

The Courage to Imagine

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All of who we are is all of what we know. Our culture, our faith, our family of origin – each shape us from an early age and create all that we know of the world around us and influence how we engage with it. Our origins create us. From my culture, I knew what was expected of me as a mother and a wife, I knew what jobs and vocations were valued, I knew what clothes to wear and what jokes to tell. From my childhood faith I knew atheism and a rejection of any sort of God. From my family of origin, I knew both divorce and unconditional love, I knew life with a single mother, I knew of the impermanence of moving from house to house, and the deep bond with a sister. So this shaped what I expected of myself as a mother, my aspiration to be a nurse, my atheistic outlook on life and crafted an example of the love I expected from a partner. And yet while this produced an outward appearance of success and fulfillment, in some ways I struggled. What I ascertained from my surroundings did not always align with what I held true in my heart. And so I had to re-imagine. Through a series of decisions that simultaneously broke my heart and set me free, I let go of the aspiration to be a mother. As pieces of my life crumbled around me I re-imagined faith and fostered a relationship with a loving God. This led to the pursuit of an entirely unexpected career- ministry! What I knew from my upbringing was at odds with what was true to me – so I imagined a different way forward, in some ways out of alignment with expectations and norms. I made courageous moves to shape my life into one of inward joy and satisfaction.

Last week, we explored those small acts of courage that nonetheless create great change in our lives. This week we take one step backwards. Before we create change, we need to envision it. This is the courage of imagination! Why is this brave? We are questioning all we were raised to know as we came of age within a vacuum of our own culture, family, and faith traditions. We leave the familiar for the novel, the known for the true.

As an undergraduate student I studied cultural anthropology. I learned how culture shapes individuals in profound ways. The colors we view, for example, are derived from the language we speak. There are myriad shades of green and blue – and different shades are seen or not seen depending on the language of each culture. There are certain shades of blue and green that we have no name for in English, and so we cannot see them. Think of a color wheel. If we have a name for a particular shade, those of us with sight can pick it out. If it remains unnamed, we cannot observe a difference from another shade. We can only know what we can name. Or culture-bound illnesses. The culture we are raised in determines some of the illnesses we can suffer from. Some illnesses are universal – cancer, AIDS, smallpox. And yet others are culture specific – such as the disease of anorexia within Western cultures. People in Latin American cultures can suffer from what is called “attack of the nerves,” something we have no name for and thus do not experience in the predominant culture here. Neither culture bound nor universal ailments are any more or less painful, harmful, or real. Yet, again, we can only experience what we know. All of who we are is all of what we know. Breaking beyond this – imagining the new – this takes courage.

Today, I want to highlight experiences of our faith traditions. In our reflection today, we offer ideas that run contrary to the dominant faith and culture found in this country: that of the Abrahamic faiths. As already noted, we are the culture and faith we were raised in – this means we each have our own origin stories. So, too, does each faith. The origin stories of each faith tradition shape both the faith itself as well as the lives of the faith followers. Let us explore some contradicting origin stories.

There is a creation story from the indigenous peoples of North America narrating the journey of Skywoman. Skywoman plummeted to earth from the sky above, saved by the wings of a goose who flew up to meet her and break her fall. All of the animals below gathered and realized there was no place on earth where Skywoman could live. While Skywoman precariously stood on the body of a turtle, the animals searched for mud that could create the land for Skywoman to live – each sea creature dove below the water in search of the earthy substance that lay at

the bottom of the ocean. One animal even died in this quest. And yet they found it. And Skywoman spread the mud over the shell of the turtle and the land grew, and the earth was made. Skywoman had brought with her gifts, and she pulled from her pocket fruits and seeds and all sorts of plants. The world shifted from brown to green as Skywoman and all of the animals had vegetation to eat. Together, Skywoman and the animals co-created this beautiful earth as we know it.¹

What do we learn from this tale? We learn of an equality between humans and all other sorts of animals – there is no hierarchy. We learn that nature is a gift. We learn the earth is something to be cherished. Can you imagine the impact this would have on the lives of those raised within the teachings of this faith? To juxtapose this, we have the creation story of Judaism and Christianity – the tale of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. God placed these two original humans in a perfect garden, and, as stated in Genesis, “God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”² Eve subsequently eats the fruit of a forbidden tree, and thus humans are cursed with original sin. In this story there is likewise a tale of a woman and her natural surroundings. Yet where one enjoyed the earth, the other tasted sweet fruit and was banished. One was co-creator, the other was granted dominion.³ Through these stories we identify and orient ourselves in the world. Can you see where one story culminated in the destruction of the earth and a climate crisis, while the other encourages a partnership with the earth, and a deep respect for all of its inhabitants? Many in the dominant culture in our nation, even if not identified as Jewish or Christian have been shaped by this famous narrative. We are taught to see ourselves as the pinnacle of the natural world, and our collective actions reflect this. In working towards climate justice and animal rights, we need to imagine a new story. We need to imagine a story of coexistence and co-creation with all life on this planet.

