

The Spirit in Imagination

Stephanie Ford

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Like an observatory needs a telescope, so the soul needs imagination. “Without imagination,” spiritual writer Jane Vennard points out, “the soul would have no way of communicating with us, no way to pull our attention to its needs, no way to tell us how deeply we are connected to God.”¹ No one has ever seen the soul—nor heard, touched, tasted, or smelled the soul—but we have all seen its effects: how some mysterious faculty within us will forge deep bonds to persons and places that mean much less to others. We know the soul in experiences of joy we cannot describe, and in times of grief we cannot bear.

We have also witnessed how because of a dream, a vision, the spark of an idea arising on its own in our minds and hearts—we have changed direction. We have known what it’s like to giggle for no good reason: silliness to be sure, but also in a profound way, deeply belonging to the spirit within us. On the other hand, we may have watched as a hurt the size of a splinter, perceived trivial to others, grew to become a hardened thorn in our heart. While there may not be precise words for this thing called “soul”—we know it when we meet it. We know it when we feel it. And ranking high in the economy of the soul, almost as high as love and loyalty, is imagination.

A book series I relished as a young girl, was the memoir-like tale of the pioneer girl Laura Ingalls Wilder. Her images of the 19th C Midwest hardly fit the experience of my 1960s and 70s childhood, but her evocative narrative and the fine illustrations of Garth Williams helped me create scene after scene of Laura’s prairie adventures in my mind. She became as real as a friend. I felt myself running down to the Plum Creek to play with her and her sister Mary. I can still picture myself reading *These Happy Golden Years* in the back seat of our tan 1969 Oldsmobile station wagon, laying it down periodically to stare out the window and daydream. I was the romantic sort! Later, when the TV series, *Little House on the Prairie*, came out, I saw it a couple of times, but then didn’t want to have anything to do with it. How could I forsake the Laura of my imagination for such an inadequate depiction? And so I learned, the movie, or in this case, the TV show, rarely equals the book in the book-lover’s mind!

But such an anecdote may trivialize the significance of imagination, or narrow it to childhood invention—as important as that might be. But that’s hardly true. Imagination does not abandon us as we mature, though culture, media of all kinds try to hold it captive. Indeed, imagination may enable to soul to grow. As psychologists point out, the foundation of empathy is essentially imagination; we reach beyond the

¹ Jane E. Vennard, *Praying with Body and Soul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), p. 75.

boundaries of our own experience to consider what another is feeling, and thus we learn compassion. Even though our rough estimate of our neighbor's reality often falls short, we have moved in the direction of healing kinship. Biblical scholars will tell you that imagination was also fundamental to the creation of the Hebrew people, who were told that their ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, went on a journey beyond the only land they knew—following a Divine Voice calling them out. Later, after their descendants had grown to be a people, but were enslaved in Egypt—the Hebrews were called out again, to follow a prophet named Moses, on a long desert pilgrimage toward liberation. The Hebrew people carried a history of hope, of deliverance, a story to remember and recite to new generations.

So in the passage Bob just read, we are not surprised that this is the story Isaiah invokes for the Hebrew people, now suffering centuries later in Babylonian exile. Isaiah reminds them of the most powerful story they know: how God once freed them from their fierce oppressors, the Egyptians. Remember, Isaiah declares, that your ancestors crossed the sea safely, but your enemies perished. Take comfort in the heritage that God has given you; you are not forgotten!

Well and good; it would have been nice to linger in the hope of that story, but then the prophet changes course abruptly, startling his hearers, and us! Having appealed to the past in a powerful way, he now seems to be rebuking a bunch of daydreamers: “Do not cling to events of the past or dwell on what happened long ago. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Look back no more, or you might miss what God is doing. And don't expect the future to be like the past. So which is it, dear prophet? Remember the miracles of old in order to find hope, or imagine something altogether new? What are we to make his ‘about face’?

Neuroscientists have shown that much of the remembering process is actually a work of reconstruction that is not unlike the work of imagining. Each time we invoke a memory, we remake it anew, and thus it changes. Even those images that seemed fixed as timeless in our memory are altered in intricate ways the moment they are called up for inspection. The part of the brain, the hippocampus, that carries memory, is also involved in imagining the future—but imagination is activated differently. Imagination can feel as vivid as memory--that's part of its power—but it is not just a recombination of memories into a novel scenario.

