



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Unconstrained Imagination

Clay Nelson © 17 July 2022

I would like to give you a peek behind the curtain to see one of the blessings, or possibly curses, of being in my line of work. If you have been doing it as long as I have, it is nearly impossible not to see the world continuously through theological lenses. It is not a conscious decision anymore. It is just my reality and as involuntary as breathing. Nothing I'm doing is exempt from theological reflection. It doesn't matter if it is reading my Facebook feed, bingeing on Netflix, hearing music in many genres, holding Rachel's hand, playing peek-a-boo with a grandchild, eating a Macca burger, playing fetch with Waldo, or walking on the beach after a storm. You get my gist. Bloody everything reverberates with theological discernment for me. Everything. It can be exhausting as it feeds my imagination to overflowing.

As of yet, I have not found a place where I can escape. I never pack my lenses when I go on holiday, but they mysteriously await me in my new surroundings upon my arrival. On our recent visit to the Australian outback, I thought there was no way they could find me in the middle of nowhere. Wrong. I spent nine days drowning in theological detritus. It was everywhere. To bring home how entrapped I am in my theological worldview, our daughter and grandchildren took us to a 200-kilometre sculpture trail that inspired this musing. Yes, you heard right. 200-kilometres. It was two hours further into nowhere than the middle in which we were staying. Our family lives in Alpha, Queensland, population 550, but from what I could discern, there was no Omega, just kangaroos, termite hills, gum trees, a wide variety of noisy birds, and of course, flies.

The world's longest sculpture trail is the creation of [Milynda Rogers, nicknamed Scrapmetalshelia](#). She has lined the trail with 41 of her works at last count, all made of scrap metal most often bound together with the ubiquitous barbed wire found in the outback. When asked why she sculpts with steel, she said, "I connect steel with the typical Aussie woman. It is tough and hard to bend, but it can also adapt and be shaped into something amazing. It is versatile, and it ages gracefully in dry climates. So are Aussie sheilas."

Words cannot adequately describe her works, but I want to show you a brief slideshow of some of her sculptures. The last slide is not one of her works but fellow travellers we met along the trail.

<https://youtu.be/dIt5nSk41xs>

Besides its being unexpected, I was intrigued by her art's capacity to connect. Her often whimsical work touched my desire to play. To be more than what I do. Recycling materials that will exist long after we do invites me to remember that all of me is beautiful and eternal, no matter how rusted, technologically useless, prickly, isolated, or seemingly worthless. Their being interspersed casually in the environment raised my consciousness of how we all are part of an interconnected web and challenged me to care for the rest of what often seems hopelessly tangled. It welded me to the region's history, grounding my present to consider a future my forebears could not foresee. Lastly, it ignited my imagination, freeing an essential ingredient for being fully human and surviving our world in crisis. It isn't easy to do art in the middle of an apocalypse, but she manages to do so.

The theological lenses I viewed her art through are trifocals. One-third is celebratory or poetic theology that seeks to entice us to envision what Jesus called the Kingdom of Heaven, a place here and now. It weaves words, themes, and images in and out of one another to evoke the fullness of that vision. It finds expression in the arts: hymns, poetry, iconography, and the like.

The second third concerns communication. It focuses on reasoned arguments or justifications of our commitments, both practical and intellectual, while seeking new ways to express them. It evaluates other perspectives to determine if they support, enhance or undermine those commitments.

The third sharpens the critical eye. It is sometimes called scientific theology. It interrogates our presuppositions, norms, and language. At its best, it's the most stringently self-reflexive: eliminating lazy or complacent thought and action, purifying its discourse.

Each lens has its limitations, but together they are self-correcting. For instance, critical questioning validates Paul's celebration of righteousness, peace, and joy as marks of the kingdom of Heaven (Romans 14:17). The justice Amos calls for "that rolls down like waters" communicates commitment to the kind of world we would like to live in (5:24). The peace "that passes all understanding"

that Paul offers Philemon in return for freeing one of his slaves (4:6), and the “inexpressible and glorious” joy John assures us will be ours, that Peter says “no one can take away” (16:22) are instances of scientific theology dissipating the limitations of the other two and enhancing the clarity of our vision.

So what does this have to do with the arts and imagination? A reasonable question.

Consider the times in which we live. Natural disasters, a global pandemic, nationalism, and widespread political demagoguery are among the highlights of the “blood-dimmed tide” Yeats refers to in his poem “[The Second Coming](#)” that slouches not just toward Bethlehem but everywhere. None of these are new threats, of course, although the first, at least, are now occurring at a frequency and magnitude once unimaginable. Despite reasoned calls to read the world through less apocalyptic lenses, many, particularly those of the world’s poor, working, and burgeoning middle classes, are living with a growing recognition of the gnawing dis-ease, the erosion of old certainties, and the despoliation of hope. Many live too with growing desires for the re-enchantment of the places we find ourselves, places disenchanting and de-animating by modernity, and, in many parts of the world, oppressed by the ugly three-headed dog Cerberus, guarding the hell of colonialism, globalism, and neo-liberal capitalism. It is a difficult time. It is a time for undertaking responsible work. It is time to imagine that things might be otherwise. We imagine or we perish. Clearly, imagination matters.

Philosopher and social critic [Santiago Zabala](#) argues that art can save us from the greater demons of our nature. Art, he suggests, has the capacity to save us from such nightmares precisely by attending to the work of disrupting the status quo. While important, neither are the arts a brake on our most demonic instincts nor a messianic fix. They can be complicit in our depravity. The Nazis loved their Wagner; Mirós and Pollocks sell for hundreds of millions in the same cities where people, including artists, die of starvation.

Yet still, imagination and its artistic fruit always matter. It is imagination that shapes and enables (or enfeebles) our distinctly human capacity at every point, whether for good or for ill. In a period of crisis in particular, therefore, imagination matters because — its destructive potential notwithstanding — in it lies our only hope, humanly speaking at least. We should not deplete its remarkable power to form, re-form, and transform our shared reality. We should welcome the arts that celebrate it, communicate our commitment to

creating a better world, and be aware of all, including ourselves, that get in the way of offering peace and joy.

Writing in early April 2020, and within a week of India's first COVID-related lockdown, the Indian novelist Arundhati Roy asked:

What is this thing that has happened to us? It's a virus, yes. . . . But it is definitely more than a virus. Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to "normality," trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks, and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

[Arundhati Roy: 'The pandemic is a portal'](#)

Conversation Starter:

How is your imagination helping you to cope with a world in crisis and to make it better?