignored:

When I began to write about AIDS during Roger's illness, I wanted a form that would move with breathless speed, so I could scream if I wanted and rattle on and empty my Uzi into the air. . . . it was in my head that if only a fragment remained in the future, to fade in the sulfurous rain, it would say how much I loved him and how terrible was the calamity.

The story that endlessly eludes the decorum of the press is the death of a generation of gay men. What is written here is only one man's passing and one man's cry, a warrior burying a warrior. May it fuel the fire of those on the front lines who mean to prevail, and of their friends who stand in the fire with them. We will not be bowed down or erased by this. I learned too well what it means to be a people, learned in the joy of my best friend what all the meaningless pain and horror cannot take away—that all there is is love. Pity us not (*Love Alone* xii-xiii).

Cradle and All

In *AIDS: The Ultimate Challenge*, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross asserts that "between 1984 and 1986, about half of all mothers [of AIDS patients] either physically or emotionally supported their sick sons" (35). Quoting one mother, these women "had to 'train themselves to be moms again for little, helpless children' in a grown up body" (32). The helpless child metaphor with its attendant images of mothering, caring, holding and role reversal reached beyond the purely genetic mother/child relationship to assert itself in other contexts where it became as powerful and important as war for helping members of the AIDS community make sense of and communicate their experience.

While we cannot make an absolute claim, our reading reveals that the helpless child metaphor was most potent and most important to women, who might also invoke the war metaphor, but for whom war's imaginative and affective dimensions

never achieve the same resonance and power as in the writing of their male counterparts.

For nurses like Carmen Baez, the metaphorical attraction between her patients and her children is both irresistible and shocking.

Jimmy was the first patient who really got to her down deep. . . . He'd walk out of his room naked. He'd defecate all the way down the hall. Like one of her babies. He was 24 years old . . . Jimmy yelled, Jimmy shit his pants, Jimmy was as demanding as any two-year-old. He was a problem child. The thing was, no one seemed to see just that—Jimmy *was* a child. He was like a baby. . . . Carmen had babies of her own. Carmen loved her babies. Jimmy struck that chord. . . . Soon everyone got used to hearing Jimmy screaming Carmen's name at the top of his lungs. . . . "Go over there and tend your child," they'd say. . . .

Suddenly Jimmy was yelling, "I have AIDS! I'm gonna die! . . . I don't wanna die, Ms. Baez! I don't wanna die!" (Whitmore 146-150)

Because Jimmy is transformed by metaphor into a baby, Nurse Baez knows how to deal with him—as she would one of her own children. She knows his behavior must be forgiven and that she must not hold him responsible any more than she would hold her own children responsible for doing the things children do.

For many people, the most potent image of a mother and her helpless child is the image of the Madonna and Child, that for centuries has shaped our visual and symbolic senses of the ideal mother and child. Because it evokes a set of ultimate terms that push the infant and the mother into a place of holiness and veneration, the Madonna and Child image invites us to treasure the mother and her

The Madonna and Child image signifies the reality of grown men becoming helpless children.

child in a way almost no other such pairing is treasured in our culture. In the AIDS community, Madonna and Child signifies a dramatically transformed relationship between mothers and their children, the power of which comes from the imbalance between our ultimate terms for mother and child and the reality of grown men becoming helpless

children. Our recognition of this imbalance and involvement in the metaphor creates imaginative and affective experiences that map us into the events of the texts we read.

While the inversion of man and child is always destabilizing, it may also provide moments of contact between caregiver and patient, as well as a certain understanding of roles and the demands of the situation.

Peter is agitated and can't settle down long enough to sleep. Some invisible force won't allow him to stay still more than five minutes. I gave him backrubs to relax him. They didn't work, but he seemed to like them, like my touching him and talking to him quietly. He's been in and out of the bathroom—diarrhea. I jump up and listen through our open doors. I am an infant's mother again, with every sense heightened to respond to the least sound and movement (Peabody 116).

In other cases, the helpless child metaphor, because it carries aspects of normal childhood as well as its inversions, provides hope inside a hopeless situation. "If only I could kiss it away for him, like I did when he was small," writes Peabody (191). In another place she wishes her son could return to a kind of innocence.

I look up at him ambling happily along the corridor, "hmmphing," peering inquisitively, chuckling. Anxiety and fear are gone from his face. His green eyes are wide and innocent behind his thick lenses. He mixes words and pauses, cocks his head, laughs at his errors. Oh God, let him stay like this—why not?—protect him from the present and future horrors.

Insulate him comfortably in childishness (129).

But hope does not last. The helpless children of the AIDS community do not mature into capable adults. They become ever more childlike, ever more fetal, until at last they pass beyond gestation, beyond conception, into nothingness, leaving grief and loss and memory. As they do so, the dissonance between our own metaphoric mothers and children and the mothers and children of AIDS increases. Peabody offers us perhaps the only possible resolution, an even more powerfully wrenching image of Madonna and Child.

"Oh, Peter, . . ." I finally wail, and the tears come, falling on his hair, his tortured face, dripping on the pillow, his chest, his arms, as my whole body wilts, crumbles, caves in, I don't have to be strong anymore, the

strengths built up during months and months of tension, of angry energy, dissolve, and I am just another mother who has lost her child, who holds his empty, wasted body in her arms and mourns, grieves, cries for loss of part of her own body and soul (Peabody 273).

We know change may cast us adrift. And when we are lost, we must begin the world, our lives, again.

It is, of course, the *Pieta*, a marble metaphor imaging the same Madonna, only this time a Madonna holding a son crucified. The resonance is immediate and powerful, locating the events of the narrative inside a set of cultural experiences as broad and persuasive as any imaginable. We feel what the *Pieta* asks us to feel, what Peabody feels, and our world is overpowered by the presence of AIDS.

Beginning the World Again

Critics, rhetoricians and philosophers tell us that metaphor matters in everything we say and do. They tell us that metaphor is the heartbeat of language itself. We cannot escape metaphor, nor would we want to, for it enables us to tell our stories, to fight our battles, to mourn our children. It creates the word places in which we live and understand our lives, it allows others to enter and comprehend these places. Though we live in the belief that what we build is real and will always stand solid, somewhere, somehow we know it is fragile, tenuous. We know change and understand that it may cast us adrift. And when we are lost, we must begin the world, our lives, again. This is what the AIDS community did in the early years, what it continues to do. And it matters. Listen:

I have oceans of unresolved rage at those who ran from us, but I also see that plague and panic are inseparable. And nothing compares. That is something very important to understand about those on the moon of AIDS. Anything offered in comparison is a mockery to us. If hunger compares, or Hamburger Hill or the carnal dying of Calcutta, that is for us to say (*Borrowed Time* 83).

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