



Soul Matters

What does it mean to be
a people of IMAGINATION?

Small Group

January 2021

What Does It Mean To Be A People of Imagination?

Maybe our most important work is to re-imagine imagination.

Imagination's great gift is *improvement*. At least that is what we're usually taught. The deep magic lies in the way it can reshape our reality. We are urged to imagine the world we dream of. A world with more justice. More peace. More love. From that, a mysterious magnetism arises, a magnetism that pulls our imperfect present into an improved future. Imagination moves us forward. It makes us better.

Yet there's a way in which this view of imagination impoverishes us. It steals the stage. Shuts out imagination's *other* precious gifts.

For instance, think of what happened when you got out of bed this morning. After a shower and a cup of coffee, you didn't just pull on fresh clothes, you also pulled out a jewelry box and slipped on your grandmother's ring. As you slid it on your finger, she slid, not just into your memory, but into your day. Now, because of imagination, you aren't just elegant; you're *accompanied*. Or how about that invisible friend of yours when you were a child? Imagination made sure you didn't travel through those early years alone. It conjured up a loyal friend. Even today, amidst the hustle and bustle of adult life, tell me you don't hear the guidance of ancestors and friends all day long. It's all one giant reminder that imagination doesn't just improve our lives, it populates it.

And *illuminates* it too. That's right. Imagination isn't just a force that drives us forward toward a more perfect future, it also pulls the sacred into our impoverished present. Imagination is what transforms trees from potential firewood into wise friends. Imagination is what moves us from lording over the natural world to seeing ourselves as part of it. It gives the world a soul. And not just the natural world, but the ordinary world too. Through the lens of imagination, we perceive the common as precious, even miraculous. The laughter of our children becomes the sound of angels. Sunshine on our face becomes a greater treasure than gold. Our "everyday" lives are understood as amazing adventures and inexplicably lucky gifts.

So friends, this month, do everything you can to soak in *the many* messages of imagination. It's not just shouting, "Improve the world!" It's also pleading, "Let the world come alive!"

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A

Imagine Your Gravestone

It's not something we like to do: imagine our deaths. But it's also something many [wisdom traditions](#) encourage. It isn't just a way to not take our days for granted, it's also a way of taking control of the story of our life. Imagining how we want to be remembered increases the likelihood that we will actually live in a way that is worthy of that. So many spiritual guides encourage people to imagine their funerals and write their own eulogies.

That's a pretty intense and time-consuming task. So to simplify things, we invite you to simply imagine a few epitaphs for your gravestone.

Of course, it's not really simple at all. Take your time with it. Don't try to do it in one setting. Chew on it as you take your morning walk. Spend an evening thinking about it as you listen to music. Take a friend out to lunch and ask them what they might want theirs to read.

Here's a wonderful piece by UU minister, Victoria Safford, to spark your imagination and guide you on your way: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhv1AeD_PPQ (also [HERE](#)). And you might also want to check out what epitaphs this blogger came up with when he took up the challenge: <https://blog.excastle.com/2009/12/05/eulogy/>

Option B

Imagine the Colors & Location of Your Happiness

The creative folk at Soul Pancake came up with this exercise. Inspired by art therapists, they asked people to color code all the things in their lives that bring them comfort and happiness. And then with those colors in mind, the participants imaginatively located those sources of happiness on their bodies.

Here's the video to guide you on your way:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulpancake/videos/10155393464706117/?v=10155393464706117>

Unlike those in the video, you may not have access to a giant sheet of paper on which to trace your entire body. No worries. Just pull out whatever size paper you have and trace out a smaller figure of yourself on it. The important part is not the size of your creation, but the location on which you place your meaning-filled colors.

Just as the art therapist encourages in the video, be sure to pay attention to which color you start with, which color anchors your effort and you.

Come to your group ready to share what you learned and the journey of your colors.

Option C

Imaginatively Replace Every Other Line

It's a common exercise for writers and poets: Imaginatively deconstruct a poem to create something new. For this exercise, you are asked to engage a particular version of it. Here are the instructions: Take a poem, cross out every other line, and then rewrite the poem filling in the crossed out lines with lines of your own. You can take it to the next level by taking the new poem you've created and crossing out the remaining original lines (leaving the ones you wrote) and then filling in the crossed out lines with new ones of your own, making it a completely original poem.

