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Imagine

BY REV. CHUCK MIZE

Do you remember Harry Chapin? He was one of America's greatest folk singers. And he sang his social conscience and commentary to make a difference for good in our world. Perhaps his best-known song is Cat's in the Cradle. My favorite is Greyhound.

In 1978 he released Flowers Are Red. It's a song about how insistence on two-dimensional uniformity crushes three-dimensional creativity. Here's an excerpt from his lyrics.

The little boy went to the first day of school. He got some crayons and started to draw. He put colors all over the paper, for colors was what he saw. And the teacher said: What you doin' young man? I'm paintin' flowers, he said. She said: It's not the time for art young man, and anyway flowers are green and red. There's a time for everything young man, and a way it should be done. You've got to show concern for everyone else, for you're not the only one. And she said: Flowers are red young man. Green leaves are green. There's no need to see flowers any other way than the way they always have been seen. But the little boy said: There are so many colors in the rainbow, so many colors in the morning sun, so many colors in the flower and I see every one.

What a gift imagination is! To be able to see things in new and fresh ways...to dream a new world into being...to paint a rainbow of joy on every black and white despair is God's grace, working in us.

Here's an image from Southminster's fall theme, Imagine Together, that captures the spirit of the little boy in Harry Chapin's Flowers are Red. This image is so compelling for me! And it paints the words of the prophet Isaiah in his 43rd chapter:



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Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick. "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches. For I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise."

Sometimes we are so straightjacketed by conformity and so weighed down by discouragement that we lose heart...that we can't allow ourselves to reach for a future of hope, healing, and renewal. The book of Ecclesiastes sounds wise, but its perspective is too often severe and terrible, smothering the human spirit. From chapter 1:

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.

Imagination can't survive in that toxic climate! So, escape! Run as fast as you can away from that poison toward promise! Get out your crayons and chalk and imagine! Imagine a whole new rainbow way to paint the world. Imagine a life that's renewing and free. And imagine a new day for Southminster...for this precious church is not ours alone. That means that it will not be limited by its history. Instead, it will become something blessedly new in the mystery of God. Yes, inspired by the love of Jesus and filled with the power of the Spirit, we can Imagine. Let's do it Together!

Mornings at Blackwater

BY MARY OLIVER

For years, every morning, I drank
from Blackwater Pond.

It was flavored with oak leaves and also, no doubt,
the feet of ducks.

And always it assuaged me
from the dry bowl of the very far past.

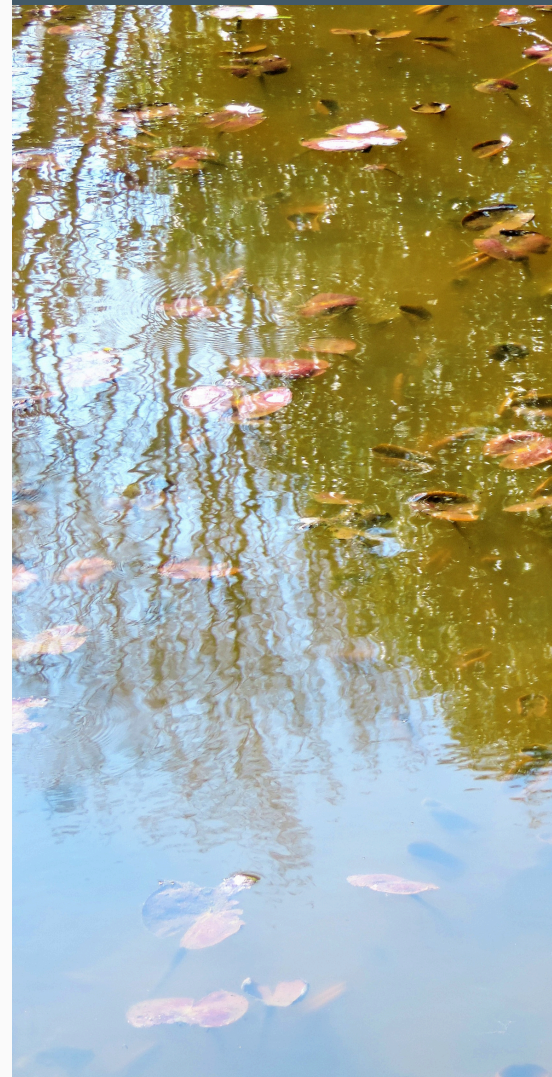
What I want to say is
the past is the past,
and the present is what your life is,
and you are capable
of choosing what that will be,
darling citizen.

So come to the pond
or the river of your imagination
or the harbor of your longing,

and put your lips to the world.
And live
your life.

"Imagination will
often carry us to
worlds that
never were. But
without it we go
nowhere."

