

Preparation for Imagination (Theme for January)

All that we are is perception. We as humans are engaged in a constant practice of sensual input and interpretation. Our interpretation of all that we see, feel, touch, hear and taste is tempered by imagination, by the constructs of utility, beauty and spirituality.

What is imagination and how did it evolve as a key function of the mind? Is imagination unique to humans as a species, does it indeed define us as separate from all other forms of life on earth?

Philosopher Timothy Williamson suggests that humans evolved a “reality-directed faculty of imagination” as a tool for survival. “By enabling you to imagine all sorts of scenarios, [imagination] alerts you to dangers and opportunities. You come across a cave. You imagine wintering there with a warm fire – opportunity. You imagine a bear waking up inside – danger.” Imagination can be understood as a fundamental operation of the human psyche.

The depth of the impact of imagination on human society is profound. We want to see imagination as creative and unlimited. We're all for imaginary friends and creative, mind-expanding stories and living other people's experience through novels and films. But if imagination develops through social experience, it is also limited by social experience. It is difficult to have empathy for others if we cannot imagine the experiences that shape their lives.

Our earliest experiences can shape whether our imaginations are more likely to focus on positive or negative outcomes. Our imagination can lead us to assume the best and to fear the worst. Decisions based on imagined consequences can lead to creativity, exploration, discovery, but can also lead to crippling fear and depression. The imagination is a powerful component of individual identity.

To prepare for the Gathering, use your imagination. Imagine yourself in a lovely garden. How does this make you feel? Does your imagination primarily consist of images; can you imagine birds' songs, the breeze on your skin, smells of blossoms and summer heat? Now, imagine yourself drawing on the beauty around you to paint a picture, write a poem or a story, compose a melody.

Read the following quotes on imagination. How do they reflect your own experience?

To imagine the inner world, both intellectual and emotional, of the other ... to ask, once in a while: What if I were her? Or him? Or them? ... can show us a different landscape that may be fascinating and surprising. Fascinating even if it is not right for us; surprising even if it does not appeal to us. Perhaps, indeed, in curiosity lies the prospect of openness and tolerance. *Amos Oz*

The possible's slow fuse is lit by the imagination! *Emily Dickinson*

If a person wanted to get to the moon, there is a way; it all depended on whether you knew the directions ... on whether you knew the story of how others before you had gone. He had believed in the stories for a long time, until the teachers at Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of “nonsense.” But they had been wrong.

Leslie Marmon Silko, Ceremony

To be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality. *bell hooks*

We all have an obligation to daydream. We have an obligation to imagine ... the truth is individuals make the future, and they do it by imagining that things can be different. *Neil Gaiman*

Imagination and fiction make up more than three-quarters of our real life. *Simone Weil*

I am an organizer: a prison abolitionist who wants to see black people, my people, free. To achieve this goal, we need imagination. Poetry helps me to imagine freedom. *Mariame Kaba*

Questions to Ponder

1. When you were a child, what kind of things did you like to imagine?
2. Did your family and your education encourage imagination or discourage it?
3. What sorts of creative activities are spurred by your imagination?
4. Do you ponder alternatives and imagine consequences in your decision making process?
5. What would it be like to imagine the experience of someone who is different from yourself – a different gender, culture, race, or age? Try to imagine a story about the inner life and experience of a couple of different kinds of people. What is that like?
6. Think of a time that your imagination helped you to solve a problem or figure out a new way of doing things. How did you balance the use of imagination and practical thinking to come up with a solution or plan?
7. Does your imagination ever cause difficulties for you?
8. Imagination may have originated with the human need to plan contingencies for survival. What vision of our society can you imagine for us all to flourish in the future?

Words of the Day

For the Gathering, reflect on the experience of your own imagination. The Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence: “My imagination is most welcome when ...”