We suggest you use the poem, [Delusions of Grandeur](#), by Darnell Arnoult. But of course you might also want to pick a poem of your own.

To help you on your way, here's a blog post showing how one poet did the exercise using Arnoult's poem: <http://asclepion.blogspot.com/2011/02/poem-delusions-of-grandeur.html>

Option D

Listen to Shel Silverstein

Carve out an evening just for yourself. Put on a favorite music playlist, one whose songs leave you feeling like you're sitting with a long-time friend. Find a 3*5 card and grab a pen. Heat up a kettle and make yourself a cup of tea. Once the warmth of the music and tea have settled in, read Shel Silverstein's masterful children's poem a few times aloud:

Listen To The Mustn'ts
Listen to Mustn'ts, child, listen to the Don'ts.
Listen to the Shouldn'ts, the Impossibles, the Won'ts.
Listen to the Never Haves, then listen close to me.
Anything can happen, child, Anything can be.

Let it take you back to childhood, or maybe even to early adulthood, and spend some time sorting through the "mustn'ts," "shouldn'ts," and "won'ts" that were laid on your imagination as a young person. Spin them around in your memory until one floats to the top; one that lived uncomfortably in your heart for a long while, like a splinter stuck in your skin. Then shape that mustn't/shouldn't/won't into a sentence and write it on your card.

After a few more sips of tea from your cup, get up and put on a jacket. Grab a pack of matches from the junk drawer. And head outside into cool dark air with that 3*5 card in hand. Strike a match and light an edge of the card with the flame.

Open yourself to whatever happens next. Let the moment have whatever meaning it will, whatever meaning you need. Then with the card now ash, offer yourself a blessing.

Option E

The Imagined Story That Has Shaped Your Real One

All of us have [a book or two](#) that shaped who we are and how we live our lives. Some piece of fiction that rooted itself in our imaginations and from there wormed its way into our real-life living and loving.

So, what book was it for you?

Take some time this month to figure out which one impacted you the most. For some it will be a book from our childhood. For others of us, it will be a book we read as an adult during a difficult time in our lives.

Whichever it is, search your imagination (and bookshelves) to find it.

If you don't have the book on your bookshelves, consider going out to buy it.

And while you are at it, why not read it and let it into your imagination again?!

Bring that book, and the journey of this exercise, with you when your group gathers.

Option F

Find Imagination in Our Recommended Resources

Our recommended resources are full of wisdom about what it means to be a people of and a person of imagination. Engaging these resources and finding the one that especially speaks to you is a spiritual practice in and of itself.

So, if none of the above exercises call to you, engage the recommended resources section of this packet as your spiritual exercise for the month.

Set aside some regular time throughout a week to go through them and meditate on them until you find the one that most expands or deepens your understanding of imagination. After you've found it, consider printing it out and carrying it with you or pinning it up so you can continue to reflect on it throughout the weeks leading up to your group meeting. Come to your group ready to share where the journey led you.

Your Question

Don't treat these questions like "homework" or try to answer every single one. Instead, make time to meditate on the list and then pick the one question that speaks to you most. The goal is to figure out which question is "yours." Which question captures the call of your inner voice? Which one contains "your work"? What is that question trying to get you to notice or acknowledge?

Often it helps to read the list to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with!

1. Have you ever been "saved" by your imagination
2. Has imagination ever led you astray?
3. Have you become more or less imaginative with age?
4. Is your imagination kind or cruel to you?
5. What is the opposite of imagination?
6. We all live with a voice that says "One day I will..." What "possible life" has been with you the longest?
7. Do the "mustn'ts," "shouldn'ts," and "won'ts" from your childhood still impact your imagination?
8. What do you want to thank your childhood imaginary friend for?
9. What "made up" cultural story do you think our society most suffers from?
10. Do you use your imagination to enhance reality or to flee from it?
11. Albert Einstein said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge." Do you buy it?
12. Is there more to see in your "enemy" than what you've been imagining?
13. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it. Or maybe the question or call you need to hear is waiting in one of the quotes listed below. Consider looking there!

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of imagining what it means to be a people and a person of imagination.

