

The Resonance of Gates

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In recent years as I walk, ride, and drive around the country I notice gates. This is a meditation on how metaphor accounts for why gates, especially vernacular gates, seem to resonate with meaning. Gates are straightforward, simple functional devices and yet there is something about gates that I respond to in a special way. Metaphor, as discussed by Mark Johnson and George Lakoff in *Metaphors We Live By*, proposes the possibility that objects and the way we interact with them with our bodies makes up a significant part of how we construct meaning in the world. This paper is a meditation on the metaphorical resonance of the kind of gate a single pedestrian might use.

In *It's A Wonderful Life*, a 1948 movie directed by Frank Capra, James Stewart stars as George and Donna Reid stars as Mary. The movie is about one day in the life of this middle-aged man who finds himself in a crisis, coming to terms with who he has become in contrast to who he imagined he would turn out to be. In a flashback to his youth we find George lingering at the gate on the sidewalk outside Mary's home one evening, ruminating on how his ambitions to travel the world and to be an architect have been thwarted by fate. Life's circumstances have prevented him from making a break from the small town he grew up in. Meanwhile, waiting eagerly inside the house is Mary, a young woman to whom he is attracted and who may offer comfort, yet who represents a future he is trying to escape. George is ambivalent at a critical moment in his life. He protests to Mary that he was just walking by, didn't mean at all to come to her house. Mary is unshaken and insists he come inside for a visit. George, brandishing a stick like a sword, finally consents and attempts to unlatch the gate until finally he must kick it open to enter. It is the gate that resists him and his entry is violent. The passage through the gate is difficult like the decision to submit to this woman and small town life. Reluctantly, George moves down the path to Mary, to his future.

The gate in the excerpt from *It's A Wonderful Life* is an ordinary design, a classic white picket fence gate that is a part of the imagery of small towns in America, not at all surprising to find in a setting in this era. But the ways in which it goes beyond the role of a mere prop is in the meaning attributed to it through its physicality, the space it defines, its mechanism, and the way George interacts with it. The gate doesn't play the leading role in the movie, but it plays an important supporting role, reinforcing and engaging the protagonist's situation in ways that are meaningful, that tell a story. All of these qualities suggest a significance greater than "a gate is just a gate." The following discussion will indicate that a gate, path, and enclosure constitute a configuration of objects and spaces that are experienced and understood in ways that are not objective, but are metaphorical.



The work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson establishes the importance of metaphor in the way humans understand and construct meaning about the world. Literary metaphor, exemplified by "floodgate of emotion", is familiar to us. What Lakoff and Johnson offer is the notion that literary metaphor arises out of a more

profound way of thinking metaphorically. They say that humans construct metaphorical meaning at every level, not just literary, by relating all our experiences and thoughts to each other. They state: "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another."¹ They say that the relationship between experience and language and understanding is complex, so much so that "experience is everything that makes us human — our bodily, social, linguistic and intellectual being combined in complex interactions that make up our understanding of the world."² Language, and how we use it, reveals our understanding of the world. An example of this is how our understanding of verticality is revealed in language. We experience verticality first through our bodies, through "the felt sense of standing upright;" we observe rain falling in relation to our bodies; we form a mental image of a flagpole and liken it to our body's orientation. Up and down, the two poles of verticality are fundamental bodily experiences and emerge in language in other domains of experience, such as state of mind.: "I was feeling down," "she really is upbeat," and "I'm up for it." The spatial conditions of up and down are not neutral, but qualitative. In our society up is good and down is bad: "Up the production rate." Here, up is increase, and increase in our society is good.; and "We need to downsize." Down is to become smaller, which in our society is not good. A bodily experience of verticality becomes a way of understanding and even evaluating other experiences.

Again, Lakoff and Johnson state, "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another," and an important kind of experience is what they call "natural kinds of experiences." These derive from our experience of "our bodies (...), our interactions with our physical environment (...), and our interactions with other people within our culture (...)."³ These are the experiences we know to constitute human nature, abstract and difficult to grasp. Some examples are the experience of Love, Time, Happiness, and I believe also, Life. Natural experiences such as Life may be understood through other kinds of "natural experiences" that are more concrete and tangible. Physical orientations, objects, substances, journeys, buildings, etc. are examples of concrete natural experiences. Again, one domain of experience is understood better through an understanding of another domain of experience, concrete and easier to grasp. For example, to understand time as a vessel that fills and empties, is to relate an abstract fundamental human experience to a concrete everyday experience so that the first may be better understood. What I believe is compelling and the work of Lakoff and Johnson for art and architecture is that the basis for constructing

human meaning is in human experience. With this our understanding of the role of experience of the body is extended into language in general and metaphor in particular, serving to enlarge and enrich on the things and spaces we experience and create.

If a gate were just-a-gate, that is, an objective object, apart from this complex web of interactions that make up our understanding of the world, it could be described as a practical thing. It functions with a fence or wall to keep things in or keep things out of an enclosed space; it defines a momentary path where things traverse the space of the open gate. Yet, if we are to view gates, as we might view any similar thing or space, as caught up in this complex web of interactions we call metaphorical meaning, then we cannot settle for the notion that a gate is just-a-gate, a functional object. This paper attempts to use the methods of Lakoff and Johnson to develop a kind of linguistic case for the metaphorical meaning of gates. The process leads to the conclusion that the resonance of gates resides in the moment of transition as the one passes from one side of the gate to the other side of the gate. This bodily experience of transition resonates metaphorically with an individual's experiences of transition during the course of a lifetime. Everyday phrases in English such as "rites of passage," "let's get through this," "emotional breakthrough," and "gateway to success" reveal the meaning of gates. In the case of gates, an experience of the body, one that is primary, or as Lakoff and Johnson say, "natural" is related to experiences that are more difficult to grasp, Life and its transitions.

