

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
Arlington Street Church  
27 February, 2022

## **The Power of Imagination**

I can't prove it but, allegedly, this correction ran in the Warrenton, Virginia *Farquier Democrat*:

IMPORTANT NOTICE. If you are one of the hundreds of parachuting enthusiasts who recently bought our *Easy Sky Diving* book, please make the following correction: On page eight, line seven, the words 'state zip code' should ... read, 'pull rip cord.'

Theoretically, if you're good at following directions, you're plummeting to earth, parachute still tightly furled, while stating your zip code ... waiting for the magic. *Is this a metaphor for a failure of imagination?*

I invite you to join me this morning in a reflection on the power of imagination.

Many years ago, a colleague I'll call Helen was trying to come to terms with her imminent divorce. Those of us who loved her were ecstatic — I know you've experienced this on behalf of a friend. But this had been Helen's third go at marriage, and she could only see this one's demise through the lens of abject failure. "Nothing, absolutely nothing, is bringing me joy," she reported. "Not even music. Not even nature. I feel utterly dry."

As the hungry wolves of depression encircled her tighter and tighter, I tossed out a simple question: "Would you be willing," I asked, "to spend just one moment imagining what your life might look like when this is in the rear-view?"

Curiosity saved the day. The floodgates opened, and all Helen's disappointment and self-recrimination gave way to a vision of life not circumscribed by the stultifying limits of her marriage to husband #3. That vision of being restored to herself, her life, cracked open a wellspring of hope for a better day.

Keeping those possibilities before her, Helen got to work, did what needed to be done, and emerged, not even one year later, feeling more herself — more intuitive, creative, and funny — than she had for many, many years.

In other words, she stopped stating her zip code and pulled the rip cord.

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The power of imagination is very much on my mind and in my heart as we navigate our way into year three of the global pandemic. I fear it's been a casualty of this time. We've gotten better and better at taking each day as it comes, managing our expectations, and that is worthy of high praise. But we've been so wildly demoralized — over and over — that we've tamped-down our zest for possibility. The cost has been to our dreaming — to visualizing a life beyond the confines of distancing.

Book critic Todd Shy nails it. “There is not enough lightness or balance, rupture or indirection,” he writes; “not enough style, uncanniness, lyricism; not enough tree-climbing tax collectors or spikenards of anointment being wasted on an itinerant teacher’s feet;<sup>1</sup> not enough changing minds, loafing, lingering behind, not enough garment hems being touched, not enough storms sending young students to monastery doors, not enough nostalgia, not enough Eutychuses<sup>2</sup> falling asleep in sermons and then out of windows, not enough rolling over in bed like the Tolstoy character who wondered if he’d lived the wrong life, not enough Pilgrims plugging their ears so they won’t be tempted to turn back, not enough confessions like Shakespeare’s King Richard who felt he played in his one person many people — and *none contented*.”<sup>3</sup>

I want to suggest that it’s important to our humanity, to our emotional and spiritual lives, to be conversant with our imagination. Albert Einstein said, “The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge but imagination.... 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.”

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<sup>1</sup> Spikenard is a rare, expensive oil used by Mary of Bethany, who poured it onto Jesus's feet and then dried them with her hair.

<sup>2</sup> Pronounced YOU-tee-coose

<sup>3</sup> Todd Shy, “A Newly Raucous Arena,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Autumn, 2008. Todd Shy is a book critic for the *News and Observer* in Raleigh, North Carolina

The word imagination contains, at its heart, two syllables that sound a lot like *magic*. Imagination is one of the most powerful tools we have. It calls on not just our minds, but our senses — sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and not just touch, but feeling. It frees us from the confines of time and space, transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary. It is a gateway to creativity and joy. To cultivate the power of imagination is the first step in cultivating the power to invent our lives.

This past June, neurologist and University of Pennsylvania psychology professor Joseph Kable set out to study the imagination. “We’ve made a lot of progress understanding what happens when we’re in the here and now,” he said. “We’ve focused less on what people spend a lot of time doing: thinking about things that aren’t in front of our faces.”

Dr. Kable put volunteers into an MRI machine and, as their brains were being scanned, invited them to picture themselves in a variety of pleasant and not-so-pleasant scenarios. Though imaginary, these ruminations yielded very real responses. When neurologists analyzed the data, they could identify specific regions that “lit up” when the volunteers used their imaginations. Meanwhile, at the University of Arizona, Professor Jessica Andrews-Hanna identified brain regions involved in picturing the granular details of an event, both in the past and future. “When we set a goal that we want to achieve,” she says, “we’re going to be much more likely to reach that goal if we can [picture] the goal with a lot of imagery and ... detail in our minds ... and imagine” all the steps that are needed to get there — including the obstacles to reaching that goal.<sup>4</sup>

Have you heard about Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library? In 1995, inspired by her father’s inability to read or write, Dolly began to give books to young children in her home county to inspire, she says, a love of learning. “When I was growing up in the hills of East Tennessee,” she says, “I knew my dreams would come true. I know there are children in your community with their own dreams.... *Who knows?* Maybe there is a little girl whose dream is to be a writer and singer. The seeds of these dreams are often found in books, and the seeds you help plant in your community can grow across the world.” Today, with local partners in Australia, Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Dolly Parton has given away over one million books.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Please see [inquirer.com/science/mri-imagination-depression-alzheimers-joseph-kable-20210601.html](http://inquirer.com/science/mri-imagination-depression-alzheimers-joseph-kable-20210601.html)

