



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“Imagination Station”
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What do you want to be when you grow up?

How many of you were asked this question? How many of you have asked it of others? Show of hands, or you can type something in the chat on Zoom...

Okay, great. Lots of us, for both. I'd like you to keep that question in your mind for a little while. We'll come back to it later.

Imagination is a very big topic. Right there in our chalice lighting, from the song “Pure Imagination,” we are issued an invitation: “Want to change the world? / There's nothing to it.” And of course John Lennon's classic “Imagine” has a truly broad intention - asking us to imagine changing the entire world, erasing religions, borders, hatred and greed. “It's easy if you try!”

Well I don't know about you but I actually get a little hung up when I try to imagine huge, sweeping changes. Oh, sure, I might be able to imagine a world where guns don't exist, for instance - but it's a strangely shiny science-fiction far future world that bears little to no resemblance to the world we inhabit today. Where I get a little hazy is on all the steps that we'd need to take to get from our world to that one.

After all, imagination is a tool. It does not necessarily carry any moral valence within it - you can use the tool of your imagination to daydream about the ice cream flavors you are going to select at the scoop shop. You can also use the tool of your imagination to craft lies meant to deceive and cheat others. You

can use the tool of your imagination to build a birdhouse or to build a mousetrap.

Imagination is also a skill. As such, imagination can be improved by practice. After all, if you are dreaming up your ideal scoop of ice cream, you might move from searching for a favorite flavor to inventing one of your own, perhaps making a few miscalculations on the way to your dream flavor. And if you want to build a better mousetrap, well. Try and try again! Practice makes better - after all, there's no such thing as perfection, right?

We shape the world with our imagination, but we are also shaped by it. It's a tool and a skill used by all of humanity, and almost certainly other creatures besides. Imagination gave us the world as we know it, after all - for good and for ill.

This is why I chose the reading that I did for today. John Green's beautiful book of essays, *The Anthropocene Reviewed* (based on the podcast of the same name), draws our attention to some very small things indeed. The conceit of the podcast and subsequent book was to review aspects of the human-centered planet on a five-star scale. Now some of the subjects he takes on are quite large - sycamore trees, our capacity for wonder - most of them are small. In the essay on scratch 'n' sniff stickers, Green writes, "The challenge for scratch 'n' sniff sticker makers isn't, in the end, to mimic the natural world, which doesn't really exist as a thing separate from humanity. The challenge is to imagine what combination of smells will make humans remember the smell of bananas, or ocean mist, or freshly mown grass. [...] When I open that ancient sticker book and scratch at the yellowing stickers curling at the edges, what I smell most isn't pizza or chocolate, but my childhood.

"I give scratch 'n' sniff stickers three and a half stars."

He takes a look at how the stickers are made, but mostly his imagination lingers on the overall meaning to humanity. What if the last scent of banana ever smelled by humankind is from a sticker, not an actual banana? How much

can we carry in our minds and hearts and memories? How easily are those things broken open by scent, tied so closely to memory?

The tool and skill of imagination are sometimes brought to the aid of humanity on its spiritual quest. Perhaps some of you have heard of the form of Christian spiritual practice called Ignatian Spirituality? St. Ignatius of Loyola was a 16th century Spanish priest who created a series of what he called spiritual exercises, where a faithful Christian was called into reading passages from the scriptures with a focus on imagining themselves present in the scene. For instance, what were the smells on the hillside when the miracle of the loaves and fishes occurred? What did the ground feel like under the feet of the faithful as they walked with Jesus? Ignatius showed us the way imagination can be used as a tool to build empathy and deepen understanding.

What John Green is doing, in a certain way, is taking mundane pieces of human life - like scratch 'n' sniff stickers - and giving them special, concerted attention. He is seeking a deeper relationship with the things in the world made by humans, to learn how they make us human, to learn how we shape and are shaped by the world around us. He is looking at small things and treating them as sacred.

It is easier to start small, you see.

So back to our question. What do you want to be when you grow up? We've all admitted we've asked, or been asked, this question (or both!). I'd like you to ask how many of you are currently working in a job or career that is something close to the sort of thing you imagined for yourself when you were younger? Did anyone decide they wanted to be a teacher when they were pretty young and by golly they're a teacher now? [invite responses]

I struggled with this question when I was a kid. What DID I want to be when I grew up? I gave it a lot of thought. I used to speculate on my own ideas out loud occasionally, often to my father.

“Hey Dad,” I said one day, “I think I want to be a meteorologist when I grow up!”

“You know you have to be really good at math to do that, and science. I’m not sure those are your strengths,” he said.

Oh.

“Hey Dad,” I said another time, “I’m gonna be a veterinarian when I grow up!”

“Honey, I know you love animals, but remember that to be a vet you have to deal with a lot of animals in a lot of pain.”

Oh.

And on one memorable occasion, I said “Hey Dad, I think I might want to be a nun when I grow up.” (I was raised Catholic, by the way.)

“Do you know that if you’re a nun, you take a vow of poverty, and so you couldn’t inherit anything from us when we die?”

Wow.

And this is why I sometimes jokingly refer to my Dad by calling him, “My father, killer of dreams.” But honestly, this bothered me. Most of my memories of me sharing my dreams with my father ended with him shooting down the idea...my dream.

I did get a chance to ask my father about this, fortunately, before his death in 2009. When I did ask him, I shared a story very similar to the one I just shared with you, and he laughed so hard! But then he thought about his answer.

“When I was young,” he said, “the world was at war. And it stayed that way, it felt like for a long time. And it was in all the movies. So when I was just a boy, I just sort of assumed I wouldn’t live past about age 20, because I’d have to be a soldier and I’d be killed.” My father, for the record, was born in 1939.

But what did he do, I asked, when he realized he was going to live, and get married, and have kids, and stuff?

He just smiled and said he had to imagine things differently.

My father's imagination was twisted by the world at war in his youth. It wasn't helped by the way Hollywood used the tool of imagination - wanting to portray those fighting in wars as heroes, but also showing so many young people what the future might well look like for them if the warring ways continued.

But he answered the challenge and learned to imagine things differently. And he always kept it small.

Here's what I mean: When I hear the question "what do you want to be when you grow up" I automatically assume that the information asked for is a career plan or long-term wealth-building strategy. I think it means something big.

What if someone asked you what you most wanted to be, and you answered "I want to be kind."

"I want to be trustworthy."

"I want to be able to keep my faith in the world, one person at a time."

I want to be kind. I want people to feel safe with me, to trust me to be fair and honest with them. I never had an ounce of ambition in my life - just like my dad! - until I felt the call to ministry. And the call to one's life's work is big, don't get me wrong - but the steps are small. If we can possibly learn to practice treating the small things as sacred, then when we learn that the world is full of small sacred things, what can we each do but marvel at this world, love it, want to care for it and protect it - the world and all us in it?

It all starts small. Imagine that.