

It's All in Our Imagination

Clay Nelson © 8 February 2013

On your way to church this morning how many things did you see that weren't there? It might sound like I'm checking on your mental health. Not at all, I'm not wondering if you are delusional but whether you use your imagination to see the world around you. For what else is imagination, but seeing what isn't there.

When my oldest daughter was three, out of thin air she had a new friend. Her name was Martha, but because my daughter couldn't say a "TH" sound, we knew her as Marfa. Marfa went everywhere with my daughter. She did what she did. She ate what she did. They were inseparable.

Marfa was mostly a good kid, but she was always slow as molasses. She was the last to finish her dinner. She was the last to be ready to go to day care. She was the last to finish brushing her teeth before bed. It was an annoying trait.

At the time we lived in Washington, DC. On Saturdays I would take my daughter to the mall to go to museums or sometimes we'd go to Rock Creek Park to the zoo. To get there we'd take the Metro. One Saturday I was kind of annoyed at Marfa because she was particularly slow that morning getting ready to go. We caught the Metro at the Pentagon Station. When we got to our stop and my daughter and I got off the train and its doors closed behind us and departed, I turned to my daughter and said, "Oh no! Marfa didn't get off in time. I guess we will have to go to the museum without her." Without missing a beat she replied, "Oh no! I guess we will have to wait for her to catch a train back." And she sat. I sat. We waited. When a train coming from the opposite direction arrived and the doors opened my daughter ran to greet her friend. The three of us went to the Air and Space Museum.

Marfa was with us for over a year. She eventually left as mysteriously as she came. I'm not sure where she went but for that time she was fully a part of our family. I can't prove it because she was camera shy. She hid behind my daughter for our family Christmas photo. But for all of us she was real and she made our life richer.

Our imagination is an incredible part of who we are. We all have one whether we use it or not. Most of us are pretty good at imagining the worse. I used to have a poster of a very worried looking panda bear with the caption, "Who says worrying doesn't help, nothing I ever worried about ever happened."

On the upside our imagination gives us the ability to creatively fantasise the possible, the improbable, and even the impossible. It is a gift that gives humanity boundless hope.

I was recently made aware of book written in 1884 by English novelist Edwin Abbot entitled Flatland. An animated movie was made of it in 2007.

Flatland is a metaphor about a two-dimensional world whose inhabitants are geometric figures. The protagonist is a square, who is visited one day by a sphere from a three-dimensional world called Spaceland. But all the square can see, being trapped in a two-dimensional world, is a circle.

The sphere tries to explain the concept of a third dimension to the square, but the square can't begin to imagine such a thing, until finally the sphere yanks the square up out of Flatland into the third dimension. Looking down into the two-dimensional world, the square is awestruck and horrified. Prostrating himself before the sphere, he becomes a disciple, returning to Flatland to preach the "Gospel of Three Dimensions" to his fellow creatures, but with no success.

Can you relate to the square? Have there been special moments in your life when you have been lifted up out of the ordinary and into the extraordinary, moments of joy and wonder, when you have felt a deep connection with nature or another person or the holy? Have there been other times when you have felt trapped in a two-dimensional existence, unable to rise above your circumstances, unable to imagine the possibilities before you?

Jonathan Haidt in his book "The Happiness Hypothesis," relates the story of Flatland to our personal search for transcendence. He claims that we live in a flatland of two dimensions, but there's another dimension that the human mind perceives and seeks and hungers for, and that's what he calls "divinity." Speaking from the perspective of a Jewish atheist, Haidt concludes that "the human mind perceives divinity and sacredness, whether or not God exists." This dimension of divinity has less to do with God and more to do with our imagination. We sense that there is something beyond ourselves that calls us to spread our wings and leave behind our normal existence. Our imagination opens a dimension of sacredness, of holiness, where we feel a deep connectedness with the interdependent web of existence.

I believe most of us have had these transcending experiences, these uplifting moments when our imagination sweeps us out of the mundane and into the meaningful, weaving our daily life into the fabric of all life. But too often we let these mystical moments be drowned out by the challenges of meeting each new day's routine demands.

This capacity to imagine the future and what is possible comes from our most recently evolved frontal lobes of the brain, and, as far as we know, it distinguishes us from other primates. In our imagination we gaze out into the future and hope that the seeds we plant in the spring will provide food in the summer and fall. We imagine our baby growing into a child and then an adult. We ponder the meaning of our lives when we are dead and gone. Imagination enables us to envision the future, to hope for a better life, and then to create it in this moment.

