

“Imagine That!”

Rev. Lynn Harrison
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto (via Zoom)
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Every act of creativity begins with imagination.

And by creativity, I don't just mean "artistic" creativity such as writing a song or painting a picture.

I mean any kind of creating new relationship,
whether it be starting a conversation between two people,
writing an email or an essay or a sermon,
planting a garden,
managing a non-profit,
engaging in the work of social justice,
or indeed, bringing colours together on a canvas
or melody and lyric into relationship in song.

Every act of creativity begins with imagination...with
an act of dreaming, or faith, or simply "planning."

Think about it.

When you decided to join this Zoom service today, it came about because
of some moment of hope or expectation...

A moment of imagination that carried you forward,
to click on a link, to see if what you imagined
might be found here.

Perhaps it is...or perhaps what you're finding
is different than you imagined.

There is always a gap between what we imagine or hope for and what we find, and I'll speak more about that in a moment...

But right now, let's affirm and celebrate that spark of imagination.

That point of possibility or potential or dream, as the poet and activist Theresa Soto put it.

The Spirit of Life is carried upon the wings of imagination, inviting us into ever-deeper relationship with life itself.

Imagine that!

The Spirit of Life, as simple and near to us as our imagination, ready to carry us into deeper meaning and purpose.

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Imagination carries us forward into life...
but then, we encounter a gap.

The distance between what we imagine or hope for...
and what actually is.

In the world today, this gap can seem like a chasm
and can be very frightening for many of us.

In his book "A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life," Quaker author and teacher Parker Palmer writes:

“...We live in a tragic gap: a gap between
the way things are and the way we know they might be.”

“It is a gap that never has been and never will be closed.

If we want to live nonviolent lives, we must learn to stand in the tragic gap, faithfully holding the tension between reality and possibility.”¹

This "tragic gap" can be encountered on both a personal and a global scale and in all forms of relationship and community.

In every life, in whatever circumstance,
we will find ourselves in situations not of our choosing...

and have experiences that we find difficult...
sometimes almost unbearable.

In order to live in that "tragic gap," Parker Palmer invites us to
“to practice the powers that open the heart, that open the mind, that invite
the soul into being...”

It seems to me that one of those powers is that of imagination--
the choice to ask with curiosity:

"What can be made of this situation?"

"What can I make of this?"

"What meaning can be found here?"

Depending on your theology, it could even become more explicitly a
prayer:

"Spirit of Life, God, or Wisdom:
What can I make of this?"

In the process of opening up to something new arising,
something that integrates what we might wish for
with what we actually have,

¹ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2004), 175-180

we can create new meaning in our lives.

We can open up new paths for loving and responsible action,
no matter who we are and in what circumstances.

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In recent weeks, many of us watched the Olympics, and witnessed the gymnast Simone Biles as she encountered her own gap between what she could imagine and what she could safely do.

Like all accomplished athletes, she was well-versed in the art of imagination as she visualized the complex airborne flips she planned to achieve.

But sensing new limitations in her body, and imagining the potential for catastrophe that could take place, she made a bold and creative choice to step out of competition.

It was a life-giving choice, not only for her,
but for so many people who can benefit from imagining
new pathways for self-care,
and perhaps also new ways of living
that are less driven and competitive.

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Over the summer I was reminded of a Canadian painter whose vivid imagination allowed her to live through her own difficult circumstances, while also bringing beauty and joy to others.

Maud Lewis was born in Nova Scotia in 1903.

She had physical disabilities from birth,
and later developed rheumatoid arthritis.

Despite living in a tiny one-room house with her husband,
and unable to afford art materials,
she used boat and house paints,
particleboard and cardboard to create vivid pictures
of the world around her--
which she sold as greeting cards for pennies.

One example is [her painting of a Nova Scotia cove](#).

On the one hand, the painting is clearly representational.
We can see the effort to accurately render a Nova Scotia cove.

And yet, we can sense a distance between what Maud Lewis may have
imagined the painting might become...and what she could actually do.

There are a number of painters at First Unitarian,
and I suspect most of us can relate to that challenge!

Maud Lewis's imagination allowed her to navigate that gap...and
beautifully...with simple shapes and well-placed colour.

There's a famous saying:²
"Do what you can, where you are, with what you have."

Well, it's clear that she knew how to do that.

We can see her imagination very clearly at work in the next painting (**slide**)
where the cows are almost identical, as are the trees, which are a decidedly
dreamy shade of pink.

I'm reminded of Theresa Soto's poem,
and its "lime green and frosting pink dreams."

This is a very simple painting in some ways,

² Attributed to Theodore Roosevelt.

perhaps not technically sophisticated in some ways,
and yet, to quote the poem again:

"[It] is enough. So much more than enough."

And I couldn't resist including this one last Maud Lewis painting,
of three black cats. **(Slide)**

To me, this painting illustrates how the gap between imagination and reality
can be bridged sometimes by humour and surprise...

Inviting in the Spirit of Life in a new and original way.

Maud Lewis died in 1970 in Digby, Nova Scotia,
and it was only towards the end of her life that her paintings
sold for more than a few dollars.

