

Imagination of Pandemic Proportions

Sermon 1/24/20201 by Pam El-Dinary

Introduction

Looking at *Imagination*--our Soul Matters theme for the month of January--I was captivated by the topic of Imagination and the Pandemic. This week, though, it's been tough for me to feel imaginative about the coronavirus, having learned that three people across different parts of my life died from COVID. Rather than abandon my topic, I decided to take its lessons to heart and hold both devastation and imagination side-by-side. I'm reminded of the Chinese character for *Crisis*, which includes the characters for both *Danger* and *Opportunity*. And that's how I think about COVID-19.

Pre-COVID Nostalgia

In our imagination, it's often tempting to get nostalgic about the good ole' days before COVID and to want to get back to normal as soon as possible. Aww, let's go ahead! Let's step back in time to the days before we'd even heard of COVID-19: We worshipped in a sanctuary with large gatherings. We sang hymns, completely unmasked. We even shared food at coffee hour. As a nation, we shopped in stores, went to school in classrooms, and even greeted people with handshakes.

Sounds pretty good, right? So why does Arundhati Roy, in our first reading, assert that "Nothing could be worse than a return to normality."? Let's consider more deeply whether things were actually all that great. Roy points out such unsavory features as "prejudice...hatred...avarice..dead ideas...dead rivers... smoky skies"--and she questions whether we really want to carry those "carcasses" with us into the future.

Squelching of Imagination (Pre-COVID)

Some other pre-COVID sources suggest that we were living in a numbed-out time, squelching our collective imagination. In her 2019 article "Wild Imagination," Geneen Marie Haugen wrote:

...via screens and headphones – we live amidst the greatest colonization of the imagination ever known. The images and ideas we ponder are often – maybe mostly – implanted through political or commercial advertising, which asks little of us except for a willingness to turn to stimulation provided by (usually) a screen, where we may be programmed to believe, to want, to dislike, to crave, to shun, to desire... Let us pause for a moment to ask, who controls the images that allure

us, that may direct our efforts toward a better car, a holiday, new technology? Who is streaming the script? Without the vigorous occupation of collective imagination by visionary persons who have no industrial, consumerist, or military agenda, planetary well-being is under siege. We need images of alternatives to endless war and ecocide, we need images that guide us toward purposeful creation, toward human/Earth coherence and sacred intimacy...

And as early as 2014, Canadian sociologist Max Haiven wrote:

Capitalism relies not only on the brutal repression of workers in factories and fields: it also relies on conscripting our imaginations. On a basic level, it relies on each of us imagining ourselves as essentially isolated, lonely, competitive economic agents. It relies on us imagining that the system is the natural expression of human nature, or that it is too powerful to be changed, or that no other system could ever be desirable. On a broad level, it works by transforming what we imagine is valuable in ways that see us orient our actions towards activities that will reproduce the status quo.

The COVID Wake-up Call (The Beautiful Oops)

Capitalism relies on conscripting our imaginations, and our screens spoon-feed us what to imagine. Perhaps it took a pandemic to break the spell. As Arundhati Roy observes, “coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could.” Her optimism is that this rupture “offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves.” She asserts, “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”

Perhaps, then, COVID-19 was the crisis that gave us, not only danger, but also an opportunity to see things differently. A portal between our past and a possible future. A global *Beautiful Oops* that called us to imagination.

Ingenuity

So, what have we done with this opportunity in response to the pandemic? We’ve found new ways to connect with one another, to worship, to work, to eat, to exercise--new ways to nourish body, mind and spirit. New ways of using our imaginations.

I have taken delight in some of the creative responses for coping with COVID--such as the child who made a hugging curtain so she could hug her grandparents. Or the guy who designed a mobile bowling alley for birthday parties and other events. Or the

restaurant that created bumper tables--where the person sits in the middle of a round table on wheels, surrounded by an innertube.

Last night's church auction was another testament to the imagination at play, right here in our congregation. Just the fact that we were able to pull it off during a pandemic was a feat in itself. And the events up for bidding seek to stir our imaginations as we carry on through this pandemic.

Imagination and Catastrophizing (and Imagination as a Remedy)

As wonderful as all these new imaginings may be, it sure hasn't been all sunshine and rainbows. It's important to acknowledge that the imagination unleashed by COVID definitely has a shadow side. That is, when times get tough, it can be easy to get pulled into imagining the worst, catastrophizing.

In a *Psychology Today* article, Dr. Cathy Malchiodi, PhD, observes:

Imagining what the future will bring post-pandemic is daunting for most of us. Our brains are wired to choose negative scenarios over positive ones. I know that my worst days so far have been those on which I cannot visualize anything other than my current narrative—unending physical distancing, donning a mask to go pick up groceries, and staring at the computer screen for yet another meeting, webinar, or session with a patient.

Dr. Malchiodi goes on to say:

“But in order to get through this marathon, we now must begin to see beyond it with not only imagination, but also with a sense of self-efficacy. What I call “pretend skills” are key to how we will arrive at the finish line months from now...”

The title of her article drives the point home-- “Imagination in the Time of Pandemic: This is when “pretend” really comes in handy.”

So, even as our imagination might get carried away with gloom and doom, we can take charge of that same imagination to pull us out of the abyss.

“Can you keep from crying by considering things?” asked Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*.

The Queen replied, “That's the way it's done... Nobody can do two things at once.” Mindfulness practices make good use of our inability to do two things at once--by focusing on the breath or a mantra or a visualization to bring us into the present moment--using imagination to take a break from the pain of imagined worries.

