The Path

Spiritual Theme Newsletter of the First UU Society of Burlington

Soul Matters

Living Love Through The Practice of Imagination



Small Group
May 2025

Welcome to the Practice of Imagination

Imagination's great gift is *improvement.* At least that is what we're taught. Its deep magic lies in the way it can reshape our reality. We are urged to imagine the world we dream of. A world with more justice. More peace. More love. From that, a mysterious magnetism arises, a magnetism that pulls our imperfect present into an improved future. Imagination moves us forward. It makes our world - and us - better.

Yet there's a way in which this view of imagination impoverishes us. It steals the stage and shuts out imagination's *other* precious gifts.

For instance, think of what happened when a number of us got out of bed this morning. After a shower, we didn't just pull on fresh clothes, we likely also pulled out a jewelry box and slipped on our grandmother's ring. As we slid it on our finger, she slid, not just into our memory, but into our day. Now, because of imagination, we aren't just elegant; we're *accompanied*. Or how about that invisible friend of ours when we were children? Imagination made sure we didn't travel through those early years alone. It conjured up that loyal friend so we had someone by our side. Even today, amidst the hustle and bustle of adult life, tell me you don't hear the guidance of ancestors when challenges arise. It's all one giant reminder that imagination doesn't just improve our lives, it *populates* it.

It also *illuminates* it. That's right. Imagination isn't just a force that drives us forward toward a better future, it also pulls the sacred into our impoverished present. Imagination is what transforms trees from potential firewood into wise friends. Imagination is what moves us from lording over the natural word to seeing ourselves as part of it. Or to put it another way, imagination is what gives the world a soul. And not just the natural world, but the ordinary world too. Through the lens of imagination, every day experience becomes precious, even mystical. For instance, the laughter of our children becomes the sound of angels. Sunshine on our face becomes a way that life expresses its love for us. The ocean is able to speak, telling us that we are freer and have more choices than we think. And a simple act of kindness from a stranger shimmers, and through it life says to our burdened heart, "This soon shall pass. Everything will be ok." Yes, this is what imagination does: it enables us to hear the world speak.

So friends, this month, do everything you can to soak in ***the many*** gifts and messages of imagination. It's not just shouting, "Improve the world!" It's also pleading, "Let the world come alive!"

Our Spiritual Exercises

It's one thing to analyze a theme; it's quite another to experience it. By pulling us out of the space of *thinking* and into the space of *doing*, these exercises invite us to figure out not just what we have to say about life, but also what life has to say *to us*!

Pick the exercise that speaks to you the most. **Come to your group ready to share why you picked the exercise you did, where it surprised you and what gift it gave you.**

Option A: Imagine Your Gravestone

It's not something we like to do: think about our deaths. But it's also something many wisdom traditions encourage. Reflecting on the limited days we have isn't just a way to avoid taking our days for granted, it's also a way of taking control of the story of our lives. Thinking about our death and imagining how we want to be remembered motivates us to be more intentional about our choices.

With this in mind, many spiritual teachers encourage people to imagine their funerals and write their own eulogy. But writing a eulogy is a pretty intense and time-consuming task. So to simplify things, we invite you to focus your efforts and imagine a few epitaphs for your gravestone.

Of course, while this is less complex, it is not at all simple. So, take your time with it. Chew on it as you take your morning walk. Spend an evening thinking about it as you listen to music. Take a friend out to lunch and ask them what they might want theirs to read.

Here's a wonderful piece by UU minister, Victoria Safford, to spark your imagination and guide you on your way: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhv1AeD_PPQ (also found HERE). You might also want to check out some examples of creative, humorous and serious epitaphs here, here, here & here.
When you are done, if you want to have some fun, you can put your epitaphs on a virtual tombstone here: http://www.tombstonebuilder.com/

Option B: The Imagined Story That Has Shaped Your Real One

All of us have at least one novel that shaped who we are and how we live our lives. Some piece of fiction that rooted itself in our imaginations and from there wormed its way into our real-life living and loving. So, what book was it for you?

Take some time this month to figure out which one impacted you the most. For some it will be a book from our childhood. For others, it might be a book we read as an adult during a difficult time in our lives. Whichever it is, search your imagination (and bookshelves) to find it. If you don't have the book on your bookshelves, consider going out to buy it. And while you are at it, why not read it again and let it leak into your imagination in a new way?

Bring that book, and the journey of this exercise, with you when your group gathers.