¹ *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, pgs. 3-5

² Genesis 1:28 NRSV

³ *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, pg. 7

I wonder of the impact of the sacred in world religions crafted millennia ago by people in drastically different cultures. I think, for instance, of contrasting these culturally well-known Abrahamic faiths with Taoism. The Tao – which is so fundamental to this eastern faith, has no translation in English. Just like with color, we can only know what we can name. In working to understand this concept, I lift up a quote of ancient philosopher Laotse, as translated by author Alan Watts,

The great Tao flows everywhere, to the left and to the right
All things depend upon it to exist, and it does not abandon them.
To its accomplishments it lays no claim.
It loves and nourishes all things but does not lord over them. ⁴

The Tao is both immanent and transcendent, both surpassing that which is knowable and ordinary, as well as held intimately within it. The Tao is not a deity akin to a monotheistic or polytheistic entity or entities. Instead, the Tao is an essence – it is all around us, a source of love and nourishment – not commanding nor assigning duties but serving as the core of goodness. The Tao is a great mystery. Laotse wrote, “It is there within us all the while. Draw upon it as you will, it never runs dry.”⁵ This understanding is fundamental to the faith- the Tao is everywhere. I think of this brief exchange. A student asked his Tao Master, “What is the Tao?” the Master replied, “Your everyday mind.”⁶ The Tao is a way of life.⁷ So what different ideas do we engage with? How can we re-imagine our own faith beliefs to enhance our lives and grow closer to our true selves? The life of the Taoist is one in balance, with nature and with all life. It is not a faith with an emphasis on obedience or a surrender to the divine. We do not have a duty to an entity, nor do we follow a moral law. There is no future reward; life is the

⁴ *The Tao is Silent* by Raymond M. Smullyan pg. 37

⁵ *Ibid* pg. 21

⁶ *Ibid* pg. 16

⁷ *Ibid* pg. 15

reward. We are guided to craft a life of “spiritual tranquility” here and now.⁸ It is a faith in the goodness of human nature, and the inherent goodness of all we are surrounded with.⁹

I think, too, of lessons we learn of good and bad. Within our families – when and how were we punished or praised? In our faith traditions and cultures – what was rewarded? Are we saved or damned? Are these consequences experienced in a different realm after life? Or is it this realm – are heaven or hell how we live here, with each other, now? I want to explore another narrative– one of karma, found in the Buddhist tradition. Buddhist monk Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote, “Beings are owners of their actions, the heirs of actions; they spring from their actions, are bound to their actions, are supported by their actions.”¹⁰ We are intimately connected to and interwoven with each of our choices – good or bad, whether the repercussions are realized in this lifetime, or – within in this faith of rebirth and multiple lives –the effects and consequences are experienced in a following life. Our actions – wholesome or unwholesome – yield corresponding results. So when we say, “treat another as you would like to be treated,” the advice becomes quite literal. In re-imagining these theological ideas of good and bad, reward and punishment, we examine a faith where we are crafting our own futures each day. Karma is an “imminent, universal law” – unwholesome actions trigger suffering, wholesome actions result in happiness.¹¹ What we offer to the world is directly correlated with what we receive.

I want to pause for a moment to get more personal and more concrete. We explored much related to faith – origin stories, our relationship with nature, our understanding of the divine, our heavenly or earthly punishments and rewards. I wonder of those things we need to courageously re-imagine as we continuously shape our adult lives. Imagination is the catalyst to change – to encourage and inspire us to go to psychotherapy or physical therapy or occupational therapy or rehab or to follow any sort of medication regimen. Imagination is the catalyst to create art and beauty and goodness. If we are immersed in grief, may we imagine

⁸ *The Tao is Silent* by Raymond M. Smullyan pg. 37-38

⁹ *Ibid* pg. 75

¹⁰ *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering* by Bhikkhu Bodhi pg. 14

¹¹ *Ibid* pg. 17

creative ways to reconnect with those lost beloveds. If we struggle with an eating disorder, may we work to envision our own, true beauty and worth. If we suffer from a physical disability, may we imagine a new way of being in the world and orienting our bodies. If we are facing a terminal illness, may we reimagine how to find goodness and joy in each of our remaining days. If we have slipped into addiction, may we can re-imagine a sober life. If we have felt the bondage of mental illness, may we imagine a life of joy and compassion and peace. If we were stifled, may we imagine freedom. If we were ostracized and bullied and othered, may we re-imagine self-love. Perhaps it is like a shade of blue or green – we do not even know this life of love and acceptance, yet – it is there. We see family trees peppered with addiction and abuse and debilitating physical illnesses – this is not a life sentence. Whatever we are faced with – imagine a way to make it beautiful. This is courage. I think, too, of the world of justice work. We see all around us poverty and addiction and hunger and illness – but that is not the only way. We can imagine a society of harmony and equality and be the change we want to see in the world. What is within the grasp of our imagination is endless. This is courage. This is that first, crucial step in creating a better life. We know our origin stories – we know what yesterday was. In this moment, we know all that is. I wonder about tomorrow – what can be?

May it be so, and Amen.