What's more, imagination has the power to move us beyond escape to crafting a new reality, using that self-efficacy that Dr. Malchiodi was talking about. Futurist Angela Ogunjala says in an NPR interview:

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? ...When it comes to our futures, we have hope; we have fear. But sometimes we forget that we also have influence. And that means we can choose the futures we want to work towards. Nothing is written in stone.

Turning the Year--Imagining Our Future

"We can choose the futures we want to work towards." The turning of the year is a season when many of us take time to think about the futures we want to work towards. In the past several weeks, I've heard so many people talking about how they couldn't wait to be done with 2020 and to start 2021. My observation on that sentiment was that 2021 would be starting out much like 2020 ended. We're not flipping a switch here, like we did at the beginning of this pandemic. Instead, we are easing into a new reality, day by day.

Return to Normal?

Speaking of new realities, in case you haven't heard, there's now a vaccine for COVID-19! Even though the rollout will take time, the mere existence of the vaccine stirs the imagination. Many of us may be imagining getting back to our favorite restaurants, traveling, visiting loved ones. We may think of this as "getting back to normal." I'm going to push back on that way of thinking and assert that there can be no such thing as a return to normal. Consider returning to your favorite restaurant. Is it really going to be the same experience as before? Isn't it going to be a fresh delight to sit at a table, in ambiance, and eat still-hot food from plates using silverware? Even if we end up traveling to familiar places, won't it feel like a miracle simply to be doing so? When we get together with long-missed loved ones, is it really going to be the same as before?--or will our hugs be tighter, our smiles brighter, our conversations deeper? These experiences will all be changed because we ourselves have changed.

Here and Now Possibilities

I say let's stop wasting our imagination on a return to normal. What's more, let's not gaze so much into that future that we stop imagining possibilities for the here and now.

Take, for example, the vast improvement my daughter is seeing in this semester's online instruction. Last year, when classes pivoted to distance learning mid-semester, professors scrambled to navigate the technology--and learning felt very slipshod, awkward, and unfulfilling. As this new semester starts out online, she's impressed at

how imaginative the professors have become, leveraging technology to create engaging opportunities for learning.

Let's keep putting our imaginations to use to make today brighter--to make the most of the moment we're in. Let's keep going with ideas like hugging curtains, mobile bowling alleys, and bumper tables.

New Changes to Carry with Us

And as we do look toward the future, let us not be overly eager to get rid of all of the changes that COVID brought us. Some of them have served us--and the planet--well. Perhaps we don't need to run to the grocery store for every little thing. Maybe we don't need to rush back to long commutes every single day. Maybe we can continue to use video chats to stay connected between visits. COVID might soon be a thing of the past. As ready as we are to be done with its dangers, let's not lose sight of its opportunities.

Forward Leaps, Not Backward Glances

And when we do imagine the future, let's think forward leaps rather than backward glances. Instead of trying to get back to the "same old, same old," let's step boldly into the future. As Arundhati Roy suggests, let's walk through the portal "ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."

Fighting for a new reality begins with envisioning it. In the book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann writes:

The prophet engages in futuring fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before the implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing. The same royal consciousness that makes it possible to implement anything and everything is the one that shrinks imagination because 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 futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.

Opportunity (for Giving) --

Which brings me to an Opportunity. An Opportunity for the ministry of Imagination. An Opportunity for Giving.

Each week, we invite you to participate in one Opportunity for Giving to ground us and guide us as we bring our love and our faith out into the world around us. In doing this work, we fulfill part of our mission, to ignite compassion into action.

This week's Opportunity for Giving is to create a visioning board:

Think of an area that touches your heart, where you hope to see transformation. Maybe it's related to the pandemic--to things you hope to be able to do in the future or a new way that you want to live in the here and now. Or maybe it has to do with racial justice, our democracy, climate change. It can be something that may seem impossible to achieve in your lifetime--even an area where you feel utterly powerless.

Take some time in the next few days to envision the world you would like to see. Imagine it in as much detail as possible. As you visualize the details, also imagine what it would feel like to have achieved your vision.

To kick things up a notch, represent your ideas in a visioning board. You could create it on paper--writing the words and drawing or painting pictures. You could cut out words and pictures from magazines. Or you could create it on your computer with clip-art and maybe even memes or YouTube links that support your vision. However you curate them, keep the images in a prominent place where you can see them each day. As you look at the images, imagine the feelings such a transformation could evoke.

In the book *Your Spacious Self*, Stephanie Bennet Vogt writes:

Creating an image of what you want your life to look and feel like ... is a powerful message to send to the unconscious mind. The unconscious doesn't know the difference between reality and the ideal image. By surrounding yourself with the energetic signature of these images, the unconscious will begin to organize a whole new reality based on these powerful intentions.

The title of that chapter is "Act As If." Former US Representative John Lewis championed the very same. The *On Being* podcast for today's 8th Principle discussion mentions an interview in which John Lewis expressed that you have to know in your mind the world that you want to create--and you have to live "as if." Even as you are working with what is, you are also applying the power of human imagination and courage to hold the world view that you are working towards.

A visioning board can help us clarify the world we are striving to create so that we can begin to bring it into being. I encourage you to give it a try, even if you're skeptical. Maybe even especially if you're skeptical.

'There's no use trying,' [you may say]: 'one can't believe impossible things.'

'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' [say I].

I'm not asking you to believe six impossible things before breakfast. I'm just asking you to imagine one impossible thing, in vivid detail.

Just give it a try.

Imagine what it might do.

May it be so, and Amen.