

IMAGINE THAT!

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“I am an optimist by nature. Even though I experience moments of cynicism, despair, and hopelessness, my spirit is a buoyant one. Part of me is (occasionally) drawn to the odd seduction of ...wanting to relax, throw the oars off my little rowboat, and drift slowly out into the vast foggy sea. But then another voice speaks, ‘**Imagination is a moral imperative,**’ it says, in a sharp tone in which a parent might say for the third time, ‘Hang up your coat *now!*’ “

- Meg Riley, *Imagination Needed*
- *UU World*, March/April, 2005

TALK TEXT:

As this august and well-read group knows, my talks over the last seven years, more or less, draw heavily upon the ideas and words of authors that have gone before, combined with some shuffling and trail-breaking for which I must be held accountable. I am walking in their footprints, and in your footprints as well, if you have read some of my sources before me. For the title of this talk, I have violated my rule of not stealing from too close to home. “Imagine That” is the name of the art guild formed a few years ago by some of our UUFR members and displayed prominently on summer weekends at the Irvington Market. For those of you who are here this morning expecting courses in fine jewelry making, fabric arts, clay sculpture, fantasy creatures, and gourd art, I’ll pause for a few seconds for you to vent your anger and stomp out to the coffee pot.

In the way of apology, a bit of free advertising. May I remind you that you can see and purchase the best “and most expensive” of the “Imagine That!” artists’ work at The Gallery, First UU Church of Richmond’s annual fundraiser in October of each year. Art lovers, it’s worth the trip. This is The Gallery’s 40th year and it opens Wednesday evening, October 19.

“Imagine That!” leads our thoughts to the specialness of humans in that people use their brains to create mental variations of the places they observe, variations that exist only inside their heads. They imagine changes in the world as it presently exists outside

themselves; they visualize new connections and relationships that are not there yet. Other creatures may do the same, but the human animal is the only one with a history of acting out that imagination. Imagination gives humans by far the greatest power to alter established arrangements and conditions.

A naked and cold human looks at a bear and thinks that he would be warmer if he could grow such hair. Then he wonders what would happen if he simply took the bear's hair for himself. The result – clothing – makes the chilly man more comfortable, increases his ability to move around, lengthens his lifespan, and therefore expands his influence on things around him. The crucial event was not his killing of the bear, or the fashioning of a garment, but the first picturing of himself, bear-robed, inside his own head as he stood shivering -- and wondering.

Some imagining or dreaming is worthless. An example from Elliot West's writings is one of his grandfather's common responses to his grandchild's stream of "what if" speculations, "If frogs had wings, why wouldn't bump their butts so much."

In our complex and contingent world, random events often happen in seemingly peculiar sequences that cry out for meaning. We usually rise to the occasion, finding patterns in nature even when they do not exist or have no real significance. "Old Man of the Mountain" in New Hampshire, Eagle Rock in California near the town of the same name, and the "JFK" stone in Hawaii are examples of finding patterns to which we can relate. These three flights of imagination are amusing, but the phenomenon of the face of Jesus in a tortilla or the Virgin Mary on the side of a building elicits a different response. Consider the crowds that appear whenever the Virgin Mary makes her "appearance" on a barn door, in the shadows of trees, or, as you may recall, in beautiful rainbow patterns on the side of the Ugly Duck car rental building in Clearwater, Florida, where the faithful came in wheelchairs and canes to be healed when the sun hit this multi-storied glass wall in a certain way. Humans are pattern-seeking animals, patterns they pick up with all their senses. Their imaginations, sometimes encouraged by the suggestions of others, do the rest. And, depending on the perceivers depth of commitment,

the fact that the Ugly Duck Virgin Mary was determined to be a result of high powered landscape sprinklers bouncing off a particularly oily palm tree can be of little consequence as we move into territories of imagination that drive paranormal thinking. Whether the sprinkler, the palm, or the sun was heaven-sent is still a subject of debate.

One reason for this tendency to imagine the supernatural is that we may be hardwired to think magically. We have lived in the modern world of science and technology for only a couple of hundred years, yet humanity has existed for a couple of hundred thousand years.

