



Living a Life of Imagination

Small Groups: June 2015

What role does imagination play in your life? The educator, Parker Palmer, says that imagination is one of the most vital powers that humans possess. He says this because we all, even unconsciously, use metaphor to name our experience of life. However, “these personal metaphors do much more than describe reality as we know it. Animated by the imagination, our metaphors often *become* reality, transmuting themselves from language into the living of our lives.” As examples, he uses people who look at the world as a game of chance, who then create a kind of fatalism about losing or an obsession with beating the odds. Similarly, those who see life as a battlefield end up seeing an enemy around every corner and feel under constant siege.

The same could be said of the religious imagination. As Unitarian Universalists, we are often known more for our commitment to reason and a rational faith, rather than our appreciation for metaphor, mysticism and imagination. But the truth is our tradition has always existed in the tension between these two, with both elements influencing our theology and practice. This is important because scientific discovery has had tremendous influence on the religious imagination. It may even be responsible for radical shifts in theology. In their book *Saving Paradise*, Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock talk about how Paradise, the Garden of Eden, Heaven (all names for a similar, ideal place) were often thought of as existing on the earth. Paradise was thought to be in the East, in a place not easily found, but on the Earth. To what extent did the navigation and mapping of the world shift the religious imagination such that people could no longer conceive of heaven as a yet undiscovered place on the earth? In the same way, notions of a physical celestial realm of saints and angels and God(s) just above the earth has faded from the religious imagination as we have explored the skies, our eyes and telescopes always reaching further into space.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons that our religious imagination as UU’s so often delves inside of the human spirit. Imagery celebrating the star dust in our veins, metaphors of beauty, imagery of the interdependent web of creation of which we are a part – all of these turn our religious attention not to the skies, not to paradise or deity apart from us, but rather to the quality of our living. Our religious imagination invites metaphors that describe life as a gift, an opportunity to experience meaning, to grow in love, or “a chance to grow a soul,” as UU Minister A. Powell Davies once said.

Imagination is a powerful and fascinating gift. We like to think of ourselves as always rational, but imagination is a touch point between our experiences and how we make meaning of them. We celebrate the importance of science and reason as one source of our faith and we adorn the walls of our sanctuary with art and weave our services around poetry and music. I suspect that as we explore imagination this month, we will discover that it plays a much larger role in our lives than we at first realize.

Yours in Love,
Rev. Susan



Living the Theme: Imagination

Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to experience imagination and what you learned from the practice.

Option 1: Make a Case For Imagination!

We need to remind each other how central imagination is to our lives. So with this exercise we are invited

To bring a personal story to your group that testifies to the power of imagination in your life.

Below are a number of options that categorize how imagination makes a difference. They are offered as inspiration to help you remember the particular way imagination has shown up in – and even saved – your life. If none of these categories fit your unique experience, that's fine, bring your own.

In addition to bringing one story, **consider bringing an object that somehow symbolizes or captures the impact imagination has made on you.** Maybe it's a picture of your old life and another of your new one. Maybe it's a wedding certificate. Or a T-shirt with a social justice slogan. Maybe it's baby boots from the child you never imagined you'd have. Or something from your second career through which you completely reinvented yourself. Maybe it's running shoes or mountain climbing gear that symbolizes the adventurous self you have become. The point is to find something that would never have come into your life if it hadn't been for imagination.

Here are some videos of how imagination helped turn “Junk” into “Music” and changed the lives of young people. And another about how imagination can help change people's behaviors (and maybe the world). Perhaps they will help jog your memory for times when imagination inspired you for something new or helped you see something in a new way.

For inspiration: Landfill Harmonic: <https://vimeo.com/52711779>

Fun Theory Case Study: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ihai50diA7o>

Categories:

A time when imagination helped you create the self you'd most like to be

A time when imagination expanded your heart or helped create an understanding of someone else by "walking a mile in their shoes."

A time when imagination helped you improve a corner of the world, or help another person

A time when imagination led you to create a work of art, music, poetry, writing

A time when imagination helped you meet the small, daily challenges of life

A time when imagination helped you make an improvement in your life

A time when imagination helped you turn an obstacle into an opportunity

A time when imagination helped you fix a troubled relationship



Option 2: Foster the conditions for creativity

Is there an area in your life, a relationship, or an issue you are wrestling with where you could use more creativity or imagination? An area where imagination might create a new way forward or a shift in perspective? If you are looking for some creativity, try these recommendations from John Cleese, one of the founders of Monty Python, from a speech he gave about how to be creative. Cleese said that you need five things to get to a place where you can be creative:

1. **Space.** Find a quiet space where you will be undisturbed and will not be dealing with routine pressures of daily life.
2. **Time.** Select a time that you have set aside to be undisturbed, with a clear beginning and ending point. Cleese recommends 90 minutes as a good amount of time.
3. **More time.** Specifically, take the time to ponder a question or problem until you reach the best or most original solution, instead of choosing the first solution you think of.
4. **Confidence.** Be willing to experiment and try anything, including things that may not work or that seem stupid.
5. **Humor.** Humor leads to spontaneity, which leads to playfulness, which leads to creative thought. Give your serious mind a break and do whatever it takes to ease your mind so creative thought can slip in.

