

Sermon “From Stillness to Imagination”
Ostara Hollyoak, Worship Associate, Channing Memorial Church

Today we cross the bridge from our 2020 capstone theme of “Stillness” to our first monthly theme for calendar year 2021-- “Imagination.” I’d like to honor this passage by spending some time on the bridge, itself, visiting some of the landmarks that lie along it. I’ve picked out three to pause before and gaze at, and to thoughtfully circumambulate, before moving on. These three landmarks are: The present moment; the concrete and particular; and relatedness. I’ll introduce these briefly up front, and then we’ll explore each element in a little more depth.

First, why did I pick “*the present moment*” as a hallmark of transition from Stillness to Imagination? Isn’t imagination a forward-facing thing?

Yes, indeed, it can be; and when we think of imagination we often think of looking to the future. But imagination is absolutely, necessarily, rooted in the here and now. Through stillness we encounter the cracks between things-- those spaces we don’t notice when we’re continuously immersed in the linear, looking forward and backward. It’s engagement with these spaces, these cracks between things, that leads us to what comes out of these openings: Imagination and its fruits.

Secondly, “*the concrete and particular*”: I do feel like I’m cheating a bit here, picking two words that need to be connected by “and.” But neither of these quite does it alone, and no single other word seems to substitute. So, this phrase will have to do.

This choice, also, may seem counter-intuitive. When we speak of imagination we might use phrases like “flights of fancy.” But imagination must, necessarily, be grounded-- solidly connected to the concrete. When we’re off in a purely mental realm, we easily lose touch with the concrete, the particular, the real. When we return to stillness, we’re guided back gently to our immediately tangible reality. And this grounded place is, as we shall see, imagination’s launching pad.

As for the significance, here, of “*relatedness*”: It’s common to think of imagination as deeply personal-- and it is; but not in the sense of something our separate selves “own” and control. The fruits of our imagination grow when we allow ourselves to be, as it were, “bigger” than our small and disconnected selves. In stillness, we encounter our deepest, innermost self-- which is, paradoxically, also, our most connected, expanded self. It is this expanded self that is the conduit for imagination.

I've spoken of these three things as though they are distinct. As we proceed, you may notice they all overlap and circle back around to one another. But we'll do our best to tease out these three strands, so we can see each one as they braid back together.

Let's look, now, in more detail at the present moment as a feature of the bridge between stillness and imagination.

While a future focus *can* be imaginative, projecting into the future also *can be* quite restrictive. Likewise, while reflecting on the past can be a creative and growth producing endeavor, dwelling on the past can constrict our souls in a way that restrains imagination.

The term "rumination" has been on my mind lately, partly because Channing's book group is reading a work called *Resilience* by Melanie Choukas-Bradley. The author frequently refers to ruminative thinking, which she describes as, "recurring negative thought patterns." I've been thinking about how, when we ruminate, we repeat to ourselves a story in an attempt to control a situation or to make sense of it. To quote from another Channing read, *Your Spacious Self*, which is the source for our "Clearing As a Spiritual Practice" group, author Stephanie Bennett Vogt writes, "No matter how colorful they are, stories have nothing to do with what is going on in present time." (Stephanie Bennett Vogt, *Your Spacious Self*, p. 77.)

The stories we spin when we ruminate are about our interpretation of the past, and represent our predictions for the future. Unfortunately, the meaning we're making of our experience when we ruminate is confining and not necessarily in alignment with what's real. These stories keep us from actually experiencing what's happening right now. This use of imagination-- if, indeed, it can be called such-- is unproductive, holding us at a distance from our actual, present experience, and shielding us from connection with creative imagination.

Returning to the present, we step out of rumination so we can imagine outside its box. If we want to live imaginatively, we have to spend some of our time deeply in the present.

I'd like to return, for a moment, to *Goodnight Moon* to illustrate the significance of the concrete and particular as a feature of this bridge we're crossing. We begin *Goodnight Moon* "[i]n the great green room...."

Not a room, or even a “great green room,” but *the* “great green room.”

In the great green room
There was a telephone
And a red balloon
And a picture of--
The cow jumping over the moon
(*Goodnight Moon*, written by Margaret Wise)

Now *that's* concrete. *That's particular.* And the feeling this produces I find centering and absorbing. Speaking for myself, I feel pulled into this world and its stillness, and invited to settle there for a while.

The story ends spinning us out into the universal:

Goodnight stars
Goodnight air [..... (Pause)]
Goodnight noises everywhere

But it's all the particulars that are evoked leading up to it that infuse this last with meaning, and send us on our way feeling satisfied.

Imagination has to be grounded in the concrete and particular to be effective. Imaginings that don't spring from the imaginer's grounding in actual, particular reality fail to pull us into their dream world. They feel more illusory than actually imaginative, don't they?

Storytelling, and other art-making, must be *imaginative* to *captivate* us, but it also has to strike us as *true*, in some way.

Have you ever read a story-- perhaps a fantasy or science fiction story, or maybe something meant to be funny-- that, while cleverly novel, and seeming creative on the surface, failed to hold your attention? Where it felt like the author was spinning out worlds from thin air and missing the mark of making an impact on your insides? Where you sensed all too strongly the presence of the author just makin' stuff up?

And yet, the most wildly inventive, made up worlds can *feel* real to us, and even profoundly important, impacting the way we think and live.