Word Roots & Definitions

Buried in its roots, imagination carries the Proto-Indo-European root *aim* meaning "to copy" through the Latin root *imitari* meaning "to picture oneself." There is a sense of imagination not being real, but a copy. An improved copy, a possible copy, a representation of what could be. Or, as Baldwin suggests, perhaps "imagination is the real life" which creates the exterior world.

Wise Words

They are ill discoverers that think there is no land when they see nothing but sea.

Francis Bacon

Listen To The Mustn'ts

Listen to Mustn'ts, child, listen to the Don'ts.

Listen to the Shouldn'ts, the Impossibles,
the Won'ts.

Listen to the Never Haves, then listen close to me.

Anything can happen, child, Anything can be.

Shel Silverstein

My favorite Baldwin quote is, "The interior life is the real life... The intangible dreams of a person may have a tangible effect on the world." It's basically saying, what one can imagine, internally, what one can think about when nobody knows, when nobody's around, one's secrets, could shift human life. What an amazing thing.

[Jason Reynolds](#)

V'ahavta

Aurora Levins Morales

Full poem here:

<http://www.auroralevinsmorales.com/main-blog/vahavta>

Say these words when you lie down and when you rise up,
when you go out and when you return. In times of mourning
and in times of joy. Inscribe them on your doorposts...

tattoo them on your shoulders, teach them to your children:

Another world is possible...

Imagine winning. This is your sacred task. This is your power. Imagine

every detail of winning, the exact smell of the summer streets

in which no one has been shot, the muscles you have never

unclenched from worry, gone soft as newborn skin...

Our imagination flies -- we are its shadow on the earth.

Vladimir Nabokov

I like nonsense, it wakes up the brain cells. Fantasy is a necessary ingredient in living, it's a way of looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope. Which is what I do, and that enables you to laugh at life's realities.

Theodore Geisel/Dr. Seuss

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

J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan

Think in ways you've never thought before.

If the phone rings, think of it as carrying a message

Larger than anything you've ever heard...

When someone knocks on the door, think that their about

To give you something large: tell you you're forgiven,

Or that it's not necessary to work all the time,

or that it's been decided that if you lie down no one will die.

Robert Bly, Things to Think

<https://clodandpebble.wordpress.com/2019/03/28/things-to-think-by-robert-bly/>

Our problems with unhappiness are rooted in the imagination.... For instance, we can interpret someone's accidental sharp tone of voice as an unfriendly reaction to ourselves, begin to give that person life in our imagination as someone who doesn't like us, therefore be on the lookout for subsequent evidence of hostility, be ready to interpret everything that happens in that light, and of course ourselves show distrust and unfriendliness in turn, which naturally have their effect on the other person; and so by building this thing up in our imagination we can develop a whole atmosphere and relationship of hostility that may be completely false and unnecessary because it all began from something quite accidental. Similarly, by persistently thinking well of persons, looking for good traits in them, imagining them as pleasant and agreeable, well-disposed toward ourselves, we will enable ourselves to behave in a naturally friendly way to them and elicit friendly responses."

Beatrice Bruteau, from Radical Optimism: Rooting Ourselves in Reality

Fairy Tales are more than true; not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us dragons can be beaten.

G. K. Chesterton

You can either think that the world is getting better or that the future will be much better than it is now, or you can think that the world is getting worse. But that continuum isn't as important to me, actually, as this idea of, do you think you have agency in this world that is either getting better or worse?

Angela Ogunjala

Imagination is a danger thus every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination to keep on conjuring and proposing alternative futures to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.

Walter Brueggemann

History is birthed out of the imagination. It literally was conjured up. Imagination is so powerful that it could set forth 400, 500 years of something wrong, which means that it very well could set forth 400, 500 years of something right. That's sort of the beauty of humanity.

Jason Reynolds

History is a living weapon in your hand & you have imagined it.

Diane Di Prima

Imagination is one of the spoils of colonization, which in many ways is claiming who gets to imagine the future for a given geography. Losing our imagination is a symptom of trauma. Reclaiming the right to dream the future, strengthening the muscle to imagine together as Black people, is a revolutionary decolonizing activity.

adrienne maree brown, Emergent Strategy

Every single one of us knows what it is like to bleed. In one respect pain is a gift because it cultivates our imagination. Without it, we would be far less likely to rail at deprivation or shrink from cruelty. Of course not everyone derives sympathy from suffering. But the religious imagination contends that in the heart of every stranger lurks a reflection of our own.