Option 3: Spend Some Time in Imagination

Here are some questions to invite you to spend some time in imagination. Choose one that hooks you and spend time thinking about your answer and why.

Imagine: If you could make one improvement in your life, what would it be?

Imagine: If you could talk to a deceased loved one, who would it be, and what would you say?

Imagine: If you could make one difference in the world, what would it be? Why?

Imagine: If you could have one perfect day, what would it be like?

Imagine: If you could fix one troubled relationship, how would you do it?



Some Questions to Live With

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

1. Parker Palmer says that our personal metaphors (life is a game of chance, life is a battlefield, life is a gift, life is a chance to grow a soul, to name a few), animated by the imagination often become reality for us. **What personal metaphor do you find yourself using about life? Do you find that it shapes your reality?**
2. **How has your religious imagination changed throughout your life?** Are there images and imagery that used to be important to you that now are not? Where does your religious imagination take you? How does it shape how you understand or view life?
3. Connor Wood says that friendships are formed more often in times when we can be "at play" with each other, when we delve into imaginative aspects of play, make up new games, dream together of the future. He says that this is why we don't make as many friends as we get older. It's also one of the reasons congregations can form such strong bonds, because we imagine together meaning, creativity, even an ideal future or society. **Think of good friends of yours. In the formation of your friendship, did you have times to play together, dream together, create together? How does imagination continue to shape your relationships?**
4. **Currently, where do you feel imaginative?** This could be a physical place or a part of your life where you feel especially creative or imaginative.
5. **Are you looking for more creativity in your life?** In what ways do you work to foster imagination? **Where do you find resources for imaginative thought?**
6. **Have you ever experienced a lack of imaginative inspiration?** What was the context? What renewed your imagination?
7. **What do you learn from children's imagination and creativity? How do you build connections with your children or grandchildren through imaginative play? What difference does this make?**
8. It has been said that worry is a misuse of the imagination. **Has imagination ever led you astray? Or made a situation worse? Has your imagination ever gotten the best of you?** Imagination can sometimes have a dark side. Is imagination helping you out of or into trouble?
9. **When was the most imaginative time in your past?** What can you learn from that time to apply to your life now?
10. **Does imagination need to come to your rescue? Are you listening to all the reasons why "it" can't be done?** The famous inventor Thomas Edison said his deafness was his greatest blessing. A blessing because it saved him from having to listen to reasons why things couldn't be done. Do you need to do a little less listening to the "cannots" in your life?



Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

First Thoughts and Wise Words

Imagination: The ability to form images or concepts of what is not actually present to the senses. A vision.

Imagination is more important than knowledge. For while knowledge defines all we currently know and understand, imagination points to all we might yet discover and create.

Albert Einstein

The man who has no imagination has no wings.

Muhammad Ali

The visionary starts with a clean sheet of paper, and re-imagines the world.

Malcolm Gladwell

I imagine that yes is the only living thing.

e. e. cummings

True originality consists not in a new manner but in a new vision.

Edith Wharton

Sometimes I have believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.

Lewis Carroll

Solitude is as needful to the imagination as society is wholesome for the character.

James Russell Lowell

The moment you doubt whether you can fly, you cease forever to be able to do it.

J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan

Whatever happened to walking and watching and wondering?

Anonymous

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.

Marcel Proust

To me, cultivating imagination involves stopping and setting aside time from the demands of the day... This is what I would like to remind myself to do:

Take time... imagine different responses to difficult situations.

Take time... imagine ways to create a better balance in your life.

Take time... imagine how to create a better relationship with a loved one.

Take time... imagine how to create more calmness and serenity in your life.

Take time... imagine being out in nature, on the beach, or on a mountain top... feeling part of the universe.

Stop! Take time!

Small Group Facilitator

I am suggesting that faith involves our will and imagination more than our minds. It's imagining a future that's different from the past and then living as if that future is possible. By living in the possibilities, faith enables the future to come true. Faith is not believing the unbelievable; it's trying the untried.

Neal Jones

What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Unitarian

You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream.

C.S. Lewis

Vision is the art of seeing things invisible.

Jonathan Swift

And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.

