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Imagining the Future

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**“The Possible’s slow fuse is lit  
by the imagination.”  
*Emily Dickinson***

As Emily Dickinson points out, imagination lights the fuse of the possible and points us to the future. Victor E. Frankl's book title, *Yes to Life In Spite of Everything*, resonated with me, as it encapsulates the essence of our imaginative capabilities. The title compels us to venture into the unknown, both individually and collectively, fostering both detachment and a commitment to creating a better world.

## IMAGINATION AND SPIRITUALITY

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In *Attuned*, Thomas Hubl draws from the wisdom of Joanna Macy and Sam Mowe, who say:

This is a dark time with suffering and uncertainty. Like living cells in a larger body, it is natural that we feel the trauma of our world. So don't be afraid of the anguish you feel, or the anger or fear, because these responses arise from the depths of your caring and the truth of your interconnectedness with all beings” (1).

Their statement and the directive in Frankl's book title to say yes to life define the foundations of imaginative creativity. These statements validate our emotions and encourage us to use them as catalysts to reimage a society.

When I was young, my grandfather said there were only two things I needed to understand: history and culture. He further explained that history shares both the dark and creative sides of societies as they pursue their vision rooted in innovation. Culture is about the myths, stories, and ways people define who they are. These two realities are being reshaped and redefined as innovation and increased global interdependence dramatically impact the world's struggles. Both of these realities raise new questions and beliefs that challenge both our worldview and our definition of ourselves. Our creativity, as a potent force, empowers us to influence and reshape these realities.

Our imagination is not just a house key but a master key, unlocking our capacity to envision a future that offers hope even in the darkest of times. The creativity within us is a potent force capable of unleashing a sense of wonder and awe. In the depths of despair, our imagination becomes a beacon of hope, sparking the new and opening us to a more hope-filled future. It also serves as a mirror, reflecting our potential for personal growth and self-awareness.

When we unleash our imagination, we can see images, concepts, or visions that unlock a world of new possibilities. In *Possible*, William Ury states,

Creativity is an innate human capacity.  
Every child is born with it. We owe

virtually all human achievements—from science to art to music—to the practical deployment of our creative intelligence, both individual and collective.(160).

Ury believes that we must resist the temptation to create distractions that steer us away from the collective imagination. Our church, country, and globe are at a crossroads in these challenging times. Thus, our collective imagination, our shared responsibility, is not just essential but urgent. This urgency should motivate and compel us to embrace uncertainty and take daring strides toward a better future. The time for action is now. Opening to our imagination allows us to shape the future we desire as a tangible reality.

Unleashing our imagination is a profound spiritual journey that opens us to transformative experiences. Scripture is filled with people who imagined the possible and, with faith, left the known and walked into the unknown future.

- Moses led the Israelites through the desert to a promised land.
- Mary said yes to the angel and bore the child Jesus, who offered a new worldview.
- Jesus endured the agony of the garden before he embraced his final journey.
- The disciples were in the upper room, afraid to leave, yet when they left, they experienced the resurrection and walked with Jesus.

Each of these singular experiences demanded courage and hope for a new

tomorrow. They are testaments to the transformative power of the imagination. Moses, Mary, Jesus, and the disciples were all able to open their hearts and souls and walk from the midst of uncertainty into a new clarity.

Finally, each of these individuals modeled how our imagination calls us to transcend current reality and existing mental models. It is a risk because success and failure are often two sides of the same coin. The creative process often involves a tortuous path of intense failure, yet through perseverance, the breakthrough shockingly happens. It is a journey rooted in trust that God, through faith, will guide the steps of a scary, creative passageway.

Opening ourselves to imagination embraces opening one's heart and soul to vulnerability. Often, we will experience a sense of fragility, which means trusting in God's grace to open the path forward. As Brene Brown defines vulnerability in her book *Daring Greatly*, vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of purpose (2). That is the process of unleashing the imagination.

The spiritual call of these times is to enter the profound process of co-creating a new society. Often, the world we imagine or dream about is untested, and yet, through faith, what seems impossible becomes possible.

Both the religious and the secular world are looking at adaptation and change as processes necessary to our future world. In *Radical Curiosity*, Seth Goldenberg looks ahead:

As the world has become more complex, singular-solution frameworks no longer suffice. Today's challenges require interdisciplinary approaches, diverse perspectives, and the ability to remix existing knowledge into new cocktails fit for the occasion. As the activist poet reminds us, there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives (5).

My lifelong fascination with Disney, for example, led me to understand that the creative process is about both imagination and innovation or what they call *Imagineering*. Walt Disney, the founder, created a culture of having people imagine the new and then create it, thus the word *Imagineering*. The word is powerful because it links two crucial interlocking concepts: the ability to imagine and the ability to implement. As I studied their concepts and praxis, what struck me was that the process of being imaginative is rooted in faith, perseverance, failure, and breakthroughs. This process creates something that, once imagined, becomes a reality.