The experience of gates is characterized by an event, a passing between inside and outside that has a beginning, a middle and an end. Events, according to Lakoff and Johnson, are often conceptualized as objects.⁴ "Getting married" is an event we think of as some thing we can get, in the sense of acquire. We can also "get acquainted" "give a speech" and "give last rites" all of which are events understood as objects. The way we understand transition is also as an object. We "make a transition." To make something is to make an object like a cake or a pot. In the gate there is a powerful integration of the concrete and the abstract. We can make a gate, it is an object that embodies the event of transition, and every time we pass through a gate we re-enact the event of transition by interacting with a concrete object. A gate must be opened, passed through, and closed. A latch must be manipulated, a plane must be pushed and pulled open to pass through and again to close; a latch must be replaced. Phrases such as "let's get through this," "emotional breakthrough," and "gateway to success" reveal in everyday

language the metaphorical power of making a transition through a gate.



The experience of gates is characterized by the physical manipulation of an actual concrete object. A typical gate is comprised of a plane that is hung on one side by hinges in an opening in a fence or wall. On the other side of the plane is a latch to secure it to the other side of the opening. Typically one approaches the gate, reaches for the latch and pulls or pushes the gate open, passes through the opening, and closes the gate behind, securing the latch; almost like a choreography or partnership. Indeed, Lakoff and Johnson explore the metaphor that instruments, tools, are conceptualized as companions in everyday language, without even poetic personification.⁵ In a phrase such as “open the gate with a latch” the use of the word “with,” indicating accompaniment, is to reveal that the gate is conceived of as a companion, an assistant. The orientation of gates reinforces the sense that a gate is a companion. Ornamented gates especially are oriented toward those entering the interior of the enclosure from the outside, rather than those leaving the enclosure from the inside. Signs and ornaments usually face out to be read from the outside by the outer world. A lack of signs and ornament on the inside seems to suggest that it is unnecessary, that what the gate expresses is unnecessary to the insider. This seems to indicate that the gate is identified with those on the inside, it seems a projection of the properties of the prototypical person, with a front face and a back, in fact a gate seems to personify the canonical person, like a gatekeeper or a sentinel, facing the outside world, mediating transitions into the enclosure. If the bodily, spatial experience of gates is to experience transition, then the gate itself is our companion in the transition.

The experience of gates is characterized by the spatial conditions of inside and outside. When we pass from

one side of a fence or wall to the other through a gate we typically make a transition between inside and outside because typically fences and walls create enclosures. The meaningful quality of the conditions of inside and outside is revealed in everyday phrases like being “in the know,” “in the in-crowd,” “into it,” “out of the loop,” “an outsider.” We construct an understanding of the abstract difficult concept of social/psychological inclusion with the help of our concrete, bodily “natural experience” of inside and outside. According to Lakoff and Johnson “there are few human instincts more basic than territoriality” and territoriality is an abstract construct of human invention. It arises out of our natural experience of our bodies as containers. They state: “each of us is a container,” “... bounded off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins, and we experience the rest of the world as outside us.”⁶ Indeed, a preferential bias arises naturally from the sense that it is better to be like me, inside, than it is to be unlike me, outside. Lakoff and Johnson call this a “conceptual reference point,” when

“the canonical person forms a conceptual reference point, and an enormous number of concepts in our conceptual system are oriented with respect to whether or not they are similar to the properties of the prototypical person. The general principle is: Relative to the properties of the prototypical person where the word whose meaning is NEAREST comes FIRST.”⁷

In our culture it is always better to be “in the in-crowd,” than “out of the loop,” “out on a limb,” “out in the cold.”

In their discussion of the system of metaphors “Argument is a Journey” (with such phrases as “talking in circles,” go into this further,” “get to the next point”) Lakoff and Johnson include the path as a subset of journey by recognizing that an actual journey defines an actual path. A path is an entailment (or subset) of a Journey because it is a “fact” or real aspect of a Journey. It emerges in language as a way of understanding argument in phrases like “He strayed from the line of argument.” Straying from the line is straying from the path of the argument, as though the argument itself is going on a journey.⁸ If the Journey-Path metaphor helps us understand the difficult concept of Argument then I believe it also helps us understand the difficult concept of Life. Life is a Journey on a Path is revealed in language by phrases like “the end of the road” “on the path to success,” “road to glory,” and “the road less traveled.” Language reveals that our understanding of Life is helped by our concrete experience of a journey and its entailment, a path.



If Life is a Journey and a Journey defines a Path, then I believe that gates play an important role within this system of metaphors: Gate is Transition on Life's Path (Journey). The gate, a breach in the enclosed boundary resonates with the "natural experience" of humans that traverse the gate. A person walking on the path approaches the gate, anticipates the barrier posed by the closed gate, and pausing to manipulate the mechanism of the gate, swings it open, steps in to the space of the gate and past, returning the gate to its closed position behind. The physical presence of the gate is suggestive of a transitional event experienced by the individual even in and perhaps especially in absentia.

In conclusion, to walk or drive down a road and notice a gate in the distance is not, I believe, to cognitively recognize a symbol or a sign in the distance. Rather, I believe the metaphorical resonance of gates, like so many spaces and things in our everyday lives, occurs with variety, subtlety and ambiguity. And, I believe, it emerges this way in literature, and the movies. This is the subject of a future investigation. If Lakoff and Johnson's thesis is to be accepted, and the concrete bodily experience of gates is about transition, then at the most profound level, gates must metaphorically



relate to the most fundamental experiences of transition: birth and death, both of which are constituted by Life.

NOTES

¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 5.

² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.132.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

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