Keep on Imagining

REV. SUZELLE LYNCH & BRAD THE DAD

Suzelle and Brad have been CLF pen pals for years. They wrote this exploration of imagination together.

SUZELLE: Imagination is human magic. It gives us the power to make mental pictures and feel feelings beyond the input of our senses. It helps us believe, remember, reason, fantasize and solve problems! Imagination misused fuels our fears, but more often it beckons us toward a better life.

I always thought I had a good imagination. I’m a writer, an artist, and a songwriter... But I never imagined I could have a rich, beautiful, loving friendship with somebody like Brad the Dad, a young incarcerated Black man who grew up on the streets in poverty, fear, and violence.

BRAD THE DAD: Imagine a child born to a single mother addicted to crack cocaine and alcohol. She has utter disregard for this child; his basic needs are at war with the merciless enemy, crack, and only one desire can be fulfilled. The child loses every time...

There is no father. Often, there are no lights, heat, or hot water; no food or rules; no love, attention, or affection. There’s only crack smoke, empty beer cans, and strange men coming and going day and night. And if the child cries from hunger, he’s fed punches to the face to shut him up.

Imagine a child who wanted to be Superman; who dreamed of being a lawyer or policeman; who dreamed of his mother loving him and his daddy being home. Feel the bite of cold, hard steel around his tiny wrists; the loneliness, fear and sadness of being locked in jail for trying to protect and earn the love of a mother who cursed the day he was born. Honestly, would it surprise anyone if this child answered the call of self-preservation and took to the streets?

Now imagine the surprise of this child grown to adulthood, in a prison cell, watching TV as a crowd of black and white people march through the streets, professing “Black Lives Matter!” I thought it was some kind of a hoax. Frustrated and angry, I asked myself, “Who are these Black Lives everyone claims to matter...?”

SUZELLE: It was my congregation and me that Brad saw on the TV news. We were marching to fight the dismissal of charges against the police officer who murdered Jay Anderson, Jr., a young black man from our neighborhood.

Brad wrote to me. He asked. “Does my black life matter? Does my son’s black life matter? Or is it just the black lives who are dead that matter?” His question hit my face like a dash of cold water. We began writing back and forth.

“Without leaps of imagination or dreaming, we lose the excitement of possibilities. Dreaming, after all is a form of planning.”

GLORIA STEINEM

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IMAGINATION

What role does imagination play in your life?

MICHAEL
CLF Member, incarcerated TX

Imagination has had a major role in my life ever since I was a little boy. My imagination started and grew, from my shoe box full of G.I. Joe vs. Cobra action figures. I’d create story lines, and they’d be my actors for my imaginative movie. To be honest, that carried on until I was 17 years old. At that time, I gave my action figures to my oldest nephew.

Then, I started writing short stories, getting critique and advice from my Reading and English teachers in high school. By 20, I went online to find out how a screenplay is properly written and formatted. After reading a couple of screenplays online, like Die Hard and The Sixth Sense, I started writing my own screenplays.

Every day, I have new ideas and imaginative plots for stories, screenplays, and novels. Being able to go into my world of imagination really helps me to be able to cope and manage a cool mind and time while in prison. Of course, movies, commercials, TV shows, classic literature and novels, really help to spark an idea and let my imagination fly and take me into a place of wonderful, awesome, and potential possibilities. I’d be one lost and crazy individual without my imagination. I’m very thankful for the imagination I have and hope one day, I can use it to help and bless others.

MICHAEL
CLF Member, incarcerated WI

Your mind controls whether you live in a paradise, or hell. Imagination give us the power to believe, and push the limits. My imagination has granted me ideas, innovation; the natural outcome of creative thinking. The proper use of imagination is to give beauty to the world.
When we're incarcerated we lose a lot, but one of the main things we lose is our ability to connect to the world. We become very isolated, and we start to forget the world outside this one — our dreams even start to become defined by the parameters of prison. Our interpretation can become distorted through the prism that is prison.

Our imagination plays the vital role of keeping us connected to the outside world.

We use our imagination in a variety of ways: we tell stories about our life before incarceration, or imagine what we’ll be doing upon release. We imagine playing games with our kids, of having intimate moments with loved ones; we use artistic mediums to remember the world as we once saw it, or re-imagine it in a way that renews our connection to it. There is no shortage of inventive ways that those of us in prison use our imagination as a means to feel connected to a world that some of us haven’t seen in decades.