Option C: Your Seven Thoughts

This exercise comes from John O'Donohue, the beloved Irish poet and author. In one of his talks, he recommends this activity:

> *"There's a very interesting question to ask yourself and the question is this:* ***What are the seven thoughts that govern, shape and determine my life?*** *It takes a long time to find them out. What are the seven thoughts that you keep secretly coming back to? Because every day you're using thought, whether you realize it or not. And the world that you inhabit and see is shaped by the way you see it. And the way you see it is shaped by the way you think. So if you really want to change your life, the best way to change it is to change the way you think… If you change some of the furniture in your inner world in your mind, then you really change your life… You get a secret look, or a look into the secret way, that you understand things."*

O'Donohue's "seven thoughts" could have just as easily been called "seven imaginings." Because they are, of course, more like the themes of a book than cold, objective facts. And they arise more from the creative part of our brain than the analytical part. These guiding thoughts are like the glasses through which we view others and the world. And as such, they imaginatively shape our experience of the world.

So, with this in mind, spend some time this month figuring out and writing down your "seven thoughts." Take your time. It's always helpful to start by putting a bunch down and then coming back to the list later to pare it down. It might also be helpful to ask someone close to you what they think your seven guiding thoughts are. Afterall, sometimes others know us better than we know ourselves. And maybe most important: be honest. This is not about what seven thoughts you *want* to shape and guide your life. It is the seven thoughts that ***do*** shape and guide it!

Once you are done, step back and ask yourself which of these thoughts you'd like to alter or eliminate, as well as what thoughts you want to put in their place.

Option D: Your Five Imagined Lives

This one comes from Julia Cameron's classic book on imagination and creativity called "The Artist's Way." Here's her instructions:

> *"If you had five other lives to lead, what would you do in each of them? I would be a pilot, a cowhand, a physicist, a psychic, a monk. You might be a scuba diver, a cop, a writer of children's books, a football player, a belly dancer, a painter, a performance artist, a history teacher, a healer, a coach, a scientist, a doctor, a Peace Corps worker, a psychologist, a fisherman, a minister, an auto mechanic, a carpenter, a sculptor, a lawyer, a painter, a computer hacker, a soap-opera star, a country singer, a rock-and-roll drummer. Whatever occurs to you, jot them down."*

For those of you wanting to explore this further, here are a few thoughts. First, from Cameron: *"Look over your list and select one of the lives. Then do [an aspect] of it this week. For instance, if you put down a country singer, can you pick a guitar? If you dream of being a cowhand, what about some horseback riding?"* Second, you could spend some time reflecting on where your attraction to each imagined life came from. What piece of history, inner hunger or unmet need gives rise to it. Third, you could ask a friend or family member if they can guess which five you put on your list. Finally, consider spending some time asking yourself, "Do I want to keep these lives imaginary? Or is there some way in which I *need* them to become real?"

Option E: Listen to Shel Silverstein

Carve out an evening for yourself. Put on a favorite music playlist, one whose songs leave you feeling like you're sitting with a long-time friend. Find a 3x5 card and grab a pen. Heat up a kettle and make yourself a cup of tea. Once the warmth of the music and tea have settled in, read Shel Silverstein's masterful children's poem a few times aloud:

> *Listen To The Mustn'ts*
> *Listen to Mustn'ts, child, listen to the Don'ts.*
> *Listen to the Shouldn'ts, the Impossibles, the Won'ts.*
> *Listen to the Never Haves, then listen close to me.*
> *Anything can happen, child, Anything can be.*

Let it take you back to childhood, or maybe even to early adulthood, and spend some time sorting through the "mustn'ts," "shouldn'ts," and "won'ts" that were laid on your imagination as a young person. Spin them around in your memory until one rises to the top; one that lived uncomfortably in your heart for a long while, like a splinter stuck in your skin or a jagged rock that painfully weighed you down. Then shape that memory of a mustn't/shouldn't/won't into a sentence and write it on your card.

After a few more sips of tea from your cup, get up and put on a jacket. Grab a pack of matches from the junk drawer. And head outside into cool dark air with that 3x5 card in hand. Strike a match and light an edge of the card with the flame. Open yourself to whatever happens next. Let the moment have whatever meaning it will, whatever meaning you need. Then with the card now ash, offer yourself a blessing, one that reminds you "anything can happen; anything can be"

Option F: Ask Them About Imagination

One of the best ways to explore our monthly themes is to have conversations about them with people who are close to you. It's also a great way to deepen our relationships! Below is a list of questions to help you on your way. Be sure to let your conversation partner know in advance that this won't be a typical conversation. *Remember to also answer the questions yourself as they are meant to support a conversation, not just a time of quizzing them.* Come to your group ready to share what surprised you about the conversation and what gift or insight it gave you.