In *Awe*, Dascher Keltner defines "awe" as "the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world" (7). Awe is the power of thinking about the future, standing in awe of the challenges, and finding the

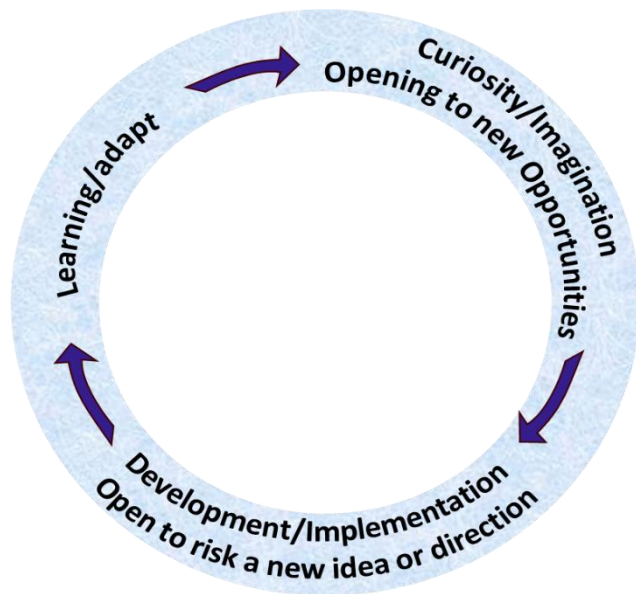
opportunity to create something new. The global reality of COVID-19 was a startling manifestation of awe. It paralyzed the globe, offering no simple solutions, causing loss of life and leaving people homebound to avoid this deadly virus.

In *Moonshot*, author Dr. Albert Bourla connects the moonshot with COVID-19:

Like the Kennedy moonshot, affecting life on earth, the work to develop our novel vaccine against COVID-19 was indeed a massive exercise in problem-solving, an exercise that allowed us to consolidate scientific knowledge of a decade within nine months and that will spillover effects in many other scientific areas, affecting life on Earth more than we thought at the beginning (xix).

Both Keltner and Bourla speak to the process of imagination. First, it takes a level of awe to unleash one's inner passion for something that solves a crucial issue. Second, when that happens, the group becomes open to the unimaginable, which not only becomes possible but also makes a significant difference, as did the COVID-19 vaccine.

In my experience, the imagination process has three critical elements: curiosity/imagination, development/implementation, and learning/adaptation. This process opens the window for the community or group to embrace a transcendent dream. It is an all-consuming belief that empowers the collective to create what seemed impossible in concept yet becomes tangible through perseverance and commitment.



## CURIOSITY AND IMAGINATION

In *Radical Curiosity*, Seth Goldenberg states,

Society has trained itself to move swiftly toward solutions. So fast that too often, we leap straight into answers before knowing the questions; we skate on the surface, misdiagnosing problems, assuming that every nail needs the same hammer. We are seduced by quick fixes, which somehow reassure us that we've done something, anything (3).

Goldenberg encourages readers to pause for a moment and explore how the quick-fix mentality impacts their thinking and the groups they participate in. He explains how people often tend to continue creating a circular loop and remain focused on what they already know. This is what is called remaining frozen in one's mental model. Goldenberg encourages them to take a moment and think about a time in their lives

when they imagined something and followed the path to creation.

When we unleash our curiosity and imagination, we experience a spiritual experience. It is embracing God's call to transcendence and detachment that opens our hearts and minds to new concepts, directions, or ideas. It is a sacred passageway that allows the community to enhance their sense of purpose and impact on society.

Three essential qualities are necessary for a group or individual to be curious or imaginative: inquisitiveness, open-mindedness, and the willingness to open themselves to understand beyond the known. Each of these aspects opens an avenue for exploration, musing, and considering possibilities.

When we look at any issue, it is essential to unleash the imagination nonjudgmentally. Being nonjudgmental opens the door to the possible. When we practice the discipline of imagining, we release the energy to see multiple paths or solutions, and we begin to appreciate how interconnected today's issues are. For example, we can see how the climatic crisis across the world has led to migration, the overwhelming destruction of nature and communities, and immense economic costs.

We tend to block our imagination through being comfortable with the known or with one's success. For example, Blockbuster researched and explored the model that became Netflix. Instead of following through, however, they tightly held on to

their existing mental model and financial success, which created the door to what we now call Netflix, which led, in turn, to Blockbuster's demise. That is why being imaginative is truly a spiritual experience; it often demands that our current success be left behind so that what never existed before might become a reality.

