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Every month **Attractors** shares tips and tools
from human systems dynamics.
In this month's edition, Glenda Eoyang reflects on

DIVERSITY: A LIVING METAPHOR

In their classic book, [Metaphors We Live By](#), Lakoff and Johnson introduce us to the concept of a dead metaphor as one that is widely used, but whose metaphorical meaning has been lost. You know them well:

- *Home run* is a major business success.
- *Fifth wheel* is an unnecessary person.
- *Out to lunch* is a state of being disconnected.
- *Down in the dumps* is a state of sadness or depression.

Each of these phrases began as a colorful shorthand to describe something familiar and evolved over time and use into a cliché. With recent celebrations of Martin Luther King Day and unfortunate comments (and reactions to comments) coming out of presidential stump speeches, I've been reflecting on *diversity* as yet another metaphor that has gone dead for many of us.

In its moribund state, *diversity* stands out in the world of the politically correct. Many individuals and organizations strive for diversity and see it as a value of enlightened social intercourse. "Of course diversity is a good thing. It is good in itself." Anyone who says otherwise is silenced or seen as a social Neanderthal by the enlightened many. This is really unfortunate, because in its richest, truest form, *diversity* can be a door to learning and adaptive action. It can remind us of deep truths of human interaction.

What is *diversity* as a living metaphor?

It reminds us that each individual person is unique and deserves to be engaged in terms that respect his or her personal identity. The more different a person is from us, the more we are obliged to open our eyes and connect in ways that are authentic and immediate. We are moved out of a stance of certainty and predictability into inquiry as we struggle to see, understand, and engage with people who don't look or talk like we do.

As a living metaphor, *diversity* reminds us that all learning begins with difference. When we value only what is like us, when we avoid the “other,” we lose the opportunity to expand ourselves, to learn new things, to challenge our long-held assumptions.

In its most lively forms, *diversity* reminds us that emergent patterns of human systems are most rich and rewarding when they encompass multiple perspectives, tastes, cultures, and colors. We can delight in the surprise of difference, even before we have developed a taste for sounds or flavors or insights that delight others.

Ultimately, *diversity* has the power to challenge our own comfort in things we find familiar and predictable. It drives us into new paths of opportunity to see and influence productive human interactions. It asks us to become more conscious of who we are as unique individuals who also have the responsibility to choose our own values and beliefs.

Diversity, as a living metaphor, opens the door to adaptive capacity. Each difference we are able to comprehend expands the range of solutions we can imagine, so that when we are surprised, and our tried-and-true solutions fail, we have access to a repertoire of novel and innovative options for action.

Dead metaphors are not necessarily bad. They can be simple ways to capture complex and rich concepts, but they can also help us forget what is most important. They can trivialize and Balkanize distinctions that should retain shades of meaning and purpose.

So, next time you hear or speak about *diversity* and its value in an organization, please pause and consider the rich, living metaphors that unfold in individual and group experience when difference is acknowledged and embraced.

I would love to hear your reflections on the theory and practice of diversity in human systems, especially if they are different from my own. Please email me at geoyang@hsdinstitute.org.