How is a piece of utter fiction grounded in truth? The truthfulness of the story may lie in vivid descriptions that evoke somatic responses in us. Or the character's emotional reactions might ring true in our own living. Or the truth of a moral theme in the story might so resonate with our experience that the story feels fundamentally real and

significant to us. Or some other element of the story-- and probably a combination of more than one-- might lend it the weight of truth. The source of all of these, *ultimately*, is not the author's mental gymnastics or revelry in novelty, but his or her authentic experience. Stories, like children, must be given both roots and wings to thrive. And our imagination only wakes up and takes flight when we're on intimate terms with the concrete, particular, immediately lived experience that escapes us when we avoid coming to stillness.

And, finally, let's attend to the element of "relatedness."

I'd like to begin exploring relatedness by reflecting on gratitude. We've all heard and read about the benefits of practicing gratitude, including the fact that grateful people are happier people. And who doesn't want to be happier?

But while we know the practice of gratitude benefits us, we don't (I hope!) practice gratitude for our own benefit!

When we're grateful to another person, it's not about us-- it's about the other person. To the extent that it leads to *our happiness*, we might say that it's about our *connection* to that person and the blessing that connection brings us.

Now consider what you feel when, for example, you gaze at a particularly beautiful sunset, or stand on the shore of a peaceful lake. In this instance we might experience a more generalized feeling of gratitude for the blessing of a circumstance and its impact on us. It's about our connection with the world around us.

When we're grateful, we apprehend our relatedness to others and to the world around us. We see ourselves as part of something bigger, and we experience the world around us as alive, or ensouled. Feeling ourselves as part of this sacred web also bestows on us a sense of harmony..., which leads to a sense that we can trust. We ruminate less, because we feel less need to control.

What I'm trying to get at here is that the contentment or happiness we feel when we are spontaneously grateful, *or* when we *consciously* practice gratitude, is a perfectly *natural* state. It's just that when we're in alignment-- that is, when we're mindful (when we're paying attention)-- we open up inner space to *feel* the harmonious underpinning we experience as happiness. Of course, when we're in alignment we'll also feel things like sadness more deeply, since we're not shoving it down or off to the side. But the point is we shouldn't think of happiness as a *reward we get* when we're grateful.

But, you might ask, when I'm feeling grateful and feel a corresponding sense of ensoulment of the world around me, is that real or imaginary? One way of answering that is, "Does it matter?"

Allow me to, again, dip into Stephanie Bennett Vogt's *Your Spacious Self*. This is how she opens a chapter called, "Be Grateful":

Wondering what a one-minute practice of conscious gratitude might look like, I posed it as a question to myself one morning before getting out of bed. What popped up was the directive to "thank everything."

So I did-- in that *Goodnight Moon* children's book sort of way. I began by thanking everything I experienced for a whole minute as I did what I usually do to get ready for my day:

Thank you, body, for letting me sleep through the night (without having to get up and pee once). Thank you, bed, for being so yummy and cozy. Thank you, underwear, for being on sale when I bought you. Thank you, arms and legs, for being able to function so that I *can* get dressed. Thank you, squeak-in-the-closet-door, for reminding me to be grateful. Thank you breath...

(Stephanie Bennet Vogt, *Your Spacious Self*, p. 60.)

She goes on to talk about how her anticipated one minute turned into five minutes, and follows up with a short list of the beneficial effects she noticed emerging from this exercise, beginning with, "I was more present." She ends by saying, "Gratitude and clearing. They go hand in hand."

What leapt out at me when I read this passage was how she's speaking *to things*, *personally*, rather speaking *of things* as a "user" or "consumer." Her gratitude flips a switch that changes her *relationship* to things. The way she uses her imagination in gratitude allows her to relate to things differently without her, or her readers, needing to "go there," so to speak, about what is or isn't alive, or what does or doesn't have sentience, or consciousness, or a soul. The relationship is transformed without regard to her intellectual *position* about the matter. While we may want to stay away from being anthropomorphic, in a literal way, ascribing attributes of ourselves to other things and beings, we can still engage in I-Thou relationships, to quote Martin Buber, recognizing that we're all connected and essentially of the same stuff. Gratitude is, in its nature, an act of imagination, as it transforms us from the subject and actor of our world into the recipient of a gift given by a giver.

So, let us allow moments of stillness in our days that we may notice the gifts the moment brings; and let us open our imaginations to see the web of relationships on which this circle of gifting rides.

I feel I'd be remiss to close today without a brief mention of failures of imagination, specifically with a focus on the Covid-19 pandemic. I feel we've gotten where we are by a failure to imagine how this thing spreads-- exponentially, by way of concentric and interlocking circles. We've failed in imagining the interdependent web, and to convey the image of how connected we all are. When the first vaccine came out, and I learned that some extremely wealthy people have tried to use their resources to jump the line to get vaccines and to procure, for their doctors, the freezers needed to store them, I was struck anew by our collective failure to see ourselves as part of a larger whole, and that individual benefit can't be separated from the collective good.

And, finally, this points me to how critically important it is to teach ecology and webs, astronomy and vastness, history and ages, anthropology and cultural differences-- and all those things that flex the muscles of our imaginations, giving us a bigger and more complex picture of the world.

On this first Sunday of a new month and year, let us, like Janus, look forward and back. Let us stand on the bridge between stillness and imagination. Let us allow stillness and imagination to make us spiritually bigger... *as they do*. And let us, this week, remember that challenge to think of how we can use our imagination in service.