I will tell you the three main ways I use my imagination as a means of connection. First, I am a constant student. I enjoy learning; I love to study philosophy, sociology, and politics. I strive to understand reasons. My love of studying started with myself: I was 20 years old, facing down the rest of my life in prison, and did not understand why. I needed to figure it out. I wanted to know what happened to me that caused me to want to be someone who inflicted pain. This led me down a rabbit hole in which I found some of those answers, and also led to me finding myself, and being able to imagine how I fit in the world.

Next, I am a writer. I write a variety of things, but my passion lies with poetry and short-fiction: this is where I can play with ideas of identity and emotion. Writing helps me to imagine the world in new ways, the type of people that exist in it, and how we’re all connected to it. It allows me to imagine an existence beyond the walls. When I write, I am in a different world — connected to it, not in a prison cell.

Lastly, I use imagination with the people I correspond with. I have been told that I can be quite an inquisitive person, it is only because I desire to know. I’ve spent my entire 20s and almost all of my 30s in prison, and the experiences that people normally have at that age — things that helped them discover themselves — are things I didn’t get. I live somewhat vicariously through others’ stories. I rely on their information when discussing an array of topics, to hypothesize my own likes/dislikes and desires/needs. The more detail, the better I can imagine. It is through those interactions that I can see the world.

My imagination for me, and for others in my position, is about maintaining a connection to other people and the world. It is a necessary component to staying a person, instead of becoming a prisoner.
GEORGE
*CLF Member, incarcerated FL*

Imagination has always played a big role in my life. As kids we often imagine ourselves as superheroes or any other type of fictional hero. As we grow up, so does our imagination. As a teenager, I used to imagine myself as a firefighter or, a police officer (still heroes, but more reality based). Now as an incarcerated man, I truly understand the power of a good, strong imagination.

Relaxed thinking is the key to your imagination, and imagination is the key to your power and talent. As an incarcerated man, I have time to think clearly. Once activated, it’s easy to find and focus on your power and talent. For some it’s drawing, and for others it may be writing or story telling. For me it’s all of the above. I tell stories in graphic novel form, so my imagination is always going, even while I sleep. For all people in the free-world or who are incarcerated, if you want to be successful or just happy in life, my advice is to slow down. Close your eyes and let your imagination guide you to your true calling. Blessed be.

RUSSELL
*CLF Member, incarcerated MD*

I have discovered that the most powerful super power in the Universe is the imagination.

Imagination dictates every single thing I do. Many people may be unaware how our imagination creates everything around us. As a lifelong artist I know this to be true. Before I draw, I imagine. Before I sleep, I imagine. Before I awake, I imagine. It is a fact that dreams are mere imagination run wild.

What I do is allow my imagination to combine with the actions that will lead to my revealing the imagined thing simply by not interfering. In Buddhism, this is said to be what Zen is: the mind and actions moving effortlessly in unison.

My imagination gives me inspiration to contribute to a future world where everyone loves one another and shares all of earth’s resources for the good of the whole planet. Those that are using their imagination in the same way will quicken this imagining into physical reality.

If I never learned to just let my imagination live free I would be one of the most miserable people alive. I believe I only exist simply because I imagine it!
Keep on Imagining, continued from page 1

BRAD THE DAD: Throughout the 20 years I’ve been incarcerated, I’ve always imagined myself as something greater than the six-digit number the prison system assigned me. I HAD to imagine in order to survive. I’ve spent more than ten years in solitary confinement, with one stint lasting almost four years straight. Having a vivid imagination and hope is the ONLY way to survive the hole for such a duration. You must be able to live in your mind and work towards something greater for tomorrow. I imagined myself as the most loving and understanding father the world has ever seen, and the most supportive, loving, and loyal husband a wife could ask for. I imagined I was smart; a scholar even, so I studied and read a lot of books. I imagined myself as a Freedom Fighter. Despite the barriers the prison administration placed in front of me, I never ceased to imagine. To believe. To hope.

