

Imagination . . . or, Through the Looking Glass

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Bobby Kennedy once said, “There are those that look at things as they are and ask, ‘Why?’. I dream of things that never were and ask, ‘Why not?’ ” I believe this expresses the very essence of imagination – to dream of things that never were and ask, “Why not?”

Can you imagine a change or a development in your life that didn’t begin with imagination?

Babies watch people walking and ask themselves, “why not,” eventually using that question to lift themselves upright and move forward on the journey of a lifetime.

Imagination plays a role in every change, whether large or small. Can you remember the way you imagined what it would be like to go to school? Or how about the way we imagined and anticipated our summer vacations? Or, as teenagers, when we wondered what it would be like to have our first boyfriend or girlfriend?

Imagination is the cornerstone of creativity – music, literature, the arts. Although some of us don’t think of ourselves as being particularly imaginative, it’s hard to find an area of life that is free of imagination.

Imagination played an especially important role at one turning point in my life. I’d been running a company that specialized in design, typesetting, and camera-ready art for the printing industry. My clients were mostly multinational companies with needs for the highest quality work in design and execution. I worked as a creative artist in a production setting, opening my mind to the specifics of the project at hand, creating work that was both unique and legible (although legibility seems to have gone out of style lately). Every day was a fresh exercise for my imagination. Each project called me to, as Bobby Kennedy put it, “Dream of things that never were and ask why not”.

Well, I was finally handed a project that taxed my imagination much more than that. Due to factors beyond my control, the once-successful business folded almost overnight. Suddenly set adrift, my first task was to imagine another job. This didn't take too much imagination, though. I was at the top of my profession and just wanted to find a new place to work.

I found a new job running a printing company but discovered that this wasn't what I wanted. I'd found so much joy in my creative work that the routine tasks of managing a company, while considerable, left me feeling unsatisfied. And the emphasis on competition and profit left me feeling empty at best, but more often conflicted and stressed.

So I set out to imagine a new course for my life. I decided to reinvent myself. I wanted to do something meaningful that would be of more value to the world than what I was doing. Looking back at my life history, I recognized that my medical challenges and brushes with death had given me a special capacity to be fully present in the face of pain and suffering and I wanted to find a way to help others who were experiencing health crises. I decided to become a nurse.

Now this was no small change. I'd never finished college, hadn't taken a class in 22 years. I'd never even considered going back. But it became clear that I'd have to dream of things that never were if I was going to move forward.

So I enrolled in a community college so I could eventually get a degree in Nursing. I continued to work, taking two classes a quarter for three years, planning on an eventual transfer to nursing school.

I learned a great many things that were entirely new to me there. I'd never been particularly interested in science, but took college-level classes in biology, zoology, microbiology, including three semesters each of chemistry and anatomy and physiology. My horizons broadened as never before. This was an exciting time. I'd been an indifferent student years before, but now made Dean's List every semester.

But there was one class that changed everything. With the exception of a handful of tortured poems written in my teens, I'd never written anything. Nothing. I couldn't do it. I had an inner critic so severe that I couldn't write more than a few words before its scolding voice drowned out all other efforts. I would

freeze. There were few things that were as certain in my life than the knowledge that I could not write. Not poetry, not prose, not even a letter.

My first two classes at community college were biology and English composition. The English composition class was taught by a young man nearly twenty years my junior, a recent graduate of Bowdoin College. He taught us something called “free writing.”

Free writing is a technique to silence the inner critic. I learned to write without question or reflection, just to let thoughts pour out of me onto the page. And once my inner critic was silenced, the floodgates of creativity opened and I wrote and I wrote and I wrote. The person who did not and could not write became a writer.

And the ability to write began a process of broadening my field of creative imagination that, with many twists and turns, eventually led me to envision myself as a minister rather than a nurse. Ministry has given me the opportunity to harness my creative energies in entirely new ways. Every day is an adventure of dreaming of things that never were and asking “why not?”

Imagination is an indispensable part of our lives, and it functions in many more ways than we may think. After all, it is imagination that helps us break out of our self-centeredness and see ourselves as connected to the greater whole. It helps us to put ourselves in other people’s shoes and bring empathy and compassion into our lives. It is what allows us to trust and assume good intentions with others, even when people may seem threatening or of ill intent. It is what allows us to – as the saying goes – turn lemons into lemonade. It’s what helps us paint the picture of what the world could be and thus inspires us to work for that better world. It helps us to picture what we might become and then lures us toward that goal of a different self and a new life. One of the most precious gifts others give to us is when they use imagination to paint a picture of what’s possible and talk us out of all those negative voices in our heads that tell us “things will never change.” All this is a way of saying that when it comes to imagination, we may well need reminders of how deeply it is woven through the fabric of our lives, even our daily living.

