

“The Portal of Imagination”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Reading Excerpt from “What’s Real?” by Andrea Gibson¹

*...But that’s not real, my mind contends.
Real is provable. Googleable.*

*in the Pacific Northwest, who were guided
by the voices of moss and the mist.*

Then google this, I say, —

Is that real? my mind asks.

*The chemo that kept me alive,
the chemo cold men in white coats
take credit for, is sourced from the bark
of the Pacific Yew tree and was first
discovered for its healing properties
by Two-Spirit Indigenous people*

*I don’t see the point in answering
because my mind can’t hear the language
spoken by the moss, has never
picked the sweetest fruit from the saddest
note
of a song and planted every seed
to feed the joy of those to come...*

Sermon

Do you ever just want to get away from what’s “real”?

Some days it feels like the world is all bad news, broken systems, and endless noise. Perhaps for you it is endless medical appointments, PT, radiation. Or, chasing toddlers, scraping for the next dollar, or yet again fighting fascism.

In those moments of overwhelming reality, I find myself thinking: I would very much like to be somewhere else right now.

Someplace warmer. Quieter. Kinder.

Maybe you’ve felt that way, too.

¹ <https://andreagibson.substack.com/p/new-poem-trusting-intuition-healing-grief-hope>

In these moments, the human imagination can give us what we need.

This was true for Jay Ellis, the actor and now author. Ellis had a tough childhood. His parents were very young when they had him, and life wasn't always stable.

One night, when he was quite young, his parents were having an argument. It was stormy outside, and he was alone in his bedroom. They lived in Tampa, Florida at the time, and the young Jay Ellis started imagining that his bedroom was a swamp and there were alligators circling his bed.

That could have been terrifying. But just then, Ellis imagined someone who popped up over his shoulder. They told him, "We are not about to get eaten by these alligators."

From that moment and well into his childhood, Mikey stuck around. A companion. A comfort. A protector. A friend.

Ellis shares his story in his memoir entitled "Did Everyone Have an Imaginary Friend (or Just Me)?"² In a recent interview with the author Jason Reynolds about the book, Ellis said, "Your imagination gives you what you need when you need it."²

Imagination can comfort us. Liberate us. Delight us. We can lean into our imaginations especially in those times of overwhelm, pain, or fear.

I think there's a part of us—like poet Andrew Gibson talks about—that wants to stay focused on what's "real," what we can prove, what we can touch. Or, a part of us that believes the story that all that is real is what we can touch. That only matter matters.

But there's also a part of us that just wants to dream. That longs for what isn't fact and can't be verified on your smartphone.

That's where imagination comes in. Not as an escape, but as a portal. A threshold from one place to another.

A way to release when our spirits become confined.

² Derrick A. and Ramunda Young, "Envisioning Possibilities: Imagination's Role with Jay Ellis and Jason Reynolds," from MahoganyBooks Front Row: The Podcast, September 9, 2024, <https://mahoganybooksmedia.com/podcast/mahoganybooks-front-row-the-podcast/episode/envisioning-possibilities-imaginations-role-with-jay-ellis-and-jason-reynolds>.

Imagination can be a kind of freedom.

Freedom from the tyranny of consumerism and the nonstop scroll of news. Freedom from the systems that attempt to close us in.

Imagination is also freedom to wonder, to play, to build something beautiful out of the chaos.

The musician Jon Batiste recently reflected on his new album, “Beethoven Blues,” a masterfully imaginative take on Beethoven’s most famous pieces. He wrote about imagination this way: “I love that something in your mind that’s not real can become real. You can bend and shape and mold and push back against the world around you. If no one has done it yet, you can think about doing something. It doesn’t have to be make-believe; it can be real.”³

Batiste affirms that we are free to tinker keys outside the measure, to color outside the lines, to think and believe outside the box, to create what doesn’t yet exist.

I believe that something within each of us longs for this kind of freedom whether you consider yourself an artist or use your imagination in other ways.

