

“What Is, What If, What Can Be”
Sermon delivered at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier by
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When I was a child, I loved to read. I still do, but back then I was constantly immersed in books. I have a distinct memory of sitting in my class when I was in the fifth grade, and during a break, I had started reading one of Cynthia Voigt’s books, and I was so immersed in it, I lost all sense of time. When I finally paused long enough to become aware of my surroundings, I realized that the teacher had already started the math lesson while I had my nose in my book.

Our human capacity for imagination is powerful.

We most often recognize this capacity in children. We affirm their capacity to imaginatively play and to imagine without limits.

The musical meditation we just heard comes from the movie “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory.” In the scene that this song appears, Willy Wonka invites his guests to take his guests come along with him into a world of pure imagination. He leads them into a room full of candies and treats of all colors and shapes. It is a fantasy world made real through his imagination and creation. In the scene, the children and their adult chaperones are encouraged to indulge to their hearts’ content.

In some ways this is a more stereotypical notion of imagination. It is analogous to fantasy. Something so unreal, so beyond, anything we might find possible.

We’re given the impression that to live into the “pure imagination” is indulgent and may have repercussions we wouldn’t really want to live with.

Often we associate imagination with fantasy. Something is labeled a figment of your imagination with derision.

We can sometimes pit imagination against reason. We tell ourselves that reasonable adults don't need to use their imaginations.

Or, we put imagination into a box only accessible by certain kinds of people. It can be easy to believe that living an imaginative life is only possible for artists or writers or actors or those with natural and innate creative capacities.

But, what if, as the song suggests, the imagination is the gateway to freedom?

Through our imaginations we discover the freedom to embrace the possible.

The poet William Blake called our imagination the highest human faculty. It is certainly an aspect of our human capacities that undergirds so much of how we live in both ordinary and extraordinary ways.

Just take this morning. A regular Sunday. As you woke up, you may have already started engaging your imagination as you became aware of the room around you, hearing the noises of your house. The dog plodding along, or the kids waking up and getting out of bed. And your thoughts may have drifted to the unfolding of the day. Coffee and breakfast to be made. The drive to the church. Where you might find parking. Who you might see or want to see this morning. And as the morning has unfolded you have had to make choices about what to eat, what to wear, a question to ask your partner, where to sit in the sanctuary this morning. Your arrival here has been the culmination of imagination turned into your lived experience.

Each day we encounter new possibilities and we must imagine our way through these choices. Our imaginations help us make sense of our current realities and move our way through them.

Imagination is simply a part of who we are and is a regular and ordinary part of our lives.

For centuries, scientific thought had envisioned two separate areas of our brains: one part that processes all the data gathered by our senses and one that conjures up gauzy daydreams of our imagination. But, recent studies in neuroscience show that instead our sense-based perception and our imagination utilize the same neural pathways. The same cells in our brains light up, for example, when we perform an action ourselves as when we watch someone else do it.

And, even watching ourselves doing something in the future can help shape our current realities.

I learned this as a track and field competitor in high school. One of the tricks my coach taught me was to visualize each race before it started. So, at our meets, as I prepared for a race. I would imagine myself in the starting blocks, hear the start gun go off, imagine my feet and legs pushing out and onto the track. See and feels my arms relaxed, my head centered, striding strongly through the first curve, then the straightaway, and across the finish line.

It has been a long time since stopped competing in track and field, but I have continued to imagine my way into and through a myriad number of life experiences.

This capacity of ours to imagine our future selves is a gift that can help us especially in times when we may be feeling stuck in the “what is” of our lives. Our imaginations can help us ask “what if” and “what can be.”

The writer Elizabeth Gilbert recently shared a post on Facebook on this topic that some of you may have read (and I have to credit UCM member Ginny Sassaman for sharing it to our Friends of UCM group which is how I learned about it).

I appreciate how Gilbert describes the role imagination has played and continues to play in her own life, and so I want to share that with you.

She writes:

“You have to be able to imagine something good for yourself before you can have it. You must create within your imagination an idea of what your life could look like, in a better way — or else you can't change anything for the better, or seek anything good for yourself.

I had to imagine myself capable of speaking Italian before I started — as an adult — to study that new language.

I had to imagine myself walking down the streets of New York City, before I dared to move there from my small town.