SUZELLE: I didn’t understand Brad at first. I thought he wanted help from me. I asked a committee of my congregation to assist, but they returned only fear and suspicion. But Brad had imagined something far more powerful than help; he imagined honest conversations, a sharing of laughs and lives, caring support for his son. In a word, he imagined kinship. And that is what we now have — Brad and me, my partner, Brad’s wife, his son, and Lynn and Marc — a wonderful couple from my former congregation who wrote to Brad when I could not. We are a circle of kin, companions on life’s path. We love each other; we listen and learn from each other.

BRAD THE DAD: I never knew exactly how I would bring my imaginings to fruition, but I always believed I would. Now I can proudly profess to you that I stand here today as a loving husband of an amazing wife, who has enriched my life beyond anything I could have ever imagined; a supportive father of a wonderful son and step daughter. I am a college scholar with a 3.8 grade point average, and I am a staunch defender of the freedoms and liberties of all people, regardless of age, race, gender identity, or sexual orientation. So much love is reciprocated between my great friends Suzelle and Lynn and me, and their partners, whose friendship and support has helped me turn my imagination into reality. We have all dared to hope, believe, and imagine something beyond the boxes of each of our cultural or social demographics. I encourage you to have the courage to do the same.

PHOTO BY NICOLE BASTER ON UNSPLASH
IN PASSING  BY: ULTRA Vilet

I'D LIKE TO USE
SOME ALLEGORICAL ALLUSIONS HERE
A MYTHICAL, METHODOICAL,METAPHORIC
AND SYNERGISTIC SYSTEMATIC REVOLUTION REAR
BUT NEED I TELL THEE, ANNOUNCE
OF MY ENDEAVOR IN ENIGMAS ENGINEERED
A THOUGHT OUT-LOUD, ADMISSION
PARDON THIS PARABLES PROMPT
POMP PROPOSITION

IN PASSING

SO I SAY TO THE WAYWARD WAYFARER,
LODGE IN YONDER INN UNTIL THE STORM PASSES
AND I PLACE 7 GOLD COWS IN HIS PALM
WHICH RIGHT-NAY CATCH FIRE AND BURN TO ASHES

AS IF I HAD GIVEN HIM NOTHING IN FORM
AND THE FIRE HAD NEVER FLARED FIZZED
FLOODED MY EVANESCENT EXISTENCE.
HE LOOKS AT ME AND SAYS: "WHAT STORM?"
AS THE THUNDER ROLLS AND A CRACK OF LIGHTNING
BEARS HIS FALSE WITNESS

BUT HE UTTERS NOT A LIE
AND NEITHER DO THE TORRENTS OF RAIN
THE SHUTTERS ON HIS EYES
FRAME DISTORTED WINDOW PAPERS
SET WITH A STARK FATE; FIXED
SEARED IN HOBRID DISDAIN

ON THE HIGHWAY TO HELL, HE SAYS
HIS MOTHER IS DEAD
HE'S CHASING DEATH (HALF-HEARTEDLY)
CAUSE THE OTHER HALF WAS RIPED OUT HIS CHEST
SAYS HE'S ANGRY, BITTER, AND BRING WITH RAGE
LIVES IN SORROW AND SWIMS IN RAGE
SAYS HOW HE CAN'T TAKE LIE AND SUCKS
SCREAMING KOMAROZY AND HOW HE NO LONGER CARES
ON THE VARY GROUND HIS CALLOUS FEET WALK
HE CASTS CURSES AND SINISTER SHARES

FOR WHAT ITS WORTH,
EVEN THO I PERCEIVE HIS UNPERCEPTIVE PROMISE
IN TURNING, I LOOK INTO HIS EYES AND PLANT THE SEEDS
A SPIRITUAL DEPOSIT; DETECTIBLE
IN SOIL ELSESOUL, FOR HIS SOUL'S SOUL IT BURNETH

I SAY:
I'VE BEEN BY THAT WAY
DOWN THAT ROAD, YOU SEE
THRO THEM ALLEYS
UP THAT STREET
ON THAT BOULEVARD
VENTURE THOSE AVENUES
DROVE THAT DRIVE
TOOK THAT ROUTE
JOURNEYED THAT LAME
TRAVERSED THOSE HIGHWAYS
I KNOW THE PAIN
REVERSE AND SIDEWAYS

