

# “Imagineers of the Soul”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

At this time yesterday, I was in St. Louis, Missouri,  
at the end of a summit meeting of Unitarian Universalist leaders,  
looking into the challenges of the future  
and seeking to imagine a long-term path to sustainability.

I was the representative of the Canadian Unitarian Council at this gathering.

It was an at times sobering assessment of our place  
in the rapidly changing landscape of religious life in North America.

And, yet, it was also a gathering full of creativity and hope and openness  
to our learning to live out our faith in different and more daring ways.

As engaging as the content of this gathering was, what I really want to tell you  
about this morning is what I did yesterday morning after everyone else had left.

I played. Like a kid. For the first time in a long time.

Last Tuesday night, a friend of mine posted a photo on Facebook  
of a wild and wonderful place called The City Museum.

The photo captivated me. She and several others chimed in to say,  
“Wow, I want to go there!”

I did, too.

And so, when I realized this magical place was in downtown St. Louis,  
a few blocks from where I would be staying this week,  
I took it as an invitation from the universe.

The place is a bit difficult to describe.

Its name, The City Museum, doesn't really convey that it's actually part jungle gym and part junk yard.

It's described as an "eclectic mixture of children's playground, funhouse, surrealistic pavilion, and architectural marvel."

It occupies a massive eleven-story building that once housed the International Shoe factory.

Today, it looks like the domain of a mad scientist living in an enormous scrap heap.

Outside, in front of the building is a mishmash of architectural elements taken from long-gone buildings, turrets and church belfries, all woven together with wrought-iron tunnels, and with chutes and ladders and slides in between.

For good measure, thrown into this mix are two old airplanes, teetering high above the ground, along with a decommissioned fire truck and a two hundred year old cabin.

Inside the building are floor after floor of mazes and caves, with an aquarium and a pipe organ thrown in.

There are two ten-story circular slides, called the Shoe Shafts, that were once used to send big boxes of new shoes down to the lower floors.

On the roof, there's a garden and a fish pond, an old school bus hanging over the edge of the roofline, a fifty metre-long metal slide, and an old-fashioned ferris wheel.

To put it simply, it's something to see. It's a place of wonder. It's a marvel—in the truest sense of the world.

It's an urban playground intended for both children and adults—though I'll confess that I felt a bit out of place in being there without a child as an excuse for having so much fun.

Over and over I heard children and adults exclaim: "This place is awesome."

And it truly is.

So, I'll have you know that I had an amazing time,  
circling down that ten-story slide,  
and climbing, like a hamster,  
through the wire tunnels suspended far above the ground.

I felt full-on queasiness riding the rickety roof-top ferris wheel.  
Out there, high atop the building, with the city all around,  
I had visions of the whole wheel coming loose  
and rolling right off into the streets far below.

It was great!

Like I said last week, there really are no lengths I won't go to  
in the name of sermon research...!

After all, this enthralling place is the epitome of imagination,  
our theme for the month of June.

This over-sized fun house is clearly the result  
of someone with a very active imagination.

That someone was Bob Cassilly, a sculptor.

It would be easy to dismiss his zany creation  
as the work of a highly eccentric man.

But, each year, 700,000 people visit his museum.

The Project for Public Spaces has named it one of the  
“Great Public Spaces in the World.”

And this museum, first opened in 1997,  
is credited with sparking the renovation boom in downtown St. Louis,  
that has started to draw people back into the city,  
after decades of “white flight” to the suburbs  
had left it hollowed out and dilapidated.

Out of this monument to creative chaos has come restoration, repair, healing,  
and lots of fun!

As is so often the case, you can never quite know  
just where a bit of imagination might lead.

What was most fascinating to watch yesterday  
was how this magical place fired the imagination of everyone there,  
filling people—myself included—with both wonder and delight.

Seeing that combination on full display in those around me  
was a reminder of what a rare thing it is in our world anymore.

What was so striking is that there was clearly something going on there  
that went far beyond being mere entertainment.  
There was more to it than simply the stuff of spectacle.

There was mystery and amazement at work.

There was something of the human spirit summoned forth  
in this grand and glorious invitation to just come out and play.

To be fully alive, and to know it.

An article in the journal of the Themed Entertainment Association—  
the very people who create and build theme parks and amusement rides—  
gets at this, speaking to a yearning within us all for “something more”.

Why do people go to museums in the first place?  
...if you ask visitors why they came,  
the top answer isn't generally “to learn something,”  
so purely educational motives don't explain the attraction.

What does? I think the answer is at the core of what drives  
much of the human experience.

It is, [the author says,] the same reason some people read books,  
raise families, go to church... “meaningfulness”.

We'll go to the aquarium to feel a connection to the environment,  
the science centre to ponder [the] mysteries of the universe,  
the zoo to witness the truth of our evolutionary human ancestry.

We go to quench a thirst, [to] fill a void.

