

# **“When Imagination Is Not Our Friend”**

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When imagination runs wild, sometimes it can lead us astray. This Sunday we'll explore a variety of pitfalls and perils of imagination. But fear not! For each potential poison, we will explore possible antidotes.

### ***Introduction***

Imagination. When I say the word, what springs to mind? For me it's the stuff of dreams. It's fairy tales and art. It's ingenuity and invention. Sweet imagination--a source of progress, a source of delight.

But what about when imagination is not so sweet?

What about the ways our imagination can lead us astray? --

when dreams become nightmares--and we let those nightmares rule our lives.

With the help of abundant resources from the Soul Matters Worship packet, let's explore a variety of pitfalls and perils of imagination. We'll ease into it, starting with the lighter and more benign, then working our way to the heavier and more nefarious.

But fear not! For each potential poison, we'll explore possible antidotes.

### ***Imagining What Will Make Us Happy***

So, starting with a relatively harmless way that imagination is not our friend:

We often imagine what will make us happy in the future.

Spoiler alert! We're bad at predicting it!

Backed by a large body of research, Harvard Psychology Professor Daniel Gilbert says:

We overestimate how happy we will be on our birthdays, we underestimate how happy we will be on Monday mornings, and we make these mundane but erroneous predictions again and again, despite their regular disconfirmation.<sup>1</sup> In the Hidden Brain podcast “You vs. Future You; Or Why We're Bad at Predicting Our Own Happiness”<sup>2</sup> Gilbert explains why:

First: We don't imagine events accurately.

Imagination oversimplifies, focusing on only a few salient details, rather than considering an event in all its fullness.

Second: We don't know who we will be when we are experiencing that event.

Imagination underestimates how much we will change--our interests, preferences, values.

These errors of imagination often cause us to make choices that are counter-productive to our happiness.

## **Antidote**

So, how can we train our imaginations to make better predictions?

Sorry, we can't-- that's according to 15 years of research.

The antidote to making better choices for ourselves is to use a completely different approach. Instead of imagining your future, ask people who are already in your future how they feel about it. For almost any situation, there are people who are already doing what you're imagining--and they are experiencing emotions about it.

“How could someone else possibly know what I would like?” you say, “I’m unique!”

Well, guess what --says Dan Gilbert--you’re really not! We delude ourselves into thinking so, when in fact we’re more similar to others than we are different. If you’re still dubious about outsourcing your happiness, think about whether you rely on reviews of restaurants, movies, online purchases. Gilbert asserts that, although the surrogate

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Gilbert, as quoted in

<https://bakadesuyo.com/2011/06/whats-the-main-thing-we-can-learn-from-harvar/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/490972873>

approach isn't perfect, it's still way better than imagination when it comes to predicting future happiness.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Imagination in the form of Worry***

Imagination is not our friend when it comes in the form of Worry. In today's reading, Rev. Michelle Collins writes:

I imagine the worst and prepare for it in my mind, as if worry were a form of protection.<sup>4</sup>

"You Need To Stop Wasting Time Worrying" says Ryan Holiday in a YouTube video reflection of that title.<sup>5</sup>

These ideas feel timely, but they are not new.

First century philosopher Seneca, in a letter titled "On groundless fears," wrote:

"There are more things ... likely to frighten us than there are to crush us; we suffer more often in imagination than in reality."

21st century Lori Huica explains that the ancient Stoics "saw no benefit to complaining about things outside of our control."<sup>6</sup> Although it's good to evaluate our actions in terms of our values, problems arise when we overthink future possible outcomes or ruminate over past mistakes. As Seneca put it, "We are in the habit of exaggerating, or imagining, or anticipating, sorrow."<sup>7</sup> The Stoics warned against potential dangers of allowing our imagination to run wild in these ways. Negative thought loops can lead to paralyzing fear rather than learning from mistakes and moving on.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/11H2Z-NjMg-9xyCg9wsccpzBF1ApWL6zYw1h8dfDCJyI/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.atjhztyur44a>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGFKO\\_\\_bjkM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGFKO__bjkM)