Sylvia Plath



*A dragon lives forever, but not so
little boys
Painted wings and giant's rings
make way for other toys
One gray night it happened, Jackie*

*Paper came no more
And Puff, that mighty dragon, he ceased his
fearless roar
His head was bent in sorrow, green scales fell
like rain
Puff no longer went to play along the cherry
lane
Without his lifelong friend, Puff could not be
brave
So Puff, that mighty dragon, sadly slipped into
his cave*

From "Puff the Magic Dragon," lyrics by
Leonard Lipton

*Dreams are extremely important. You can't do it
unless you can imagine it.*

George Lucas

*I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if
one advances confidently in the direction of his
dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he
imagined, he will meet with a success
unexpected in common hours.*

Henry Thoreau

Halleluiah

*Everyone should be born into this world happy
and loving everything.
But in truth it rarely works that way.
For myself, I have spent my life clamoring
toward it.
Halleluiah, anyway I'm not where I started!*

*And have you too been trudging like that,
sometimes
almost forgetting how wondrous the world is
and how miraculously kind some people can be?
And have you too decided that probably nothing
important
is ever easy?
Not, say, for the first sixty years.*

*Halleluiah, I'm sixty now, and even a little more,
and some days I feel I have wings.*

Mary Oliver

*Imagination was given to man to compensate
him for what he is not; a sense of humor to
console him for what he is.*

Francis Bacon

*We tend to consider imagination too lightly,
forgetting that the life we make, for ourselves
individually and for the world as a whole, is
shaped and limited only by the perimeters of our
imagination. Things are as we imagine them to
be, as we imagine them into existence.*

Thomas Moore

*Imagination will often carry us to worlds that
never were, but without it we go nowhere.*

Carl Sagan

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond
measure. It is our light, not our darkness that
most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I
to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child
of God. Your playing small does not serve the
world ... As we are liberated from our own fear,
our presence automatically liberates others.*

Marianne Williamson

*If we could change ourselves, the tendencies of
the world would also change. As a man changes
his own nature, so does the attitude of the world
change towards him ... we need not wait to see
what others do.*

Mahatma Gandhi

*You cannot depend on your eyes when your
imagination is out of focus.*

Mark Twain

*What if imagination and art are not frosting at
all, but the fountainhead of human experience?*

Rollo May

*Ethiopians imagine their gods as black and
snub-nosed; Thracians blue-eyed and red-
haired. But if horses and lions had hands, or
could draw and fashion works as men do, horses
would draw the gods shaped like horses and
lions like lions, making the gods resemble
themselves.*

Xenophanes (c.570-475 BCE)



The future is not some place we are going, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made. And the activity of making them changes both the maker and their destination.

John Schaar

For children, imagination and creativity are developed through play, dress-up, role-playing, experimenting with making things, and reading fiction, to name a few ways.

Through fantasy-play, the child may develop awareness, empathy and compassion for others. This may also help in the learning process of overcoming social deficits.

Parents help the child to know the difference between “real” and “unreal” and guide in the imaginative process.

Small Group Facilitator

It is not hard to live through a day, if you can live through a moment. What creates despair is the imagination, which pretends there is a future, and insists on predicting millions of moments, thousands of days, and so drains you that you cannot live the moment at hand.

Andre Dubus “A Father’s Story”

The Stories We Tell

*She said, “Did that really happen?”
And I answered,
“Of course it did.
Or at least almost
This is the way it should have or might have
Or needed to have happened.
And to the best of my knowledge,
And by my most reasonable memories,
This is how I understand it
To have been
And was
And still is.”*

*She looked at me askance,
Not sure whether to follow the question
Further down the rabbit hole,
Or to simply believe me,
And to leave it at that,
Not pressing to know
If the story was real
Or merely true.*

Carrie Newcomer

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Imagination

To join a Small Group, email sgm@phoenixuu.org

Additional Resources

Articles:

John Cleese lecture on creativity:

<http://genius.com/John-cleese-lecture-on-creativity-annotated/>

"The Fate of the Religious Imagination."
by Czeslaw Milosz, 1980 Nobel Prize Winner
for Literature.

http://www.digitalnpq.org/archive/2004_fall/28_milosz.html

"Religion, Imagination, and Secret Worlds" by
Connor Wood

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/scienceonreligion/2013/12/religion-imagination-and-our-secret-worlds/>

“The Beloved Community: Martin Luther King Jr.’s Prescription for a Healthy Society” by Jeff Ritterman, MD

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeffrey-ritterman/the-beloved-community-dr-b-4583249.html>

Videos and Films:

Songwriter and composer Bobby Lopez shares the song that changed his life: the inspiring and magical “Pure Imagination”:

<https://soundcloud.com/bullseye-with-jesse-thorn/bobby-lopez-stcm1>

And the song itself, “Pure Imagination” from the film Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZ-uV72pQKI>

John Lennon’s song “Imagine”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRhq-yOIKN8>

Books:

The Artist’s Way by Julia Cameron