Rev. Dr. William F. Schulz

Nobody is more dangerous than he who imagines himself pure in heart.

James Baldwin

What will become of a failure? What can be built with an honest mistake? Keep paying attention. Keep dreaming and supposing that more is possible. We don't know the ending. And if you are tired, then it must be time to rest. Staying curious is like a muscle. We flex - reaching for what we don't yet know. And relax - leaving space for what is yet to come.

Rev. Theresa I. Soto

Live out of your imagination, not your history.

Stephen R. Covey

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —

over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

Mary Oliver, Wild Geese

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge. That myth is more potent than history. That dreams are more powerful than facts. That hope always triumphs over experience. That laughter is the only cure for grief. And I believe that love is stronger than death.

Robert Fulghum

Music

We create two different playlists for each of our monthly themes: one in Spotify and another in YouTube. We organize these lists as a journey of sorts. So consider listening from beginning to end and using the lists as musical meditations. Follow the links below to connect with this month's "Imagination songs."

Click [here](#) for the Spotify playlist on [Imagination](#).

Click [here](#) for all [Spotify playlists](#).

Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on [Imagination](#).

Click [here](#) for all the [YouTube playlists](#).

Videos & Podcasts

Breaking Free

<https://vimeo.com/14425446>

Do you ever imagine "Breaking Free"? Is it possible to imagine a different way of living life?!

Taking Imagination Seriously: The Artistry of Janet Echelman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YekkGz1E2k>

TED Talk - Dan Gilbert: The psychology of your future self

https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_the_psychology_of_your_future_self?language=en

The Good Ancestor - The Legacies We Leave

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8i9f1UdvohE>

On what happens when short-term thinking dominates our imaginations...

Reversing Inequality & Rebuilding Local Economies Post-Pandemic

On imagining a new economy

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G34LjMH5kws&feature=youtu.be&utm_campaign=website&utm_source=sendgrid.com&utm_medium=email

Unfinished Portraits

On using imagination to honor the loss of black lives.

<https://www.facebook.com/60SecDocs/videos/384017189256735/?v=384017189256735>

Imagining the Future of UUism

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1842&v=H7sjTUK-iu0

As part of the First UU Congregation of Ann Arbor 150th anniversary year, UU leaders from around the country gathered to imagine the future of the UU movement and how UU congregations can boldly go into the dawning future.

The Neuroscience of Imagination

https://www.ted.com/talks/andrey_vyshedskiy_the_neuroscience_of_imagination

Some Fun with Visual Imagination

https://www.boredpanda.com/things-that-look-like-other-things-optical-illusion/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic

Tipping Our Hats to Mr. Rogers for Inspiring Our Imaginations!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFzXaFbxDcM>

Articles

On Despair and the Imagination

<https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/on-despair-and-the-imagination/>

“It may sound strange to locate the problem here, but some of our most despairing moods are caused by failures of the imagination. We are not merely ‘sad’; we cannot picture any better life than the agonized one we currently have. What we really mean by imagination is the power to summon up alternatives. When we are sad, we can’t imagine finding another job; we can’t imagine retraining or shifting profession. We can’t imagine not minding what the gossip says about us. We can’t imagine finding another partner and letting ourselves trust someone again...”

Coronavirus Will Change the World Permanently. Here’s How.

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/19/coronavirus-effect-economy-life-society-analysis-covid-135579>

Rainy Wedding

An imaginative story to touch your heart

<https://www.npr.org/2012/05/20/153116028/rainy-wedding>

Books

Imagine: How Creativity Works

Jonah Lehrer

Kindred

Octavia E. Butler

The Ocean at the End of the Lane

Neil Gaiman

Movies & TV

[Landfill Harmonic](#)

[The Big Flower Fight](#)

[Whose Line is it Anyway?](#)

Finding Neverland

Big Fish

Pan’s Labyrinth

Life of Pi

[Black Mirror](#)

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