In *Radical Curiosity*, Seth Goldberg argues that “Radical Curiosity is the most significant expression of what it means to be an artist and a designer willing to leverage the full range of our senses to author new worlds”(10). Goldberg further asserts that Radical Curiosity opens us to questioning, probing our mental models, and reflecting on other disciplines and ideas to leverage that knowledge. As Goldberg states, “Learning has come to mean the new acquisition of new skills. Unlearning requires the skill of stepping outside of existing mental models and embracing new mental models” (41).

## DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION



The noted anthropologist Margaret Mead set the stage for the discussion of development and implementation when she said: “We are continually faced with great opportunities which are brilliantly disguised as unsolvable problems”(1). William Ury relies on her analysis to explore the idea of the possible in *Possible*. Ury shows how Margaret Mead speaks to holding in tension both the unsolvable challenges and the opportunities in order to get to the next step, the walking the path to the future. Both scholars agree that the development and implementation stages

are often more challenging and demanding than the imaginative process.

Once we have agreed on the direction, the next crucial step is to embrace our ability to release our assumptions, successes, and existing mental models that no longer serve our mission and purpose. This is often difficult because, unbeknownst to us, we become attached to our mental models, methods, and directions. As a group, we become comfortable and, at times, complacent, which leads us to hold on to our given assumptions and practices unconsciously, especially if we are successful.

When we enter the development and implementation phase, there are three essential questions:

- Who is the primary audience?
- What needs addressing?
- How will the group or individual benefit?

The COVID-19 epidemic, its resulting process, and its eventual vaccine addressed all three of these questions. Its primary audience was everyone; it addressed both the medical process of treating the sick and discovering a vaccine. It also allowed people to regain their lives and feel safe in their everyday environments. Finally, the ongoing availability of a vaccine creates a means for regaining one’s sense of normalcy and living one's life without fear.

The development of the COVID-19 vaccines involved people taking significant risks. One powerful reality was that the group working at BioNTech leveraged their full range of

serums. They had been experimenting with the mRNA platforms in relation to cancer and were simultaneously curious if that serum could be effective with other viruses. This led to ongoing experimentation, and eventually, the vaccine for COVID-19 was developed.

Again, the curiosity and imagination of the scientists, researchers, and doctors created a life-saving drug for the world. For them, it meant becoming detached from their primary research on cancer and imagining that learning, knowledge, and research could create a solution to the COVID crisis. Their willingness to risk, as scary as it was, allowed them to imagine a life-saving drug.

COVID-19, with its lockdown, brought new ways of living. Once society returned to a new standard, people were unwilling to give up certain benefits, like meeting on Zoom and working from home, conducting business online, to name a few. These new benefits allowed people to live their lives more freely and with greater flexibility after the virus.

## LEARN AND ADAPT



In a rapidly changing world, organizational leaders must become learners and adaptors. They must always be learners and questioners of current reality. This is not easy in a world that seeks certitude and minimal change.

Two fundamental aspects of being an adaptable and flexible group are making meaning and engaging in learning. These

two realities dance together and foster a commitment to ongoing change and reimagining.

The key to implementation is learning. For any successful imagination process, the organization must be aligned with a learning framework. The imagination process requires aligning the culture, learning, and implementation. This movement allows for flexibility, skill, and ongoing adaptation in real time.

In *Learning Organizations*, Peter Senge and Fred Kofman claim that “because of their commitment, openness, and ability to deal with complexity, people find security not in stability but in the dynamic equilibrium between holding on and letting go – of beliefs, assumptions, and certainties. What they know takes a second place to what they can learn, and simplistic answers are all less important than penetrating questions” (33).

These assertions speak to our time. In dealing with complexity, we need to acquire a sense of stability through exploring our previous assumptions and a sense of certainty to enter deeper into society's new generative questions. When the collective enters this process, it explores/ creates something new or radically different from what is held sacred and unchangeable.

To imagine and implement, the group must nurture a culture of seeking new knowledge, probing new questions, and searching for ways to implement. It is not easy to be open and receptive to this ongoing process. It means everyone needs to see their role as a learner and pioneer, which leads to initiation and imagination.

Goldberg poses several profound questions:

Why does society fail to recognize creativity and imagination as powerful tools for value creation? As societies and businesses face a diverse landscape of seemingly hopeless challenges, how can the language of imagination help us respond? Considering that we've imagined the current state of the world, can't we also reimagine our way out of it? (292).

The above leads to the profound question of our time: how do we, in a complex and

changing world, allow our imagination to create what the future will take for granted? One fundamental way is to be lifelong learners, seekers, and risk-takers for a transcendent dream. That is the fundamental foundation of the Christian journey.

Thus, through imagination, spirituality, process, and hard work, we can move forward toward our dream and goal of changing ourselves and our world for the greater happiness of us all and the glory of God.

## Imagining the Future



*Author and consultant, Mark Clarke, is a Senior Consultant for CommunityWorks, Inc. He is available for consultation and welcomes a conversation to discuss your thoughts and questions about his writings.*

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