<sup>6</sup>

<https://aureliusfoundation.com/blog/we-suffer-more-in-imagination-than-in-reality-explained-2022-04-01/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## Antidote

So, what is the antidote to worry? The ancient Stoics suggested that worry can and should be “transformed by our own will, inner strength, and rationality.”<sup>8</sup> Modern day Stoic enthusiast DhruvMakwana offers these “Four R’s” to help put this into practice<sup>9</sup>:

1. Remember: Anxiety is counter-productive to any situation, mistake or not.
2. Reduce: [Ask yourself] What about this situation is within my control?
3. Revise: Challenge the judgements that lead to anxiety – where do they come from? How could you be wrong?
4. Reframe: Is there any opportunity for virtuous actions here? What positives can you be grateful for, the absence of which would have made the situation worse?

Lori Huica sums up by saying,

Imagination can therefore either be a channel for self-improvement and mental strength, or a medium facilitating inner suffering. What we decide to do with it, in Stoic fashion, is our choice.<sup>10</sup>

## *Imprisoned by Imagination*

A still peskier way imagination is not our friend is when we become imprisoned by it. Consider the sad analogy of training elephants for the circus. Have you ever wondered how a 6,000-pound elephant is so easily controlled? Kelly Wendorf of The EQUUS Academy<sup>11</sup> explains that handlers start training the elephant as a baby, shackling its legs to a twelve-foot length of chain staked to the ground. The baby elephant learns that it can walk a few feet in any direction but cannot move beyond that 12-ft diameter circle. The shackles stay on until the elephant has grown to almost 30 times its size. When the

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<https://aureliusfoundation.com/blog/we-suffer-more-in-imagination-than-in-reality-explained-2022-04-01/>

<sup>9</sup> @DhruvMakwana as presented in

<https://aureliusfoundation.com/blog/we-suffer-more-in-imagination-than-in-reality-explained-2022-04-01/>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>

<https://www.equusinspired.com/essays/lfy/b4ypxaere7g-jnxks-z43c5-lazka-544ax-rteky-xnzt5-m9wms-s478y?rq=imagination>

trainers remove the shackles, the elephant is now physically free, yet it never again wanders beyond a twelve-foot circle.

“We too are bound by invisible chains,” says Wendorf, [quoting here] “They come in the form of unexamined limiting beliefs and narratives that we have about ourselves. Stories like, ‘I’m not good enough,’ ‘I don’t deserve to be radiantly happy’,... ‘life is hard’ are examples of narratives that lurk so close to us we may not recognize them. Like the baby elephant, our narrative was hammered into the ground during our childhood by our family, our church, and/or our teachers—sometimes unconsciously, sometimes deliberately. The stake and its chain ensured we did not wander outside the fray of our twelve feet...”<sup>12</sup> [end quote]

## **Antidote**

What’s the antidote to imprisoning thoughts? Wendorf offers:

“You may have up until now examined lots of old narratives and beliefs, and if you are a life-long learner and consciousness explorer, you’ll discover there is always more to deconstruct. How do you find them? Trace invisible threads of feelings such as frustration, resentment, anger, blame, or resignation. They will lead you to the chain and ultimately the stake to which it is attached.”<sup>13</sup>

Wendorf encourages us to examine our limiting beliefs--their origins, how they imprisoned us, our attachments to them, and how we might break free.

## ***Imagination Co-opted by Media (Capitalism and Politics)***

One specific way our imagination can be imprisoned is when it’s co-opted by media.

