Imagination and the Spiritual Life

The imagination profoundly shapes who we are. Our imagination is the world we live in, the way we perceive reality. It can guide us toward what is life-giving or what is destructive. The world projected by our imagination is fueled by whatever we drink in. We can imbibe the world through pornography or Facebook debates. Or we can choose to contemplate an autumn tree or the meaningful work of a non-profit organization.

Ignatius of Loyola became a follower of Jesus when he realized the effect of the imagination on his own life. Bored and bedridden from a battle, he spent half his time daydreaming about the life of Jesus and the saints and half the time fantasizing about war and women. He began to notice a significant difference when his imagination was shaped by the story of Jesus. His spirit quickened and the positive feelings persisted long after the daydream was over. The impact of filling his imagination with the things of God led him to radically change his life. He dedicated himself to ministry, even when it meant a lifetime of poverty and celibacy.

Similarly, Paul the Apostle wrote: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4:8). He went so far as to say we can be transformed by “renewing” our mind, and that the way we nurture our imagination has a direct impact on our ability to know the Divine will (Rom 12:2). The imagination is a determining factor in how we live our lives—for better or for worse.

In the digital age, it takes considerable discipline to proactively shape the imagination. Often it is easier to passively absorb whatever pops up on social media or Netflix. Studies have shown that we can even develop technology addictions that impact neurology and the way we relate to others. Often we are unaware of how much we allow our imagination to be unpredictably and passively shaped. But we can take steps to proactively cultivate our imagination in beneficial ways.

Stories: The biblical authors often exhort us in the form of stories. Narratives have a way of enlarging our imagination. They help us to transcend present challenges to envision a world of possibility. As we see Jesus’s compassion for the crowds and his healing touch, something stirs in our own spirit. Stories inspire us as we watch people living out the culture of the Kingdom in everyday life, whether the local school teacher pouring into her students or a married couple pressing into faithfulness amid challenges. Similarly, fiction like Lord of the Rings or Les Misérables can also serve to turn our faces toward God. The world of these stories becomes our world until we, too, are living it out. We can actively shape our imagination by reading, hearing, or watching stories that stir our hearts to act with love.

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**Senses:** One reason top geneticist Francis Collins converted from atheism to Christianity was the wonder of creation. Many people have experienced profound awe when standing before the Rocky Mountains or the Grand Canyon. Visual splendor can remind us of the grandeur of God. The same is true for the sound of music or ocean waves, the loving embrace of a friend, or the taste and smell of fresh food pulled from the earth. Some of us grew up in traditions that told us to suppress our senses lest we be led astray, but God created us as embodied creatures. Our imagination can be quickened in positive ways through our senses.

**Wisdom:** Paul the Apostle lamented those who are “darkened in their understanding,” leading to destructive living (Eph 4:17-24). Wisdom involves testing the spirits and not simply accepting anything and everything. It means questioning sources and engaging in critical thinking. Growing in wisdom often requires exposing ourselves to viewpoints that challenge our presuppositions and stereotypes rather than sticking with whatever position feels most comfortable. We can shape our imagination by fact-checking. Such illumination gives us the ability to discern truth from lies, life from death, God’s will from the will of the world.

Begin noticing and attending to your imagination. Reflect on how it impacts your moods, attitudes, and actions. Incorporate the shaping of your imagination as a regular spiritual practice in your life.²

² The Examen can be a helpful tool to help you engage in prayerful noticing on a daily basis.

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