The mythologist, storyteller, and teacher Michael Meade talk about the genius story. This is the idea that each of us has a kind of genius inside. Your particular way of showing up in the world that no one else can replicate.

This genius isn’t about IQ or the grade you get in school but about one’s own gifts and how those are uniquely expressed.

Sometimes, that genius shows up in creative, quiet ways.

Allison Meyer lives in Cleveland, Ohio. After losing her mom in a terrible car accident, Meyer was grieving deeply. Out of that grief, she started something beautiful.

She put out a bright yellow mailbox and invited people to write anonymous letters about what they were going through—grief, loss, addiction, fear.

Strangers read those letters and wrote back with hope, encouragement, and care. This turned into the Never Ever Give Up project. For five years including throughout the Covid pandemic, the

³ Jon Batiste, “Prompt 309. Beethoven & the Blues: Jon Batiste on spontaneous composition & Hollynn Huitt on imagination,” The Isolation Journals with Suleika Jaouad, October 27, 2024, <https://theisolationjournals.substack.com/p/beethoven-and-the-blues>

mailbox traveled around to different parts of the city allowing people to connect with their neighbors.⁴

People shared vulnerably their struggles and wrote to strangers messages of empathy and kindness. That mailbox became a sacred space for connection.

Allison imagined with empathy the hurt endured by others and then imagined that she and others didn't have to ensure that hurt alone.

That was Allison's genius—come to expression through loss and full of imagination and healing.

Each of us has a genius - our own soul's imagination that comes into being through acts of care and creation.

While imagination can lead to beauty and comfort, we also need to acknowledge that sometimes our minds imagine things that aren't helpful at all.

We can spiral into worst-case scenarios,
or imagine everyone is against us,
or convince ourselves that failure is inevitable or that we are not enough.

That's still imagination but it's pushing back against reality in ways that can cause suffering. When that happens, we can pause and ask: Is my imagination helping me or hurting me right now?

Sometimes we need help telling the difference, and that's okay. Whether it's the help of a friend, a counselor, a therapist, or your minister, there is no shame in needing mental health support and getting a check on your imagination.

We need not navigate it all alone.

We have also witnessed and are witnessing now how imagination can wreak havoc and cause destruction when humans create stories about who is the enemy and imagine tools and methods of cruelty that are made into reality.

This is the shadow side of imagination.
When ungrounded, it can feed paranoia.

⁴ Shelli Reeves, "Send A Letter, Share A Story, Help The Healing With Never Ever Give Up," May 23, 2020, Ideastream Public Media, <https://www.ideastream.org/community/2020-05-23/send-a-letter-share-a-story-help-the-healing-with-never-ever-give-up>.

When misused, it can justify cruelty.

Imagination can be healing and beautiful, but it also needs good boundaries, safe containers, and accountability that can help our imaginations serve wholeness and that keep our dreaming accountable to love, truth, and justice.

Michael Meade has said, “The deepest power of the human soul is imagination, and when humans bring imagination to the situation, we join the agents of creation.”⁵

I like thinking of imagination as a power. A faculty, a tool we are fortunate to possess that enables us to have creative agency.

We all have this power. When used responsibly for ourselves and others, we can access our deepest freedom and contribute to the world in life-giving, creative ways.

Imagination helps us ask not just, What do we want to dismantle or protest?
But also, What do we want to build in its place?

That’s the liberating power of imagination.
It helps us to dream up the next world and then go make it.

We can imagine together a world where all people are treated with dignity and respect.
Where every child has someone like Mikey whispering to them, “You’re safe.”
Where the wisdom of plants guides our human actions.
Where we not only fight for justice, but feel it and live it.
Where your genius gets to shine.

Imagination isn’t something we outgrow.
It’s something we grow into.

It’s how we survive.
It’s how we dream.
It’s how we create something new together.

So may it be.

⁵ Michael Meade, “Awakening the Genius in Everyone: When the Calling Keeps Calling,” Bioneers, October 25, 2017, <https://bioneers.org/awakening-the-genius-in-everyone-when-the-calling-keeps-calling-michael-meade/>