A second reason is that we have evolved to be skilled pattern-seeking creatures. Those who were best at finding patterns (standing upwind of game animals is bad for the hunt, cow manure is good for the crops) left behind the most offspring. We are their descendants. The problem in seeking and finding patterns is knowing which ones are meaningful and which ones are not, imagining the bear rug vs. the frog wings. Unfortunately our brains are not always good at knowing the difference.

On the technology side of the ledger, imagination leads to discovery, usually at the end of a long and ordered journey. Discoveries made by accident, by random actions also intrigue, as illustrated by this story by scientist and author, Richard Shermer.

“I recently encountered the following coincidence in the home of a friend. During a quiet moment alone I grabbed for the nearest piece of reading material and happened to pull down a 1954 edition of “the Story of the Starry Universe,” part of the Popular Science Library’s series of illustrated books of science for the general reader. Flipping to the final page to see what prognostications were being made for the future, I read that V-2 rockets were being hauled into space with scientific instruments (instead of warheads of a decade prior), so that the stars might be studied from above the ultraviolet filter of the ozone layer. The research was so new it was not even published yet, but the authors boldly speculated:

Scientists are even talking about the possibility of sending rockets completely outside of the earth’s atmosphere and causing them to move in an approximately circular orbit, permanent satellites of the

earth for special laboratory studies. It has been estimated that perhaps ten years or so will elapse before such a ladder to the skies will have been perfected.

My coincidental gem came later that day in the same room, when I opened the paper to view the magnificent newly released color photographs from the Hubble Space Telescope – our “ladder to the skies.” It may have taken four decades instead of the estimated one, but the prize was well worth the wait.

In science, as in most cultural productions, time frames rarely match expectations. But there is no disputing the fact that science imagines, then changes, faster than religion. Compare this 40 year discrepancy to the 360-year abyss between Galileo’s 1633 indictment for the heretical support of Copernicus’s heliocentrism and Pope John Paul II’s acquittal of him in his April 1993 address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission; or the 137-year gap between Darwin’s 1859 “Origin of Species” and Pope John Paul II’s acceptance of evolution as a viable theory in his October 1996 address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences.

As Popes go, John Paul II was relatively progressive in embracing science and its underpinnings of logic and empiricism. He was both broadly and deeply read, and sensitive to the relationship between faith and reason, religion and science. In his 1993 address he explained that “it is necessary to determine the proper sense of Scripture, while avoiding any unwarranted interpretations that make it say what it does not intend to say,” and in order to do so “the theologian must keep informed about the results achieved by the natural sciences.”

The Pope imagined a more scientifically rational Catholicism as he carefully left the creation of souls in the hands of God while relegating the human body to the product of natural evolution. Science philosopher Michael Ruse notes: “If you want evolution plus souls, that is your option, and if you want evolution less souls, that is also your option. Either way, evolution is untouched...More than this, together with the Pope, his perception is right in feeling that evolution—even evolution through selection—is no barrier to faith. Were I a Catholic, I would positively welcome Darwin as an ally.”

Imagining such new arrangements and relationships becomes a kind of storytelling. People are inspired to compose a fresh account of themselves that explains, literally, who in the world they are. Such stories become guides and encouragements for living out a newly dreamed existence. When people look back, the stories become proof to them that they have been summoned by fate of history or, if you prefer, God into their rightful homes.

The conjuncture of losing one's literal religion, finding science and rational thought, and discovering glorious contingency is remarkably empowering and liberating. It spurs the imagination. It gives one a sense of joy and freedom. Freedom to think for ourselves. Freedom to take responsibility for our own actions. Freedom to construct our own meanings and our own destinies. With an acceptance that this may be all there is, we can trigger our own cascading changes and be free to live life to its fullest.

