



North Western Deanery Careers

Book review

“The Magic of Metaphor”

Title: *“The Magic of Metaphor”*

Author: Nick Owen

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When I was given a choice of books to review, my attention was instantly attracted by the title of this book, as it seemed to offer the chance to explore medical education in its broader context.

The testimonials on the first page raised expectations of a fascinating, mind-broadening read, and my anticipation was heightened by the hand-picked quotations, including Ghandi’s ‘You must be the change you want to see in the world’.

I was more than receptive to learning from this book, particularly since I love literature and I am intrigued by the use of words. Moreover, I was aware of the fact that this book is not aimed specifically at those interested in medical education; indeed, I saw that as a positive attribute.

As I began to read, however, I was plagued by doubts, which I tried hard to dismiss.

The doubts became increasingly insistent, formulating themselves into a distinct impression of superficiality and pretentiousness, containing certain references which are frankly misleading.

An early example of this is the mention of the ‘Uncertainty Principle’, referenced on p. xvii to Werner Heisenberg’s contribution to quantum physics. Yes, it is true that Heisenberg postulated his ‘Uncertainty Principle’, but I see no evidence that the author understands what he meant by it. Rather, Owen

seems to attempt to gain vicarious validity for his writing by making reference to this well-respected piece of scientific work.

The very title of the book is itself misleading. The pieces of writing of which it is composed are not metaphors, but rather parables or allegories, and sometimes merely anecdotes.

The background to the book is covered in the first few pages, but I had to search to almost the back pages to find the details of the author. Even then, I wasn't entirely clear as to what he actually does. He is said to be an NLP trainer (with no explanation of the acronym) and Master Practitioner, holding qualifications in Spiral Dynamics and Reversal theory (again, with no explanation of what those credentials might mean).

I do not think that I am alone in tending to use an author's stated academic background and credentials as an indicator of what credence I should give to their writings. I am afraid that Owen's credentials did not inspire confidence in me.

Despite my reservations, I steeled myself to read to the end of the book. I found some sections to be excruciating in their banality, notably the one entitled 'the uses of story', in which 58 reasons were starkly listed, covering two pages.

The previously-noted pretentiousness came into its own again towards the end of the book, in the chapter entitled 'Some Ways to use the Metaphors and Stories in this Book'. Frequent references to characters known as the Apprentice and the Magician filled an excruciating 31 pages.

I tried hard to be fair in writing my review of this book, and I do have to say that there were certain aspects of it which I appreciated, notably the choice of Albert Einstein's quotation 'The rational mind is a faithful servant; the intuitive mind a sacred gift. The paradox of modern life is that we have begun to worship the servant and defile the Divine.' I had hoped, when I read that quotation, that it would set the tone for a book which would be an antidote to the currently fashionable blind adherence to the notion of Evidence-Based Medicine. Sadly, that proved not to be the case.

Yet I do still agree in principle with the author on the value of storytelling in illustrating important points in all aspects of life and education, as well as in

our medical practice. Most of us recognise how much better we learn, and how much more we remember, from a lecture which includes anecdotes and case histories than from an outline of principles, however persuasive those principles may be.

What a pity that the author did not use the opportunity to draw in and educate his readers with genuinely thought-provoking writing, rather than attempting to blind them with pseudo-science.

As I reached the end of the book, I read that the follow-up to 'the Magic of Metaphor' is now available, entitled 'More Magic of Metaphor'. From my experience of reading the original, I am afraid that I will not be hastening to read the sequel.

Reviewed in June 2011

By Dr Brigid Hayden FRCOG