The problem is imagination can be stifled. The fare served on TV can stifle it. There used to be a "brightness" knob on a TV, but no matter how high I turned it, it didn't seem to work. Now we have smart TVs but they don't seem much brighter. It's not the TVs fault. It is when we let it drug our own capacity for dreaming of how the world might be better and simply through inaction accept an unacceptable status quo.

Creeds can stifle it. When absolute certainties are handed out who needs to think and let their imagination run free. It is a little pathetic and so much safer that so many can only imagine gods that act and look like us.

Preachers and politicians who use fear and deceit can stifle it. No one who is afraid lets his or her imagination out of its box. The imagination can be dangerous, taking us into uncharted waters. Best not to let our imagination get away from us. Better to stick with the tried and the "true."

The educational system can stifle it when it confuses knowing facts with learning.

Albert Einstein had this to say about the difference: “Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.” Blessed be the teacher that ignites a child’s imagination that he or she may be more than another obedient drone fulfilling the capitalists’ need for trained workers. She or he may write a great novel that transforms our understanding of our selves and reality, cure cancer, or lead a nation in a time of peril.

Religions are often the enemy of the imagination supporting a culture that worships absolute truths and that require an unquestioning faith in fixed, often irrational beliefs and rules, which can only be questioned under penalty of heresy. Such acceptance costs us the ability to dream.

But not all religions are equally guilty. Kurt Vonnegut, an avowed non-theist, once said that if Jesus hadn’t preached a message of mercy and kindness in the Sermon on the Mount, he wouldn’t want to be human. He would just as soon be a rattlesnake. When he was asked about his own religiosity, his response was, “In order not to seem a spiritual quadriplegic to strangers trying to get a fix on me, I sometimes say I am a Unitarian Universalist.”

Unitarian Universalism is a faith that nurtures imagination. Many of us who find our selves here this morning left the religious communities we grew up in because their gods and theologies and spirit were too small for us. We had big questions to ask about the divine and suffering and death. We needed to have open conversations about our beliefs and fears and hopes. We needed room to imagine gods and theologies and spirit with no limits and no boundaries.

What’s more we are here because we care more about the common good than individual salvation. We long to understand what it is like to be those who are different from us and to let them enrich us. We seek to experience our oneness with creation. We seek solutions to the world’s ills and hope to find the courage to stand up to evil and injustice. We can imagine a world much like John Lennon described.

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today...

Imagine there're no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions

I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one

If you were here last week you heard how Robert F Kennedy impacted my 19 year-old self. One of his most powerful quotes was from George Bernard Shaw, "Some men see things as they are and ask why. I dream of things that never were and ask why not." To me, this is the touchstone of belief and faith and imagination. It draws a line between unimaginative pessimism and imaginative hope. It is a deeply spiritual statement, and George Bernard Shaw was an atheist.

We are at the beginning of a new year in the life of this congregation. We are here because our forebears were able to see something that wasn't there. They planted a mustard seed 113 years ago on this spot, trusting that an exotic plant could flourish in this soil. In Jesus' parable, the mustard seed can grow to a size that all the birds of the air can roost. On the one hand we might be discouraged that we have not yet fully realised their hope, but on the other, we can celebrate that we are still here striving in spite of wars, droughts, economic collapse and seismic cultural changes to bring into existence the world of peace and justice they imagined.

Our strength is our imagination.

If we can see ourselves as a truly welcoming community in all that that means, we will be. All those who are marginalised by society because they are gay, poor, tangata whenua, non-European immigrants, or differently abled will find us a safe harbour to be who they are and to contribute what they have to offer.

If we can see ourselves as a voice for the powerless, we will march for those who can't. We will speak truth to power in the media and to our friends and associates for those who are silenced. We will make submissions on their and our behalf to those in government who still live in a two-dimensional world they seem willing to let be destroyed for short-term gain.

If we can see ourselves as merciful and kind, we will show compassion for even those who oppose or mock us, making the world we imagine a little less fractured and violent.

I used to have another poster in my office of a poor, black, sharecropper holding a small child. Its caption read, "If I cannot do great things, may I do small things in a great way."

We are only as small as our imagination. Let it be free that we may walk together into a better future—one we can see even though it isn't there... yet.

If you can see it, can I have an Amen?