Imagination Questions:

- In your early life, who most helped you imagine possibilities of what you could become?
- Are you someone who imagines everything that can go right or everything that can go wrong? Who in your life balances you out?
- Did you have a childhood imaginary friend? What gift did they give you?
- How close is your current life to the life you imagined for yourself in early adulthood? How would that younger self feel about the life you are living now? Surprised? Proud? Confused? Curious?
- If you could have 5 fictional characters as best friends who would they be?
- What is your greatest act of imagination?

Option G: Which Companion Piece Speaks to You?

Sometimes we come across a quote, song, article or movie and it perfectly captures what's going on for us right now or allows us to view our current circumstances in a new light. With this in mind, spend some time this month going through the Companion Pieces section below to find the one piece **that speaks most powerfully to you. (Or "shimmers" most strongly for you.**) Come to your group ready to share the piece you picked, why it called to you and what insight, memory, or message of comfort or challenge it offered you.

Your Question

This list of questions is an aid for deep reflection. How you answer them is often less important than the journey they take you on.

So, read through the list of questions 2-3 times until one question sticks out for you and captures your attention, or as some faith traditions say, until one of the questions "shimmers."

Then reflect on that question using one or all of these questions:

- *What is going on in my life right now that makes this question so pronounced for me?*
- *How might my inner voice be trying to speak to me through it?*
- *How might Life or my inner voice be trying to offer me a word of comfort or challenge through this question?*



1. What is your greatest act of imagination?
2. Has your (or someone else's) imagination ever led you astray?
3. In your early adult life, who most helped you imagine possibilities of what you could become?
4. Has age widened or narrowed your imagination?
5. Are you someone who imagines everything that can go right or everything that can go wrong? Who in your life balances you out? Have you thanked them for that lately?
6. What "imagined life" for yourself has been with you the longest? Might it be time to act on it or let parts of it go?
7. What's the most radical thing you can imagine doing before you die?
8. Are you sure it's not realistic to live that life you keep imagining?
9. What gift did your childhood imaginary friend give you?
10. Is there more to your "enemy" than what you've been imagining?
11. What did your greatest failure of imagination teach you?
12. If you could change the way a friend or family member imagines themselves or the world, who would it be and how would you change their imaginings?
13. Are you living out of your imagination or your history?
14. How close is your current life to the life you imagined for yourself in early adulthood? How would that younger self feel about the life you are living now? Surprised? Proud? Confused? Curious?
15. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find it.

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. Nor are they intended to be analyzed in your group. Instead they are here to companion you on your personal journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of embodying the practice of imagination in your life.

Wise Words

Imagination is the spirit
freed to be herself,

slipping the carbon cuffs
of convention's false arrests.

She picks the locks,
a laughing Houdini—

magician
of freedom itself.
David Breeden

There are so many boundaries in me,
so many limitations, prisons,
places where a line has been drawn…
But… sometimes the imagination
takes a line and bends it, twists it
like a clown with a balloon,
until what I thought was a boundary
becomes bird, becomes crown, becomes
flower. Or it turns the line perpendicular
so what I thought was a deadline
becomes path…
Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

Logic will get you from A to Z; imagination will get you everywhere.
Albert Einstein

The imagination is committed to the justice of wholeness. It will not choose one side in an inner conflict and repress or banish the other; it will endeavor to initiate a profound conversation between them in order that something original can be born.
John O'Donohue

We suffer more in our imagination more often than in reality.
Seneca

Live out of your imagination, not your history.
Stephen R. Covey

Despair, when not the response to absolute physical and moral defeat, is, like war, the failure of imagination.
Adrienne Rich

I become more and more certain, as the years go by, that wherever friendship is destroyed, or homes are broken, or precious ties are severed, there is a failure of imagination. Someone is too intent on justifying himself, or herself, never venturing out to imagine the way things seem to the other person. Imagination is shut off and sympathy dies. If we know what it is that makes other people speak or act as they do… We might understand. Often we could heal the wounds. But even where that is not possible - even where fuller understanding only leaves us rather sad and helpless, it would still give us the power to be kind.
A. Powell Davies

Thinking that we can exponentially grow forever, or even that this is somehow desirable, is a catastrophic failure of imagination, and it's putting the entire human experiment in jeopardy.
Dirk Philipsen

the only war that matters is the war against the imagination. all other wars are subsumed in it. the ultimate famine is the starvation of the imagination. it is death to be sure.
Diane di Prima (more)