I had to imagine myself getting every single job I ever sought out, before I would be able to summon the courage to show up for the interview...

I had to imagine that I could write books, before I had the courage to begin writing them...

I had to imagine that there could be a better life for me on the other side of my unhappy marriage, before I could leave that marriage.

I had to imagine that I was capable of becoming a more honest and trustworthy human being, before I could seek a pathway to personal honor.

I had to image — even in the darkest pit of my depression — that someday I would not be a depressed person anymore. I didn't know how I was going to get through my depression, because it was a nightmare, but if I had not been able to imagine myself as healthy and happy, I never would have been able to seek out professional help, and yoga, and prayer, and even medication — and all the things that saved me. In other words, if I could not imagine myself ever being anything but depressed — why would I have bothered to seek change and healing?

Imagination is not a promise. Nothing is ever promised to us. Sometimes I've imagined good things for my life, and then was unable to achieve them.

I have imagined friendships that I hoped would last forever, and then watched those friendships die. I have imagined getting jobs that I didn't get, or finding love that I didn't find.

So just because you can imagine it, doesn't mean you're going to get it. But that's OK — you still have to imagine good things! Because I never got anything good out of my life without imagining it first. So I refuse to ever keep my imagination tethered on a short leash, even when things are going wrong.

This is the heart and soul of optimism, and optimism is the beginning of all possibility.”

She continues:

“These days, I can imagine all kinds of things for my future.

I can myself living to over 100 years old, so it's worth it for me to take care of my health now...

I can imagine myself finding creative ways to keep on enjoying and honoring my life, even when the people I love have died...

I can imagine myself starting to study Greek or watercoloring when I'm 80, so I don't have to worry that my days of learning are over.

I can imagine myself making new friends when I'm 95.

I can imagine myself growing braver as I get older, and more wise...

I can imagine that I can trust myself to never again settle for a life of pain or stagnation, and therefore I can relax about my future, rather than fretting over it.

I can imagine that this world is becoming a better place, not a worse one...and I can imagine myself being part of that...

You have no idea the limitlessness of my imagination.

But you also might have no idea about the limitlessness of YOUR imagination.

Perhaps you have just not been using your imagination widely enough.

Perhaps it is time to let that thing off the leash.”

What have you had to imagine before it became a reality?

And, what new possibilities emerge for you when you let your imagination off its leash?

Now I don't want to seem overly idealistic about the power of imagination. There are certainly times when things don't quite turn out how we imagined.

I had this experience earlier this week while I was at our district retreat for UU clergy in northern New England. I decided to go out and enjoy a run on the trails at the retreat center. At first, I thought I'd just run down to the lake and back but then I saw the trailhead into the woods. I had looked at a map earlier and remembered that the trail looped around and back to the lodge. So, I decided to take the less familiar path imagining that I'd make a quick loop through the woods. But, the reality of the trail didn't quite match up with my imagination and I ended up lost in the woods and had to re-trace my steps back to where I started.

So, our imaginations alone don't always get us to where we want to go.

And, there are times when we are in fact limited by the narrowness of our individual imaginations and we need other people to help us imagine bigger.

A beautiful example of this has been the “It Gets Better” project which some of you may be familiar with. In September 2010, the syndicated columnist Dan Savage created a YouTube video with his partner Terry Miller to share the

message with LGBT youth that “it gets better.” Their video was made in response to a number of young people taking their own lives after being bullied in school. Since the project launched, over 50,000 videos have been made. People of many different ages share their own stories of having faced the judgment and name-calling and harassment for being who they are and their lived reality now of having friends who accept them, having found partners, of simply having survived long enough to know that it gets better. The stories that are recorded share another set of possibilities for youth and teens who face discrimination and bullying. These stories help youth imagine a future in which they, too, are accepted and thrive.

We live in a time when we need our imaginations more than ever.
We need our imaginations to give us hope in times of despair,
We need our imaginations to face devastating losses and grief,
We need our imaginations to change life patterns that keep us stuck,
We need our imaginations to create new ways of ensuring the health and safety of our communities,
We need our imaginations to bring peace and justice and sustainability into the world.

George Bernard Shaw writes, “Imagination is the beginning of creation.” And, indeed, it is just the beginning. Shaw continues, “You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine and at last you create what you will.”

May we use the power of our imaginations to create for ourselves and for our world a present and a future in line with our highest aspirations.