This is not to say that those who are more traditionally religious cannot share these freedoms. But a world without monsters, ghosts, demons, and controlling gods unfetters the mind to soar to new heights, to think unthinkable thoughts, to imagine the unimaginable, to contemplate infinity and eternity knowing that no one is looking back. The universe takes on a whole new meaning when you know that your place in it was not foreordained, that it was not designed for us – indeed, that it was not designed at all. If we are nothing more than star stuff and biomass, how special life becomes. If the evolutionary tape were replayed again and again without the appearance of our species, how extraordinary becomes our existence, and, correspondingly how cherished. To share in the mass of knowledge generated by other human minds, and perhaps even to make a tiny contribution toward that body of knowledge that will be passed down through the ages – part of the cumulative wisdom of a single species on a tiny planet orbiting an ordinary star on the remote edge of a not-so-unusual galaxy, itself a member of a cluster of galaxies billions of light years wide is sublime beyond words.

At 9:00 p.m. on Wednesday evening, August 3, 1997, the renowned sage and Vedic philosopher from India, Sri Leachim Remresh, took to the airwaves on WGN radio's Milt Rosenberg Show to offer pearls of

psychic wisdom to Chicago listeners. Remresh explained that he presently lives in Sedona, Arizona, a New Age capital of sorts, where the Earth's mystical energies are focused in special vortices. Having traveled extensively throughout India, and studied under some of the great Himalayan sages, Remresh unlighted his listeners on how the linear mode of Western scientific thinking restricts our ability to perceive other dimensions, times, and forces. Callers were told they need only give their birth date and ask a single question for Remresh to tap into the cosmic vibrations.

The first caller, a woman born in 1953, wanted to know if her present relationship was going to work out. Remresh cut straight to the woman's heart, telling her that she had previously been married but was now in a relationship with a man who was not as committed as she. In fact, he might even have someone else on the side. The woman gasped in acknowledgement. That was precisely the problem. What should she do? Remresh told her that she already knew what she needed to do. Another caller, a woman born in 1941, wanted to know what she should do about her son. Remresh once again drew upon psychic harmonies, telling the woman that her son was presently adrift in life but that in a few years he would turn his life around; she should not worry too much that he has no goals. Remresh was absolutely right. She wished her son would do something, anything! She gave Remresh a 95 percent psychic accuracy rating. The host then announced he had an even more startling revelation -- right after the break, of course.

Sri Leachim Remresh, it was revealed, was simply Michel Shermer spelled backwards (with a couple of letter reversals to ease pronunciation). He happened to be in Chicago as a part of his national book tour for *Why People Believe Weird Things*, and radio show host Rosenberg asked him to play along with this experiment to show how easy it is to appear to have special insights into people's lives, and how convinced people can become when such bold proclamations are offered. With no formal training on how to be a psychic, he merely repeated the mantras of New Age gurus, offered some generalizations about human behavior he learned as a student of psychology and in his forty-three years of life experience and let the callers to the rest. The first woman was a product of the late 60's and referred to her "relationship", not her marriage. Since most people of that age have been married at least once, her previous marriage history was an easy guess. Statistically speaking men are

more promiscuous than women, and women are more committed to relationships than men, so it did not take a genius (or a psychic) to figure out what was behind her question. The second woman was fifty-six years old, so he figured her son must be in his late teens or early twenties. Many guys that age are lost souls, rudderless and unanchored, seeking independence from their parents but not yet parents themselves. So he played the odds again and was right again.

Among magicians this process is called “cold reading,” and is practiced by those who bill themselves as “mentalists.” Start with generalizations, then work your way to specifics, using subject feedback, both verbal and non-verbal. The four areas people most want to know about are obvious – love, health, money, and career. So you work your way through those. Sri Leachim Remresh was successful for the same reasons all mediums, psychics, palm and tarot card readers, and astrologers are successful – the people who come to them for advice believe they will be successful. Once that belief is in place, the imagination makes certain it is confirmed.

Why are we so anxious to invest our imaginations in this direction? Why is it so difficult to discriminate between what is real and what is not? Researchers point to our wonderful imagination, pattern seeking abilities, and propensity for storytelling to fill in our knowledge blanks. Studies show an inverse relationship between religious and paranormal beliefs when compared with educational level and scientific understanding. In other words, as education goes up religiosity and mysticism goes down with the technical and scientific community near the bottom of the religiosity scale. The stratification within the scientific community is even more pronounced with the most accomplished and celebrated experts being the absolute bottom of the believers scale. Among the countries of the industrialized West, Americans top the true believers scale with no close second.

