

Imagination's long reach

Through empathy, we can stand in another's shoes.

As a result of empathy, judgment of another person is replaced by compassion.

One of the most vivid examples of empathy in contemporary literature occurs in the novel "Rumors of Peace" by Ella Leffland. Suse Hansen is a typical preadolescent growing up in California during World War II.

Suse goes to the movies and reads Life magazine. But she worries that her town, her school, her home will be bombed by the Japanese.

Then one day Suse somehow realizes that she and her family will never be bombed in California. She is indescribably happy. But her imagination is flooded by empathy for people who suffered during the war:

"That potato-digging family lying dead in a Polish field. They must have lived in a house and sat in their yard at an old table drinking lemonade or whatever you drink in Poland. The children must have spread their hands on the warm table top, and it must have felt real to them. They must have felt real to themselves, as I felt real to myself..."

"I didn't want to know this surprisingly strange thing, but the picture was growing, for the parents must have felt real, too, and the people in the bombed

cellars of London and Rotterdam, and the soldiers lying dead in the snow with their arms sticking up like iron, and in the jungles, rotting.

"And Frank Garibaldi, the grocer's boy, killed early in the war. He must have hated to die. He must have cried out and covered his eyes. They all must have, and it was too much to know, too painful, too pitiful, too huge and boundless, and why should I have to see such a thing now, just when I knew we were safe and I had found happiness again?"

Suse's imagination connects her to the rest of humanity, even to those situated in another time or another place. Suse weeps with those who weep — really. Isn't this a connection with the God of all humanity?

As the religious imagination is transformed, people are enabled "to situate themselves differently in the world, to challenge their values," writes Mark Searle (The Way, April 1984). This is a transformation that brings them "to question their accepted patterns of behavior."

Thus, linked to prayer, imagination not only has a capacity to transform our understanding. It begins to transform the way we live.

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a kingdom of vivid colors

lion shall browse together, with a little child to lead them. The cow and the bear shall be neighbors, together their young shall rest; the lion shall eat hay like the ox. The baby shall play by the cobra's den, and the child shall lay his hand on the adder's lair" (11:6-8).

Isaiah could have said quite abstractly that life in the era of God's reign would be marked by perfect harmony and peace in the universe. But such a statement would hardly have had the appeal of the vivid picture he drew.

Imagination is the stuff of invention — and of human progress, if used rightly. St. Francis of Assisi hit upon the idea of a creche to visualize for people the stupendous truth that God became man. That truth could be expressed as bluntly as: "And the Word was made flesh" (John 1:14). Wonderful as that statement is, it doesn't have the same power to move, on a popular level, as the sight of the eternal Word lying in the helplessness of infancy on a bed of straw, surrounded by the animals whose feed trough had become his cradle.

And when the author of the New Testament book of Revelation wanted to project the truth of God's ultimate victory over evil, he pictured a fabulous city glittering with jewels. He prefaced this dazzling picture with this equally imaginative introduction:

"I also saw a new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, beautiful as a bride prepared to meet her husband. I heard a loud voice from the heavens cry out: 'This is God's dwelling among men. He shall be with them and they shall be his people and he shall be their God who is always with them. He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, for the former world has passed away'" (21:2-4).

That is the kind of symbolic and imaginative language that has the power to create desire, yearning, and earnest striving.

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FOOD...

...for thought

might be developed in a parish. —Social justice advocates work imaginatively to lower barriers between groups of people in society.

If one stereotype associates fine imagination with a genius like Mozart, and finds it inaccessible to most people, another stereotype sees imagination primarily as a gift for children. The child at play has an ability to thrive in a world constructed out of the imagination.

But the adult? The adult puts away the things of a child and learns to live in the world at hand — the real world. Does this also mean that the adult must put away the imagination?

Consider the gift of imagination:

—It can foster an ability to envision the future.

—It is creative, generating new plans and insights, perhaps leading to much-needed breakthroughs.

—It is an explorer, asking what is needed — by the people around us, for the world around us.

—It is courageous, bold enough to believe that what should happen could happen.

Doesn't the gift of imagination help people remain hopeful in difficult situations?

Do you think imagination can be considered a valuable ingredient of the adult Christian life?

The composition of a wonderful piece of music might seem complex and difficult to most people. But in the film "Amadeus," Mozart composes new music almost effortlessly.

In fact, before the notes are written down on paper, Mozart apparently hears them in his vivid imagination. He possesses an ability to imagine how music will sound when performed by an entire orchestra with all its different members.

Mozart's imagination serves him well. But this depiction of a genius at work might prove intimidating to others. Is true creativity reserved to the world's Mozarts?

The truth is, people in the most typical situations are encouraged to put their imaginations to work.

—In offices, it is common to hear that what is needed is an imaginative solution — a fresh approach — to obstacles and problems.

—In schools, imaginative ways to draw out children's special talents are sought by teachers and parents.

—Couples put their imaginations to work to foresee what their married life could become — to look beyond present difficulties.

—Parish council members use imagination to help discover how a greater sense of unity or a better atmosphere for worship

...for discussion

1. When you think of the word "imagination," what first comes to mind for you?

2. Is imagination a power for typical adults to use in typical situations? What are some times when you rely on your imagination?

3. Often, a relationship is said to exist between imagination and creativity. What, in your view, is a creative person? When are you called upon to act in creative ways?

4. Dolores Leckey finds that the measure of religious imagination is in the changed behavior — the changed ways of living — that may result from it. What does she mean?