~ Carl Sagan





From Head to Heart

Lower your head, shut your eyes, breathe out gently and imagine yourself looking into your own heart. Carry your mind, that is, your thoughts, from your head to your heart. — St. Symeon the New Theologian

James Finley reflects on St. Symeon's instructions for praying the Jesus Prayer: St. Symeon instructs us to "shut your eyes" when praying the Jesus Prayer. What if we could all close our eyes right now and be interiorly awakened? And what if, when we open our eyes, we would see through our own awakened eyes what Jesus saw in all that he saw? What would we see? We'd see God! Because Jesus saw God in all that he saw.

What's wonderful about this is that it didn't matter whether Jesus saw his own mother or a prostitute, the joy of those gathered at a wedding or the sorrow of those gathered at the burial of a loved one. It didn't matter whether he saw his disciples or his executioners, or a bird or a tree—Jesus saw God in all that he saw. Jesus tells us, "You have eyes to see but you do not see" (Mark 8:18). You have not learned to awaken to your God-given capacity to see the God-given, godly nature of yourselves, others, and all things. This is the source of all your sorrow and confusion. Our prayer then becomes, "Lord, that I might see your presence presencing itself and giving itself away as the intimate immediacy of the grace and miracle of our very presence and of all things in our communal nothingness without you. Help us to understand that the generosity of the Infinite is infinite and that we are the generosity of God. We are the song you sing."

St. Symeon tells us, "Imagine yourself looking into your own heart." We're looking into our own hearts not only as the center of emotions, but as the very place where the ongoing, self-donating presence of God, and us in our nothingness without God, are pouring out and touching each other. In our heart there is this oneness....

Next, "Carry your mind, that is, your thoughts, from your head to your heart." We learn to settle into the transformative energies of the prayer by being quietly absorbed in the deepening communion with God by doing our best not to be carried off by the thoughts that arise and fall around the edges of our minds. Each time we realize we have been carried off into thinking, we return to the words of the prayer as a way of renewing our trust in God's merciful love.... In this way, we make our descent into the realm of the heart where our own presence is realized to be eternally one with the mercy of God revealed to us in Christ. Little by little, we begin to realize that our deepening experience of learning to rest in the realm of heart ... is beginning to show up in all sorts of unexpected ways, in each passing moment of our lives, up to and including the moment of our death and beyond.

Adapted from James Finley and Kirsten Oates, "The Way of a Pilgrim: Session 3,"

The Prophetic Imagination

BY WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

The teachings of Jesus, of course, cannot be separated from the actions of his ministry. His teachings evoked radical energy, for they announced as sure and certain what had been denied by careful conspiracy. If anything, his teachings were more radical than his actions, for his teachings played out the implications of the harsh challenge and radical transformation at which his actions hinted. It was one thing to eat with outcasts, but it was far more radical to announce that the distinctions between insiders and outsiders were null and void. It was one thing to heal/forgive but quite another to announce that the conditions which had made one sick/guilty were now irrelevant. Of course the teachings cannot be separated from the actions, for it is the actions that give concreteness and reality to the teachings. The teachings, like the actions, are shattering, opening, and inviting. They conjure futures that had been closed off, and they indicate possibilities that had been defined as impossibilities. For our consideration it will be adequate to focus on the Beatitudes because they form an appropriate counterpart to the woes, especially as Luke has presented them (Luke 6:20–26).



Imagine

Imagine Something Better

Imagining and contending for what you hope for in this world is one of the hardest and kindest paths I've discovered out here. In the midst of all this, don't forget to imagine something better. Don't forget to dream of what could be possible. And don't forget to live into those hopes with faithfulness. Move in that direction, especially when all you know is "not this."

If it helps, sometimes I've thought of this as the rhythm of turning away and then turning toward, almost like a beautiful dance.... We turn away from those things we're against and toward the hopeful future we imagine. In a purposeful movement, we turn away from the practices or beliefs or habits that consume us, threaten us, reduce us, and distract us. And then we turn toward what brings flourishing, goodness, and truth to us. Turn away, yes, and turn toward.... What we turn toward should reorient us to the world in a posture of love, joy, and service.

It can be a simple rhythm to begin with. Turning away from spaces in social media that have become toxic for you and turning toward inviting a lonely neighbor over for tea. Turning away from voices that bring shame and guilt to you or others and turning toward voices that preach freedom and wholeness and love. Or turning away from shrinking back and shutting up to keep the peace; turning toward owning your voice, your body, your experiences with boldness. Turning away from gossip and petty nitpicking; turning toward language of blessing....

Begin with Against, and keep going until you find your For. It's an act of defiant faith. It will give you something to lean into. It will give you a path to follow.

Sarah Bessey, *Field Notes for the Wilderness: Practices for an Evolving Faith* (New York: Convergent Books, 2024), 171, 173–174.

Prayer of Transformation

BY JOYCE RUPP

Gestating Spirit,

your gifts of transformation

await me on every threshold.

Your life-giving power raised Christ

from the bleak tomb. . . .

Raise what has died in me.

Refresh it with your touch of love.

I open the door of my heart to you. I open the door.

God says, 'I will pour out
my Spirit upon all flesh.
Your sons and your
daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream
dreams, and your young
men shall see visions.
-Joel 2:28 (Acts 2:17)