A Gallup poll in 1991 revealed that half of all Americans believe in astrology and almost as many believe in extrasensory perception, or ESP; a third believe in the lost continent of Atlantis and in ghosts; and a full two-thirds believe they have had a psychic experience. The belief in an omnipotent god and heaven runs in the 80 per cent range and has been increasing. Do we really live in the Age of Science? We do, but we mostly partake of the fruits of science – technology –

whereas fundamental principles of scientific thinking are often poorly taught and rarely employed.

Please don't misunderstand, psychics and their like are a valuable social resource beyond just entertainment. If you are told you have grand things ahead, isn't it natural to stick out your chin, stand taller, and try harder with greater confidence that you will succeed? Along those same lines, would God's chosen people have conquered the Philistines if they had not been told they were chosen to do so?

At this point I would like to share a few thoughts sparked by Elliott West in his *The Contested Plain: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* which features the 1858 gold discovery between the Arkansas and South Platte Rivers). You may think that an odd source for a church talk but one needs to understand one thing about the writings of West. It has been said of Elliott West that he couldn't comment on a new traffic light at maple and main without starting with the Magna Carta. Thus his work is as well researched in philosophy and insight as it is in historical fact.

West points out that we can rarely, if ever, imagine anything close to the full consequence of changing things. Some repercussions are simply beyond our ability to see or understand. Killing a lot of bears for their skins might keep people warmer, but it also touches everything directly and indirectly involved with a bear's living. It is the downside of the human advantage. Our history in dealing with our surroundings is, among other things, a lengthy account of human beings over and over imagining their way into a serious pickle.

The pace and scale of imagination and change has varied. Some conditions more than others encourage people to rethink their surroundings and once in awhile we have explosions of imagination. Some of the most spectacular have come when previously separate cultures suddenly find one another. Besides killing each other, the people exchange material goods, animals, diseases, plants. They also form imagined worlds in their heads. As those imagined worlds meet and resonate, new possibilities are spun out. It is fertile ground for change.

The history of our lands reflects this process. Waves of Native American cultures melded and modified their ways as each sought a different view and the power to implement that view. At a point in time with which we are more familiar, Native Americans and Euro-Americans met and envisioned different routes to power. The basic force was imaginative, the perceiving of the country as a fundamentally different realm of human use.

To help picture the evolution of culture after culture, considering only our Great Plains, stretch your arm out pointing your index finger. Your shoulder is the first certain presence of people in the mid-continent; the fleshy end of your fingertip is today. On this timeline, the first Europeans show up on your second knuckle. The rush for Gold in the Rockies began at about the quick of your fingernail. And a lot happened between knuckle and nail, the period we find familiar. Those 15 generations are as difficult to comprehend without knowledge of the 400 generations before as is the physiology of your arm while ignoring the first three feet of flesh, sinew, bicep, triceps, wrist, humerus, and the rest.

It is also hard not to wonder how different those years might have been if all sides had used their prodigious imaginations to picture how varied peoples and dreams might occupy the same place. We shouldn't waste time wishing frogs had wings. But after all, Indians and whites were masters of change. After 15,000 years of walking, plains Indians imagined and created a new, vastly different culture based on the wild horses which spread northward from the Spanish. Their performances were so impressive precisely because they could envision other ways and muster the will to make them happen. Perhaps their failures should push us to re-perceive our own neighborhoods into more tolerant shapes.

Meg Riley, in the bulletin quote, states, "Imagination is an imperative."

Does it take much imagination to see UUFR at a frontier where we may push ourselves to re-perceive our own neighborhood into more open, tolerant, and mutually supporting shapes? We don't have to peer across the high plains to apply our imaginations to what can be our future. But we know we can rarely, if ever, imagine anything close to the full consequence of changing things. If we are blessed

with the ability to imagine a better future, should we not move toward that vision with confidence in our abilities to deal with the unknowns?