Today, of course, they are collectors' items...
bringing immeasurable beauty and joy
into the lives of others.

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Maude Lewis was someone who was able to use her imagination to create
new meaning in a life that was very challenging.

In her paintings, the gap between imagination and reality was filled with
her own unique spirit, in what one biographer called an "illuminated life."³

Like any visual artist, she created relationship between colour, shape,
subject and light...

And she also created relationship between circumstances and meaning.

³ Lance Woolaver, *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis* (Nimbus Publishing: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 1996).

Asking, "What can I make of this?"

How can I do what I can, where I am, with what I have?

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Of course, the creative imagination need not lead to something as concrete as a painting...

It might be, instead, something that helps us find our way through a difficult passage of life.

Recently a five-year old boy named Harvey Sutton became one of the youngest people ever to hike the Appalachian Trail, covering more than 2100 miles in 209 days...

...with his parents, of course.

They credit imagination as one of the things that got him through that trip.

Dreaming up plans to make spaceships and houses...
and to host something called a "lava party"...
creating these plans as he walked.⁴

We can also imagine the star-gazers of ancient Greece or Babylon, "connecting the dots" to create images out of their imagination, which could guide them and serve as signposts in the night.

Wherever and whomever we are,
each of us is working with such specific materials,
and making of them what we can.

When we think of the events of our lives as if they were

⁴ Bangor Daily News: "5 year-old boy conquers Appalachian Trail before kindergarten starts."
<https://bangordailynews.com/2021/08/20/news/piscataquis/5-year-old-boy-conquers-appalachian-trail-before-kindergarten-starts/> August 20, 2021

points on a map, or stars in the sky,
they might appear to be a meaningless jumble.

It's our ability to connect them meaningfully
that matters.

We can do that when we consider our lives in an overview,
or when we look at one specific situation or challenge.

Can we imagine that something meaningful,
or even beautiful, might be made of it?

Can we imagine that even taking that attitude
might make a profound difference in our lives--

allowing us to actively shape life's meaning,
while at the same time receiving
the many challenges life hands to us?

Can we imagine being,
in the words of poet Danna Faulds,
both "the weaver and the loom,
creator and creation,
the sower and the sown?"

If this sounds daunting--
as it so often does to me--
can we perhaps imagine the deep
and grounded assurance, that we
are indeed "enough, more than enough...
made from fragments of the galaxy"

And that the "antidote to our doubt
is dreaming?"

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Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson is a modern-day stargazer, and someone who reflects on the meaning of our singular lives within the vastness of the universe.

He writes:

"When you look for things in life like love, meaning, motivation, it implies they are sitting behind a tree or under a rock.

The most successful people in life recognize, that in life they create their own love, they manufacture their own meaning, they generate their own motivation."

Now, there are times when I find statements like this unrealistic, or even arrogant... especially from people who have considerable privilege.

And yet, these words guide me once again toward the Creative Imagination:

"What can be made of this?

What a brave and empowering question-- to put to ourselves, in partnership with the Spirit of Life.

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Of course, it's one thing to "imagine,"

To open up to the creative process,
To engage in its unfolding...

It's quite another to know how
it will turn out.

Many sermon-writers have imagined, or conjured up,
a certain "certainty" which can be comforting.

One example is the famous line from
Martin Luther King, Jr.,

"The arc of the moral universe is long,
but it bends toward justice."

But he was paraphrasing our Unitarian ancestor
Theodore Parker, who wrote something that,
to my mind, leaves a little more to the imagination:

"I do not pretend to understand the moral universe.
The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways.

I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure
by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience.

And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice."⁵

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This, it seems to me, points to the way our imagination
guides us to create a world of greater harmony and love...

⁵ Huffington Post: The Truth About the 'Arc of the Moral Universe.'
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-smith-obama-king_n_5a5903e0e4b04f3c55a252a4

To live in the gap between the world
we hope for and the world that is...

Not with absolute certainty, but with our intuition
and our inner wisdom as our guides.

In a new book called "Art and Faith: A Theology of Making"
the artist Makoto Fujimura puts it this way:

"In order to be effective messengers of hope,
we must begin by trusting our inner voice,
an inner intuition that speaks into the
vast wastelands of our time.

This process requires training our imagination
to see beyond tribal norms,
to see the vista of the wider pastures of culture.

"...It is part of our theological journey to see
the importance of our creative intuition and trust that the Spirit is already
at work there.

Our creative intuition, fused with the work of God [or the Spirit of Life]
can become the deepest seat of knowledge, out of which a...New Creation
can flow."⁶

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In the days to come, as we ask ourselves
what we can make of this wounded world and our place in it...
may we know that our imagination is our ally.

May we do what we can, where we are, with what we have...

⁶ Makoto Fujimura, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making* (2021).

Inspired by others who have used their imaginations
in the service of love and justice.

As we do so, may we find our days illuminated by
new meaning and purpose...

Joining with others and with Life Itself
in deeper relationship each day.

As now, may we joyfully receive the gift
of Creative Imagination as it takes shape in song.

Here is Resident Musician Gabrielle Byrnes, with her
interpretation of "Dusty Trails" by Lucius.

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