<sup>5</sup> Please see [imaginationlibrary.com](http://imaginationlibrary.com)

One of the tenets of the religion called Unity is, “To set it right, see it right.” Unity author Winifred Wilkinson Hausmann writes, “Imagination cannot be forced. It must be invited.... [With imagination,] “we are able to release limiting thoughts and feelings by perceiving or glimpsing ... our divine [potential].”<sup>6</sup>

Eddie S. Glaude, professor of African American Studies at Princeton, has written eloquently on the tremendous, transformative power of imagination, and the cost of what he sees as an attack on the American imagination. “We must resist those voices who urge us to settle for the world as it is,” he says, and calls us to imagine a better world. We begin by training ourselves to see what’s possible instead of what’s impossible. Be curious.

He writes, “In every moment of radical democratic awakening in this country, the imagination has served as the spur. Ordinary people, for whatever reason, decide to risk it all for an idea that the world, their world, could be a different and better place. They imagine what that world might look like and they fight for it. Abolitionists, black and white, did so in the fight against slavery. [In the early 20th century,] figures like W.E.B. Du Bois and Eugene Debs, Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Florence Kelley organized with other like-minded people ... to put forward a radical democratic vision.... They boldly imagined the United States as a just society even though the evidence suggested otherwise.”

And then Eddie Glaude tells a wonderful story that he heard from Bob Moses, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee<sup>7</sup> activist and founder of The Algebra Project. Bob recounted that, in the early 1960s, “several black sharecroppers were on their way to register to vote in a ... town in [rural] Mississippi. They knew what awaited them: ... A mob would threaten their lives [or] the sheriff could put them in jail.... As they sat nervously on the bus, a [lone] voice [sang] spirituals. Bob [Moses] said, ‘She must have sung every song she knew.’ Then he realized what she was doing. People were afraid and Ms. [Fannie Lou] Hamer sang to fortify their spirits. [At that time], she was not [yet] the [civil rights] icon we now know. She was [black, a woman, and poor], invisible for most of her life to the powers that be, willing to risk everything for a way of life that nothing in her previous experience suggested was possible. But she imagined differently and was ready to die for it.”

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<sup>6</sup> Winifred Wilkinson Hausmann, *Your G\*d-Given Potential*

<sup>7</sup> SNCC

I call to mind naturalist John Muir’s words:

“The power of the imagination makes us infinite.”

Eddie Glaude concludes, “The imagination helps us break loose from the inertia of our habits. It aides us, in those moments when the conservative pull of the past and present bind us to the status quo in all ... its ugliness; it helps us break loose from the routine of our daily living and to reject the value of stability and order for something much more dynamic and unformed. The people on that bus in Mississippi felt the power of the imagination in Ms. Hamer’s voice and were able to see possibility in [that] racist ... town.”<sup>8</sup>

For our imaginations to truly serve us in transformative ways, we need to be connected to the truth of the present moment. O, a wholehearted *yes* to the power of transcendent imagination: *yes* to escaping into a great book or movie; *yes* to kids who imagine themselves to be Jedis and superheroes. But nothing is going to turn our living room into a tropical white sand beach, kids’ toys into lightsabers, or their powers into superpowers. It’s a wild balancing act, but we need to tether our imaginations to the world — and not look away, but look beyond.

My favorite example is of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who had a dream — a dream not about the next world, but this world. He hadn’t actually seen what he dreamed, but he envisioned it, and insisted it was possible, and so ignited in us the call to change, to be changed. Out of a prodigious imagination, fueled by faith, Dr. King dreamed a dream that awakened the very best in all of us dedicated to the cause of racial equality, to the vision of a post-racist world.<sup>9</sup>

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Beloved spiritual companions,

“The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge but imagination.”

To set it right, see it right.

Hear Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer singing every spiritual she knew.

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<sup>8</sup> Eddie S. Glaude, America is Suffering a Crisis of Imagination, *Time* magazine, 2/24/16. Please see [time.com/4235720/democrats-sanders-clinton-black-voters/](http://time.com/4235720/democrats-sanders-clinton-black-voters/)

<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Amy Kind, Professor of Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College, for her piece *The Power of Imagination*, 3/19/16. Please see [blog.oup.com/2016/03/power-of-imagination-philosophy/](http://blog.oup.com/2016/03/power-of-imagination-philosophy/)

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 should read, “pull rip cord.”

I close with a few lines from *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*, in which Kentucky farmer and poet Wendell Berry instructs, in part,

... Every day do something  
 that won't compute....  
 Love the world. Work for nothing....  
 Love someone who does not deserve it.  
 Denounce the government and embrace  
 the flag. Hope to live in that free  
 republic for which it stands....

Ask the questions that have no answers.  
 Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.  
 Say that your main crop is the forest  
 that you did not plant,  
 that you will not live to harvest....

... Laugh.  
 Laughter is immeasurable. *Be joyful*  
*though you have considered all the facts....*<sup>10</sup>

Imagine!

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<sup>10</sup> Wendell Berry, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” in *Reclaiming Politics* (IC#30), Fall/Winter 1991, p. 62; *italics* mine