We think we understand the rules when we become adults but what we really experience is a narrowing of the imagination.
David Lynch

It's easier for us to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.
Frederic Jameson

Black rage in an anti-Black world is a spiritual virtue. Rage shakes us out of our illusion that the world as it is, is what God wants.
Danté Stewart

We are in an imagination battle. Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown and Renisha McBride and so many others are dead because, in some white imagination, they were dangerous… Imagination has people thinking they can go from being poor to a millionaire as part of a shared American dream. Imagination turns Brown bombers into terrorists and white bombers into mentally ill victims. Imagination gives us borders, gives us superiority, gives us race as an indicator of ability. I often feel I am trapped inside someone else's capability. I often feel I am trapped inside someone else's imagination, and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free.
adrienne maree brown

I shudder at the emotional and psychic burden we've laid on the young black and brown New Yorkers — so many of them children… Isn't it, for them, for us, a gargantuan task not to imagine that everyone is imagining us as criminal? A nearly impossible task? What a waste, a corruption, of the imagination… The imagination, rather than being cultivated for connection or friendship or love, is employed simply for some crude version of survival.
Ross Gay

You can either think that the world is getting better or that the future will be much better than it is now, or you can think that the world is getting worse. But that continuum isn't as important to me as this idea of, do you think you have agency in this world?
Angela Oguntala

The goal of oppressors is to limit your imagination about what is possible without them, so you never imagine more for yourself and the world you live in.
Ashley C. Ford

History is birthed out of the imagination. It literally was conjured up. Imagination is so powerful that it could set forth 400, 500 years of something wrong, which means that it very well could set forth 400, 500 years of something right. That's sort of the beauty of humanity.
Jason Reynolds

The imagination plants the inconceivable in our minds and makes our hearts long for it to be true.
Hannah Mitchell

Fairy Tales are more than true; not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us dragons can be beaten.
G. K. Chesterton

They are ill discoverers that think there is no land when they see nothing but sea.
Francis Bacon

Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing… because imagination is a danger. Thus every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing alternative futures to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.
Walter Brueggemann

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge. That myth is more potent than history. That dreams are more powerful than facts. That hope always triumphs over experience.
Robert Fulghum

Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said. 'One can't believe impossible things.'
'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast!"
Lewis Carroll

Music

Click here for our Spotify playlist on Imagination.
Click here for the YouTube playlist on Imagination.

Videos & Podcasts

We Can't be Healthy Without Imagination
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCt9SlDJ1s4

The Untold Story of How Delight Teamed Up With Imagination to Invent Our World
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLltkC-G5dY

Why You Should Make Useless Things…
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0bsKc4tiuY

On Reimagining Where Creativity Comes From
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86x-u-tz0MA

Secret Friends, God & The Line Between the Real and the Imaginary
https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/secret-friends/

One Family; Two Imagined Realities
https://www.npr.org/2026/01/01/1254713697/alternate-realities-conspiracy-theories-bet

On The Lopsidedness Of Our Cultural Imagination
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCtRrx7Cv7c

How Silicon Valley Monopolized Our Imagination
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fnyx_08pDI&t=2317s

Imagining a Post-Capitalist World
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZD5DLlxuNWk
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zyLr1Jeo0c

Imagine The Angels Of The Bread, Martin Espada
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qInwMatl0a0
This is the year that squatters evict landlords,...

V'ahavta, Aurora Levins Morales
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJDx-OKCoZ8
Say these words…Another world is possible…

The Amazing Imagination of Artists!

Blair Somerville is a magical (and joyful) tinkerer!

Janet Echelman lost her paints and found her imagination.

This artist took his imagination and transformed a dilapidated hunting lodge into a house of dreams.

Tim Klein might be the most imaginative puzzle master alive!

This group of young adults and their choir master used their imaginations to transform trash into a full orchestra, or as they call it a "Recycled Orchestra"

These Atlanta photographers are re-imagining Disney's princesses, and igniting new imaginings in the process.

Articles

In Defense of Daydreaming

We Suffer More in Imagination than in Reality

Empathy is an act of imagination

Imagining the Top 10 Future Threats
More here

Books

Imagination: A Manifesto
The Ministry for the Future
A Psalm for the Wild-Built
Parable of the Sower

Movies

Cinema Paradiso
Nickel Boys
Tick…Tick…BOOM!
Jim Henson Idea Man
The Remarkable Life of Ibelin
Flow
The Big Flower Fight

© 2024-25 Soul Matters ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
Packets are for use only by member congregations of the Soul Matters Sharing Circle.