I'VE BEEN ON FEET, IN A CAR, SUV
VAN, TRUCK, BUS AND LIMOUSINE
IN A TANK, HOVER CRAFT, PLANE, BLIMP
ON A MOTORCYCLE, JET SKI, UFO, AND BROOMSTICK
I'VE HAD A HOT AIR BALLOON
MAGIC CARPET, UNICICLE, CHARriot, AND CAMOC
I'VE BEEN ON TRAINS, ICE SKATES
HORSE BACK, PO-DO STICKS
SKATE BOARDS, SNOW BOARDS
SURF BOARDS, AND SPACE SHIPS
I'VE USED STILTS, ROLLER BLADES, ROLLER SKATES
4 WHEELERS, 3 WHEELERS, OGO-CARTS, AND SLEIGHS
A HELICOPTER, CRUISE LINER, RAFT, MOPED
BICYCLE, TRICYCLE, STAGE COACH, AND BOB SLED

SO I SAID TO THE WEARY WONDERER
AND LEFT HIM TO HIS PERDITION
PARCHED HORSE TONGUES BLEED BLOOD
I MUST INFER INDIFFERENCE
BLOODY BITS AND BRIDLES
BEGET BLOODY REGIONS
ADHERENCE; GRIP IS VITAL
BUT SHALL NOT BE OBTAINED

SOMETIMES I WONDER
BECAUSE I RECOGNIZE THE STRANGERS HEART
BECAUSE THE SPIRITS WITH IN THEM
TELL ME, WHAT MANNER OF MEN THEY ARE
I POVERER IF ALL PATHS DON'T POUR INTO THE SAME PARK
WHAT IF,
THERE ISN'T EVEN ANYWHERE TO STAY... OR DO
WHERE ALL LINES BLUR AND VANNISH, ABDICATED IN A HALO

NOTHING AWAKENS VIA ENLIGHTENMENT, EXCEPT
FOR YOUR AWARENESS OF WHAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN
ALREADY IS AND SHALL ALWAYS BE
THIS ANCIENT PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGIANS
SCHOOL OF THOUGHT, IS A SLEIGHT TO ME

IF I AM SO DIVINE; MODE: SINLESS
IF MY ESSENCE IS PURE DIVINITY
HOW WAS CONSCIOUSNESS LOST, TO BEGIN WITH
HOW COULD MORE SECULAR OBSTRUCTIONS, OBSCURE,
BRAZEN
SUCH A POTENT SOUL SOVEREIGN CELESTIAL ENERGIE
I WILL NOT BE A MARTYR OF MY OWN IMAGINED NATIONS
LIFE IS FULL OF MYSTERY
THO I DO IMAGINE WONDROUSLY
FAILING SHORT A PROCLAMATION OF TRUTH
SIMPLY HID IN CONSIDERATION
LO, NO OBSTRUCTIONS, OBSCURITY MAKING
OR FURTHER ADD.
Do you believe that imagination is human magic, as Rev. Suzelle Lynch wrote? What has imagination made possible in your life?

If you would like us to be able to publish or share your writing in the future, remember to include "You have permission to edit and publish my words" somewhere on your submission.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

In this section, we offer questions for reflection based on ideas explored in this issue. You may wish to explore it individually or as part of a group discussion. To submit your reflection for possible inclusion in a future issue of Quest, tear off your answer and mail it back to us using the envelope included in the middle of this issue, or mail a longer reflection separately.

UUA GENERAL ASSEMBLY
PITTSBURGH • JUNE 21 - 25, 2023

Would you like to represent the Church of the Larger Fellowship at General Assembly (GA) this summer?

The CLF is entitled to 22 delegates at the UUA's General Assembly, which will be held both online and in-person in Pittsburgh, PA from June 21-25, 2023. You will be able to attend online or in-person workshops, programs, and worship services. Proof of vaccination for COVID-19 is required to attend in person. As a delegate you will vote on association business during General Sessions. General Sessions will be held from 2:30-5:30pm ET on 6/22-6/24 and 2:00-4:00pm PT on 6/25. Delegates should be able to be online or in person to attend the majority of these General Sessions. CLF delegates vote their conscience on matters related to the denomination of Unitarian Universalism, and are responsible for their own expenses. There is no set registration fee for delegates who are attending only for business virtually at General Sessions.

If you’d like to participate in GA 2023 in this role, please fill out the online application at clfuu.org/delegate-application. Visit the UUA’s GA website at www.uua.org/ga for details.
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