

Soul Stuff: “Spiritual Practice for Everyday, Imagination”

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I am confident by now that you can name, in alphabetical order, the soul disciplines we have studied this summer. Attention, Beauty, Compassion, Devotion, Hope, and now, today, Imagination. Keep in mind that all of these we are studying start in our spiritual selves. Each of them has certain characteristics that are essential: 1. They do not need external stimuli to make them happen. 2. God the creator is already at work in the soul God placed in us. 3. They are also connected to our faith and require only the assurance that they are present in every believer, just waiting to rise to the surface to help us give meanings to significant experiences of our lives. 4. They are matured through practice and persistence. 5. They should be part of our everyday experiences.

Imagination is like the rest of those. To begin with, from a spiritual point of view, we need to make a distinction when we say the word. The distinction is between the two words imagination and imaginary. “In the spiritual life, **imagination** has two meanings. First, it is a human faculty — the part of us that traffics in images, symbols, myths, and stories. It is the capacity we all have for innovative thinking and creative expression. Second, the imagination is an inner reality, a boundless realm not defined by our senses or reason that we know from our dreams and can enter via certain exercises while awake. The practice of imagination encourages us to use this faculty and enables us to explore the realm.”¹ **Imaginary** suggests that something isn’t real to begin with. To explore the realm of the kingdom of God is not like exploring a map from the world of Narnia.” There is a sense in which our ability to rationalize gets in the way of imagination. In those experiences in our lives when we meet incredible, unusual, or out of the ordinary occurrences, we first often go to our reason to correct the images we are forming at the time. Remember when you read the *Life of Pi* or *The Shack*? The genre in literature (there is a corresponding art form, too) has different names like magical realism, or imaginary realism. “Magical realism turns out to be part of a

¹ Fredrick and Mary Ann Brussat, <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/16/imagination> (accessed July 7, 2018).

twentieth-century preoccupation with how our ways of being in the world resist capture by the traditional logic of the waking mind's reason.”²

The imagination of Isaiah inspired a brilliant short prophesy. The background is his hopeful return of the Jews from exile in Babylonia. When they come back, he expects that the nation will return to a theocracy. Moreover, in their reclaimed state the people will live throughout the ages on the land that God had given them. He does not see it as imaginary, but imagines it as real, something that he saw as soon to come to pass for the exiled children of Israel. I want to read it to you. I want you to explore with me what the prophet Isaiah imagined from his deep spiritual connection with God:

Isaiah 25:6-9 On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples

a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

⁷ And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.

⁸ He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.

⁹ It will be said on that day,
“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the LORD; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”³

The great message of the prophesy is that somewhere from the heart of God, and in the imagination of Isaiah, a future will come to be experienced in a present that fulfils God’s promise of salvation. The response in worship follows as gladness and joy. It may be a matter of waiting, but it is nevertheless real, already beginning. No need to wait for the party to begin. Rejoice! Be glad!

Christian writer Gregory Boyd has noted that “when our imaginations see truth in a way that corresponds to the way things actually are, and when they evoke appropriate feelings to motivate us to behave in effective ways, the imagination is

² Alberto Rios, “Magical Realism: Definitions,” <http://www.public.asu.edu/~aarios/resourcebank/definitions/> accessed July 8, 2018).

³ Isaiah 25:6-9 English Standard Version (ESV)

a great ally. In other words, when our imagination corresponds with truth, we are able to experience the things of God as real and are transformed by this experience.” He goes on to say, however, that “Western Christians have forgotten how to use the imagination with regard to spiritual matters. Most of us only know God with our intellect, not our imagination. For many, faith is little more than intellectual assent to certain propositions and a commitment to live in a certain way. We tend to equate the imagination with fantasy and make believe, and therefore we have come to mistrust it, especially in spiritual matters. So our imaginations, the way we see and interpret ourselves and the world, continues to reflect more the pattern of this world rather than conformity to Jesus Christ.”⁴ As reformed Christians we say practice informed faith. But that does not say that means that we seek to dispel elements of our faith by our reason.

Can you see how much of our faith journeys really should be accompanied by the visions that substantiate them in the first place. We would never say that heaven is not real, nor that we only imagined it. In that sense we are like Isaiah. Our credo as stated in the Apostles’ Creed is a statement that is filled with what we imagine to be true while there does not exist any hesitation at all that any principles of the creed are imaginary.

Someone has said, “The imagination has been called, 'the principal organ for knowing and responding to disclosures of transcendent truth'.” God speaks to us through the organ of imagination that is present in our souls. As C. S. Lewis suggests, we humans need images to round out what we think with the words we hear. Imagination helps us by employing metaphors that help us realize what is truth. For example, when the people wanted to know who their neighbor was in Galilee, Jesus told them a parable about some man along a road who fell among thieves. Jesus’s teachings are filled with dozens of those metaphors that are not about something imaginary, but something that proposes truth that only the human imagination through metaphors can teach the soul.

It is likely that everyone in this sanctuary has had experiences in which truth was made clearer by your imagination. What we imagined became windows for our soul to peer through. Over time the experiences became bookmarks for our history. They reshaped our identities. Truth exists for us in the interpretations of the imaginations we have had. The necessity of imagination is particularly

⁴ ReNew, “Theology and Imagination,” <http://reknew.org/2016/03/theology-and-imagination/> accessed July 7, 2018).

essential when we search for God, where divine ways are not our ways, nor divine thoughts ours either. Dreams and visions, don't forget, is how the prophet Amos envisioned the coming of the kingdom of God.