In the article “Wild Imagination,” Geenan Marie Haugen asserts:

...via screens and headphones – we live amidst the greatest colonization of the imagination ever known. The images and ideas we ponder are often ... 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... <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> <https://parabola.org/2019/05/16/wild-imagination-by-geneen-marie-haugen/>

## **Antidote**

The antidote to co-opted imagination? Haugen invites us to pause and 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?<sup>15</sup>

She asserts, “Without the vigorous occupation of collective imagination by visionary persons who have no industrial, consumerist, or military agenda, planetary well-being is under siege.”<sup>16</sup>

Haugen advises, “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.”<sup>17</sup>

As Christiane Pelmas put it in today’s reading, “We must ...become brave and ingenious collaborators with the Dream in ways we could not have imagined.”

## ***Imagination That Dehumanizes Others***

And now we arrive at perhaps the most nefarious peril of imagination: dehumanizing others. Activist adrienne maree brown expresses it this way:

We are in an imagination battle. Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown and Renisha McBride and so many others are dead because, in some white imagination, they were dangerous. And that imagination is so respected that those who kill, based on an imagined, radicalized fear of Black people, are rarely held accountable. ... Imagination turns Brown bombers into terrorists and white bombers into mentally ill victims. ...I often feel I am trapped inside someone else's imagination, and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free.<sup>18</sup>

As our Story For All Ages suggests, even when we all see the same cat, we may see it differently--and sometimes we imagine the worst.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy*

Ross Gay offers the other perspective, the imagination of those who are feared:

I shudder at the emotional and psychic burden we've laid on the young black and brown New Yorkers... Isn't it, for them, for us, a gargantuan task not to imagine that everyone is imagining us as criminal? ... Time and again we think the worst of anyone perceiving us: walking through the antique shop; standing in front of the lecture hall; entering the bank; considering whether or not to go camping someplace or another; driving to the hardware store; being pulled over by the police. ...The imagination, rather than being cultivated for connection or friendship or love, is employed simply for some crude version of survival.<sup>19</sup>

## Antidote

What's the antidote to an imagination that dehumanizes others? American Philosopher Martha Nussbaum suggests that it is a reframing of imagination. In a C-Span video titled "From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law," she asserts:

... Disgust relies on moral obtuseness. It is possible to view another human being as a slimy slug or a piece of revolting trash only if one has never made a serious good-faith attempt to see the world through that person's eyes or to experience that person's feelings. Disgust imputes to the other a subhuman nature. How, by contrast, do we ever become able to see one another as human? Only through the exercise of imagination.<sup>20</sup>

So, how can we reframe our thinking? I turn to excerpts from an Image magazine article entitled, "Healing the Imagination: Art Lessons from James Baldwin.":

Our society is grappling with a soul-sickness that is ultimately an infection of our imagination... However—and this is crucial—the imagination is acquired. It is learned. It is neither instinctual nor universal. ... Rather, the imagination is a form of habit, a learned, bodily disposition to the world...

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.thesunmagazine.org/articles/26728->

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.c-span.org/program/book-tv/from-disgust-to-humanity/221677>

How to heal the imagination? Perhaps this is what the arts are for. ...Our imaginations are susceptible to malformation depending on what images we feed them, what stories they soak up... Grabbing hold of us by the senses, artworks have a unique capacity to shape our attunement, our feel for the world. The question isn't whether the arts will shape us, but which..<sup>21</sup>

## ***Conclusion***

To wrap things up:

Imagination is not our friend when it is founded on untested beliefs and skewed thinking, often based in fear. In contrast, imagination that questions our core beliefs and considers other possibilities can open us up to transformation. As Rev. Michelle Collins says:

And yet, I know that imagination is also how we dream of something better...

If I can imagine worst-case scenarios, I can also imagine resistance, resilience, and hope. Perhaps my imagination is not necessarily my friend... but maybe, just maybe, it can become my ally.<sup>22</sup>

May it be so. And Amen.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://imagejournal.org/article/healing-the-imagination-art-lessons-from-james-baldwin/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://docs.google.com/document/d/11H2Z-NjMg-9xyCg9wsccpzBF1ApWL6zYw1h8dfDCJyI/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.atjhztyur44a>