While we go to these places seeking, in part, to have a good time, we're also looking for that which touches us at a deeper level.

He concludes:

Of course, (we who design themed entertainment) know this instinctively, and even at our most cynical moments on entertainment projects yearn wistfully for more. We call it heart.<sup>1</sup>

I find it fascinating to overhear this conversation amongst the engineers behind theme parks—the recognition that we're seeking to fill the void within us with experiences that bring meaning, that help us to feel our own heart.

How intriguing I find it that engineers and I have so much in common through our work in the world.

At Disney, they call the creative people on their design team “imagineers.”

I like that. Imagineers.

And I wonder what the world might look like if more of us took on that title.

I wonder what it would mean, if rather than seeing ourselves as bookkeepers or bureaucrats or bus drivers, as students or parents or retirees, as teachers or doctors or social workers, we came, instead, to understand our role in this life as imagineers— as bearers of vision, as architects of hope, as designers of justice, as engineers of peace, as creators of love, as imagineers of the soul, who animate the lives of the people around us that we might together work to build a better world.

Just imagine.

Imagine the shape of your life if you were to truly tap

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Wisne, “Humanity’s Search for Meaning: What Education has to Teach Entertainment,” 2007 *TEA Annual and Directory* ([http://www.themeit.com/tea\\_2007\\_directory/humanity.pdf](http://www.themeit.com/tea_2007_directory/humanity.pdf)).

into the creative power in your own heart.

If you were to unleash it in the service of life itself.

Our culture seems to have great ambivalence about imagination.  
On one hand, we often celebrate creativity.

And, yet, we too easily discount and dismiss  
anyone with “an overly active imagination.”

Perhaps it’s because we associate imagination with pie-in-the-sky thinking.  
Because we see it as impractical, or unreal,  
or because it will likely require that we change.

But, as Einstein put it:  
“Imagination is everything.  
[For] it is the preview of life’s coming attractions.”

We ignore imagination at our own peril.

For it is how we conceive of possibilities that pull us into the future.  
It is how we harness inspiration and ingenuity  
in the hope of improving what is.

And so imagination is one of life’s most sacred gifts.  
For it is one of the most important tools we have  
for taking up our role in the ongoing creation of the world around us.

You may recall that I’ve spoken on occasion  
about a school of thought called Process Theology.

It’s a theological framework that emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century,  
in part to make sense of the vast changes taking place in the world.

It’s not the dominant theology of any particular religion,  
though it has been enthusiastically embraced by many Unitarians.

It’s not easy to explain or to grasp.

I love how my colleague Fran Dearman describes it:

Imagine a small brown cat, walking towards wisdom,  
taking with her all she has learned,  
growing into knowledge with each new experience,  
and leaving each individual she meets also changed by that meeting.

At the end of each day the cat is still herself, and yet also something new,  
re-shaped by each event she has experienced  
into something unforeseen and unforeseeable.

In the simplest terms possible, that's Process Theology.  
Only you are the cat. And so is God.<sup>2</sup>

Process Theology holds that, as advertised, everything is in process.  
That everything changes in the endless flow of reality.

One of the core principles of Process Theology  
is that the divine is found in each unfolding moment.

Rather than God being some remote, unchanging entity,  
every instant in time is a creative act revealing the evolving nature of God.

God creates the world, and the world creates God.

Which means that humans, with all of life, are co-creators of the world.  
That we, too, are divine and expressions of what might be called God.

That we exercise our will, together and alone,  
to bring about the world we know.

Which is why imagination matters.  
Why it's so vitally important.

Because Einstein was right.

"Imagination *is* everything."  
"...the preview of life's coming attractions."

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<sup>2</sup> Frances Dearman, "Process Theology: An evolving sense of the holy,"  
Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax, Sunday March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012

Given that, and given the state of life on this planet,  
it seems there are more than a few job openings  
in the field I'll call Imagineers of the Soul.

We live in a time calling out for anybody and everybody  
to take up their work as imagineers.

To see the hard and broken places in our world—  
in our own lives, in the lives of those we love,  
and in the lives of unknown others—  
and see there the possibilities for healing, for growth, and reconciliation.

To imagine the potential for justice, love, and peace  
to transform this world, for good.

And, then, to get down to work,  
taking up our role as co-creators of what could be.

Finally, in thinking about my trip to The City Museum yesterday,  
with its jumble of antiques and architectural remnants,  
I'm reminded of another core teaching of Process Theology.

That nothing is forever lost.  
All that has ever been goes on to shape what will come.

In our lives, all of who we have been—with our struggles and joys—  
can be used, recycled, repurposed, if you will,  
in the service of our creative work in this world.

Our experience, both the good and the bad, can fuel our imagination.  
From hard-won wisdom, our imagination can take flight.

So, let us take up anew our divine work  
as imagineers of heart and soul.

Let us play our part in the unfolding story of the universe,  
that we might bring ever more love and justice and peace  
to the great and astonishing dance of life.

Amen.