I can't imagine a theme that is more central to our Unitarian Universalist faith. We dream of better selves, better relationships, better communities, and a world transformed by love, and ask "Why not?"

Donald McCullough once shared this story about Gandhi's imagination and empathy. "One day Gandhi stepped aboard a train as it started to move, and one of his shoes slipped off and dropped on the tracks. Unable to retrieve it, he calmly took off his other shoe and threw it back along the track to land close to the first. When an amazed passenger asked why he had done that, Gandhi smiled and said, 'The poor man who finds the shoe lying on the track will now have a pair he can use.' With the eyes of his imagination, Gandhi saw a man with bare feet, saw him coming across a lone shoe and desperately searching for the other, and saw the disappointment on his face when he didn't find it; seeing these things, Gandhi did what he could to help."

But even though we can focus on the benefits of imagination, it has another, darker side. Every anxiety, fear, worry and fret begins in the imagination, too. But these forms of imagination hinder us rather than help. Like the way I imagined that I couldn't write kept me from being able to write, our worries and fears can keep us trapped in things that never were and may never be, fantasies of pain or humiliation, of danger or disaster.

In her book, *Radical Optimism*, Beatrice Bruteau points out that, "Our problems with unhappiness are rooted in the imagination . . . For instance, we can interpret someone's accidental sharp tone of voice as an unfriendly reaction to ourselves, begin to give that person life in our imagination as someone who doesn't like us, therefore be on the lookout for subsequent evidence of hostility, be ready to interpret everything that happens in that light, and of course ourselves show distrust and unfriendliness in turn, which naturally have their effect on the other person; and so by building this thing up in our imagination we can develop a whole atmosphere and relationship of hostility that may be completely false and unnecessary because it all began from something quite accidental. Similarly, by persistently thinking well of persons, looking for good traits in them, imagining them to be pleasant and agreeable, well-disposed

toward ourselves, we will enable ourselves to behave in a naturally friendly way to them and elicit friendly responses.”

So we can see that imagination, the capacity to form mental images or concepts of what is not actually present, can be as negative as it can be positive, as hurtful and destructive as it can be helpful and inspiring. An understanding of the processes of imagination shows us the need for a healthy mental discipline that can give us the ability to choose to cultivate a positive state of mind that uplifts and inspires us rather than a negative state of mind that nurtures anxiety, resentment, or depression.

Exploring the two faces of imagination is what led me to a somewhat surprising discovery, and this is where the sub-title of “or Through the Looking Glass” comes in. I couldn’t find an area or capacity of the mind that is separate from imagination. Although all the contents of our mind are derived from experiences, they are not the experiences themselves. They are thoughts about experiences, judgments and anticipations, either for or against.

We experience the touch of a hot stove. But when we recall that experience, the memory is in the form of imagination. We call to our minds images of things that are not part of our experience in the moment. When we make a plan, we are imagining things that have not happened. When think about the meaning of another person’s behavior we are imagining that we know details about their inner life to which we have no direct access. And when I realized that everything is imagination, it’s sort of like the movie, *The Matrix*, when Neo takes the red pill and perceives the illusory nature of his world. If everything is imagination, we lack access to objectively certain information about the world. But if everything *is* imagination, we can learn to choose to create and live in the kind of world we prefer.

It’s been said that only a closed mind is certain. Other people have prejudices and distortion, but we are certain. That’s one definition of a closed mind. Every certainty in which we believe is actually an act of imaginative will whereby we choose to believe that which we do not really know. Of course there are some areas in which we have enough data and experience that we can enjoy a fairly high degree of likelihood that our thoughts accurately represent the world

around us, but that very likelihood can seduce us into thinking that our thoughts are a kind of objective knowledge.

There is really so much more to our experience than we can ever understand – we only imagine that we understand. I think this is what Socrates was pointing toward when he said that the only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.

What do you know? What do you imagine? Is your imagination bringing you closer to the world or leading you away from it? Since you are using your imagination every minute of every day, can you imagine creating a positive, grounded, optimistic outlook that empowers and improves your life and the lives of all you meet?

This is part of the important work of the church, of the beloved community of faith that we are building here. We can nurture one another here, creating a trusting atmosphere where we can grow into our fullest potential. Like my inner critic that kept me from writing, criticism of one another can create an atmosphere that limits and hinders us. When we come together to create a safe sanctuary of compassion, nurture and justice, we can truly become the beloved community of transformation and healing that we long for.

May it be so.