

“Imagination: Creating the Future Reality”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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At this time last year we had no idea how dramatically different today would be than last January 10th. A year ago today the World Health Organization posted online a comprehensive package of technical guidance as the COVID-19 virus was just beginning to spread. The virus subsequently spread rapidly and widely and on March 11 of last year the World Health Organization used the term pandemic to describe the outbreak. Over the course of the last year the virus has infected tens of millions and the death toll is approaching 2 million people worldwide. I doubt any of us would have imagined a year ago how dramatically different things would be today than they were last January 10th. Likewise, we don't know today how things will have changed a year from now.

While we don't know how things will be different a year from now, I am certain that all of us can imagine some of the ways we would like things to be. I am sure all of us want the spread and the impacts of this virus to be dramatically reduced or even eliminated. We want the fear, the anger, the sorrow and the grief that has accompanied this virus to abate. We imagine and look forward to the time when we can safely gather again with the people we know and care about. Some of us imagine feeling comfortable with our children or grandchildren attending school in person instead of online. Many of us imagine feeling free to travel or attend events, such as concerts or sporting events. We imagine everyone who wants or needs to work being able to do so without fear of getting sick. These are just a few of the things we might imagine being different a year from now.

I am certain that a year from now we will do things very differently than we are today. We don't yet know what all the changes will be, but there are people, including people in this congregation, who are using their imagination today to create the future reality that will be a year from now, five years from now, and beyond. I feel confident in stating that because I know that through the use of imagination, it is possible to change what is, and what has been, to not just what can be, but also to what will be.

It is possible that there are some who would question whether imagination has the capabilities that I attribute to it. As we heard in our reading this morning, imagination's value and importance has been written about by poets, novelists and psychologists. In spite of this, there are people who may discount or downplay the power of imagination to change the future. In an effort to address those who question the power of imagination, I offer this quote by Albert Einstein, a 20th century theoretical physicist who developed the theory of relativity, one of the two pillars of modern physics. In his book *Cosmic Religion and Other Opinions and Aphorisms*, Einstein writes:

"Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution." I am reasonably certain that we would all agree knowledge is important. I wonder if we are prepared to go as far as Einstein and claim that imagination is even more important than knowledge—that imagination, as he states, embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution."

In case you aren't quite ready to accept Einstein's perspective, I offer this story about the power and importance of imagination. This is a story about one step in the process Einstein went through to develop the theory of relativity. When he was 16 years old Einstein visualized himself chasing a beam of light. In his visualization, he imagined himself attaining the speed that light travels. From this imagined perspective he noticed that the beam appeared to be stationary while at the same time oscillating. Even attempting to think about how he was able to imagine all of that makes my brain hurt. Yet it was this visual imagining as a teen which provided the insights that would later in life assist him in developing the special theory of relativity—a theory that was outside of the predominant and accepted theories of his time. Einstein's imagination, and the theory that came about as a result, changed what was then considered probable and even possible. Today, we benefit significantly from the developments that have been made possible because of his imagination.

I share this story because I believe we need to shift where we put our priorities. We put great emphasis on knowledge. And we invest a great deal of money, time and energy on expanding and passing on the knowledge we currently have. Far less money, time and energy are devoted to encouraging and developing the capacity for imagination. I believe it is time that we accept and acknowledge that while knowledge is important and beneficial, imagination is more important. And it is time that we invest at least as much to promote the development of imagination as we invest to maintain and promote knowledge.

Keeping the importance of imagination front and center, I want to return to the primary reason things are so much different today than they were one year ago. That primary reason is the emergence of the coronavirus. The pandemic, which has brought so much pain, suffering and loss to so many, is a crisis. Yet it is only one of several crises that need our attention and our action. We need to address not just the pandemic but also global climate change, growing economic inequality, systemic racism, attacks on our national government, both from beyond and from within our country, and so many other issues that are at crisis proportions. It will take more than mere knowledge to successfully address any of these issues. It will take all of the imagination we can muster. It will take visionaries like Einstein whom I just mentioned. And visionaries like Jesus and Carl G. Jung, who were mentioned in our reading. It will take visionaries who challenge what we think we know in order to perceive things in new ways. And it will take people like you and me, who are willing to step out of our comfort zones to create a future that holds more promise for everyone—a future that embraces the entire world, not just the privileged or the people of one nation. To adequately and appropriately address the multiple crises we are facing, it will take a concerted effort on the part of many of us—an effort to step back from what has been familiar and comfortable, from what we have known or think we know, in order to imagine a new and better future.

As I think about the list of crises I just mentioned, I recall something a ministerial colleague said to me several years ago. This very experienced and skilled UU minister was in the middle of dealing with a crisis in the congregation she was serving. As she shared information about what was going on and how she was addressing it, she said something that changed my way of thinking about crisis situations. “I do my best not to waste the opportunities a crisis presents,” she told me.

I encourage all of us to consider that statement for a while. And as we reflect on that statement, I would suggest that we recall what our typical approach to handling a crisis has been. Has your typical response been to look for the opportunities a crisis presents? For the vast majority of my life the way I approached crisis situations was to get laser focused on using my knowledge and my physical abilities to make it through the crisis as best I possibly could. It never occurred to me that the crisis I was in the midst of had opportunities I could or should be paying attention to. Now that I look back on various crisis situations in my life, I am able to recognize a number of opportunities those situations held. And I can say that somehow, possibly by accident, luck or providence, I managed to avail myself of a significant number of the opportunities that were there. I also realize some of the opportunities that I didn’t see then and completely missed out on. As I look back on those times of crisis in my life, it is clear that I was intent on, not just getting out of the situation, but on getting back to what was familiar and comfortable. I wasn’t able in those situations to allow my imagination to explore the new and unknown possibilities those crisis situations held. Maybe, just maybe, some of you can relate to my experience.

Since my colleague shared her way of approaching crisis situations, I have sought to engage my imagination more when facing difficult situations in my life. This new practice hasn’t come easily, in fact, it has been quite a challenge. When faced with a crisis I always initially respond the way I did for most of my life. But with practice, I am beginning to learn to step back—to step back in order to allow my imagination to look for possibilities. By that I don’t mean that I imagine worst-case possibilities. Instead, I let my imagination direct me to positive outcomes, to possibilities that may not yet seem clear or even likely. More and more I am finding this practice both useful and beneficial. Looking for the opportunities present in the various crises I face allows me to see things in a way I otherwise wouldn’t have been able to. It helps me imagine outcomes that I otherwise might not have considered possible. And it gives me a choice about where I invest my attention, time, and energy.

The future lies uncharted before us. We have a choice of how we imagine that future. May we resist the impulse, and even the urge, to return to what we have known. For what we have known has created the crises of the present moment. Let us approach the crises and the challenging issues we are facing with an eye toward the opportunities each of these situations present. And as we confront the many challenges before us, may we consider this quote from Albert Einstein. "Imagination is everything. It is the preview of life's coming attractions." With that thought in the forefront of our minds, may we use our imaginations to create a future reality that reflects the principles and the values we hold dear.

May it be so.