Jesus understood the power of imagination in his ministry. In the parables he told, Jesus did not appeal to the morals of tradition, nor did he create stories to prop up prevailing myths. Like the prophet Isaiah, his parables were meant to startle his hearers out of their depression, out of their complacency and despair. His was not the imagination of the ruling class, or of the religious elite; he created stories for farmers, bread makers, day laborers, children, peasants. *See this small thing*, a mustard seed—it works the way God does, it will grow with faith and steadiness, and in time, become the biggest shrub in the garden. Trust that God is doing such a work among you. *See the*

yeast that you are kneading into the dough you will bake, such God's new realm—hard to see at first, but it will multiply beyond what you think. *And that Samaritan you've despised*, avoided, and pitied—well, don't be surprised: he might be the very one you should emulate. Purity is not found on the exterior; God looks at the heart!

Through parable and story, Jesus created imaginative worlds, ones familiar in character and content, but ones that invited his hearers to dwell and live within in order to find a new reality. And isn't that how transformation works? We are called to imagine something beyond our memory, but it starts where we are. We are not called to keep the former things as we knew them—good though they may have been. We are called to inhabit the *familiar* with eyes open to find the *unfamiliar*.

It is Moses in the desert
fallen to his knees before the lit bush.
It is the man throwing away his shoes
as if to enter heaven
and finding himself astonished,
opened at last,
fallen in love with solid ground.²

It strikes me that Binkley finds itself today like Moses, standing before a lit bush, asking the "I AM WHO I AM" how to discern the way forward in this new day. Binkley has a rich history of working for civil rights and the inclusion of LGBT sisters and brothers. You have advocated for the poor, explored the Bible with critical seriousness, and steadily mentored children and youth in the ways of a living faith. Yours is a history of liberating love, of loyalty to the clarion call to create a new kind of Baptist church. Your music is diverse and beautiful; your worship stirring. These are gifts to remember, to appreciate, to celebrate with new generations.

Recently I attended a conference for Christian educators in Chicago, and what was relieving, but also still unsettling to me was that every clergyperson, every church educator I met were asking similar questions to the ones we are asking. How is the Church still speaking to this generation of seekers? How do we attract new families, with so much already competing for their time? How does the Church, now from the margins rather than the center of Western culture, compel others to follow Jesus in this new millennium?

Like the prophet declared and Jesus taught by way of parable, part of imagining a future can only be discovered by living it, by looking carefully at what is already growing in our midst. Although the prophet startles me, I am reassured that God who worked among us before, will in this moment awaken us. What is the new thing, the surprising thing that is yet to be perceived—which is already growing like a mustard seed, multiplying steadily like yeast, the kingdom of God in our midst?

² From "The Opening of Eyes," David Whyte, *Songs for Coming Home* (Many Rivers Press, 1984).

Jesus lived in startling ways, just as he taught. We know that the unconventional rabbi ate with persons considered unclean, had female followers, permitted his disciples to glean grain on the Sabbath when they were hungry, and named God as “Abba,” in a way that must have grated the ears of the religious leaders with its familial intimacy.

But we know imagination can take a sinister path. In the current political landscape, in the imaginations of our friends and neighbors, and perhaps even in our own, too, we have been bombarded by a spirit of fear, by fantasies of revenge, national supremacy, and authoritarianism. We have been surprised that such disturbing rhetoric has held so much sway. It is understandable that people are frustrated, but how does such vitriol and bitterness become the vision for the way forward?

A holy woman of Ireland, born around 475, founded a monastic community in what would become known as Killeedy in Limerick. She was a spiritual guide to many, and was once asked about which three works please God, and which do not (Celtic spirituality regularly honors the Trinity, by talking and praying in threes). Ita replied, “True belief in God is a pure heart, a simple life with religion, generosity with charity; these three please God fully. However, a mouth vilifying people, a tenacious love of evil in the heart, confidence in wealth; these three fully displease God.”³

“What kind of church do you dream of?” Pope Francis was asked. “I see clearly,” Francis said, “that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity...Then we can talk about everything else...You have to start from the ground up.”

Start from the ground up, yes--sounds like prophetic wisdom to me!

³ Qtd. In Jan Richardson, *In the Sanctuary of Women* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), p. 108.