THE IMAGINATION IN SPIRITUALITY

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A SEARCH FOR WHOLENESS characterizes spirituality today. One result of this effort to recover lost connections among diverse aspects of reality is a new appreciation of the imagination.

Long considered a feminine trait, the imagination was once relegated to the realm of childhood, fantasy and play. Popular understanding often equates it with the unreal; describing as 'merely imaginary' something considered an illusion. To reassure a friend that an event has not really happened or that an experience has no basis in reality, we have only to say, 'it's just your imagination'. Under the influence of the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, we have come to place our trust in reason, confident of its power to lead us to the real, at the same time mistrusting and devaluing the imagination.

Now this perspective is shifting. We are aware of the damage wrought by a rigid polarization of life's dimensions. We realize that we have distorted reality by splitting our world into opposites such as secular and sacred, female and male, body and spirit, emotion and reason, and then assigning inferior or superior status to each. Equipped with this new awareness, we recognize that the imagination is not an inferior human capacity. Though it does create the new, the imagination's power extends beyond that. It is a fundamental way of knowing and experiencing reality.

In the scale of human knowing, imagination lies closest to an event; it is the faculty of concrete knowing.[1] Reason is also tethered to events, but it moves at a greater distance from them. The imagination is the way to the deepest realities because it approaches life in its wholeness. Reason, on the other hand, abstracts from life in order to formulate clear and manageable concepts.

Freed from its inferior status, the imagination is again revealing its power to enrich spirituality. We are speaking once more the language of the imagination—story, humour, ritual, symbol, metaphor, parable—on our spiritual journeys. In what follows we will explore the imagination's contributions to spirituality in three areas: 1) the imagination's capacity to open us to the mystery in the ordinary, 2) the role of the imagination in prayer, and 3) the

importance of the imagination in sustaining a commitment to peace and justice.

The imagination as bridge to the sacred

The imagination is the power of connection and relationship; it joins realms of experience, giving expression to their continuities. Samuel Coleridge described the creative imagination as, among other things, the threshold between self and not-self, between mind and matter. It is therefore the source of wholeness in the spiritual life. The imagination's unifying power operates in many areas. Among the most fundamental is in healing the split between the sacred and secular.

Many of us live the greater part of our lives on the surface of mystery; we are restless, aware that we exist on the threshold of something more. How, we wonder, can we connect with this mystery? The imagination enables us to cross over. It does this by opening us to the Ultimate in finite reality, to the Depth at the heart of matter. For it is the imagination that holds together matter and spirit, enabling us to know the concrete in terms of its pervasive mystery. Roberts Avens explains this quality of the imagination.

> Accordingly, when it is glibly proffered that imagination is creative, this should mean that it establishes a peculiar kind of *relation* between matter and spirit—a relation in which neither matter nor spirit is obliterated, but rather brought together, fused into a new whole producing ever and anon new wholes, new configurations of images in art, poetry, religion and science.[2]

Through the imagination we are able to live out a sacramental vision of life. We open to the revelation that the particulars of existence are vessels of grace.

The imagination enables us to see with a kind of double vision, taking in reality on several levels at once. This way of seeing nourishes the contemplative path of finding God in all things. We discover the rich and irreducible elements of existence—the lined and rugged face of an old man on a park bench, the exquisite colours of a red-winged blackbird, the pattern of clouds as a storm moves into the countryside. We see the details of existence, but in and through them we encounter the invisible. God's advent is like the hiddenness and mystery conveyed in the story of the budding fig tree in Mk 13,28. We cannot see summer, but the budding of the fig tree is the promise and epiphany of its coming. The image of the yeast in Mt 13,33 conveys the same truth: we cannot see the leaven, but the rising of the bread makes it evident to all that

it is there. In his spiritual journal, *Morning light*, Jean Sulivan speaks of this double vision as the message of the gospels.

> Jesus is the rabbi whose word is transpierced with images of trees, water, harvests, cattle, shepherds and vagabonds. As if there were a secret connection between the earth, that which presses against it and the invisible . . . It is obvious Jesus lives in the depths of non-duality—that is, where God, the other, and ourselves form only one reality. This is my body, this is my blood.[3]

What is revealed in Jesus is that the human is the place of God's presence, a presence for the most part hidden under the ordinary events of everyday life. God's revelation is realized only in and through the concrete particulars of actual, historical life.

In order to see with the imagination, we must cultivate a special kind of attentiveness. We have been taught to analyze and abstract; not often have we learned a kind of loving awareness. An experience I once had in a university book store illustrated its importance for me. Joe, one of the university students, was confined to a wheel chair because of a severe palsy that kept his upper body—especially his head and arms—in constant motion. Joe was warm and friendly; he laughed often and deeply. One day in early fall I was visiting the book store with a friend and her rather precocious six-year-old daughter, Amy. My friend and I had been absorbed in talking and suddenly noticed that Amy had wandered off. We found her standing in front of Joe's wheel chair, staring up at him intently. As we approached, we heard Amy say to Joe: 'I see you dancing, but I cannot hear your music'. This experience was a parable for my friend and me, delivering that kind of shock to the imagination which Amos Wilder speaks of in relation to the biblical parables.[4] It is this shock, Wilder says, which enables us to see the familiar in a new way.

This effort to dwell in two dimensions at once—ordinary events and God's presence in the ordinary—is a complex experience. Artists help us sustain this fresh way of seeing by showing us life's details in their individual colour and vividness. A haiku by the poet James Luguri illustrates this capacity of the particular to open out into mystery.

> Spring sun
> in the pinetree: the least needle
> glistens.[5]

The haiku helps convince us that we possess only the moment; we therefore must learn to take things in as they happen. In his

poem, 'God's Grandeur', Gerard Manley Hopkins expresses this incarnational spirituality in a moving way.

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
>   It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
>   It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
> Crushed.[6]

For Hopkins, outward and visible beauty is the manifestation of the beauty of God, the visible sign of an invisible and creative energy.

The imagination enables us to see deeply into life at its most ordinary level; it is here that grace appears. The parables of Jesus make clear that it is in the midst of these daily events—farmers planting and harvesting crops, parents and children quarrelling and attempting to reconcile, people losing and recovering treasures—that God comes to us. The divine is not seen directly at all in the parables; it is encountered indirectly. Likewise in the Hebrew scriptures, for example in the psalms or Miriam's song in Exod 15, we find that poetic incarnation has been the traditional means of opening us to religious experience.

> . . . . my days vanish like smoke,
> and my bones burn like fire.
> Withered and dried up like grass is my heart;
> I forget to eat my bread (Ps 101,4–8).

The imagery of the psalms vividly captures our diverse emotions in prayer.

Because the imagination holds together matter and spirit in one experience, it allows us to affirm our connectedness to our bodies and the entire natural world. In the imagination's way of knowing, spirit emerges not as opposed to body but as the body's inner reality. The imagination is a participatory way of entering into creation. Through it we come to see ourselves as one with creation, not objective observers who look on the earth principally in terms of profit and technology. As our Native American friends teach us, all created things are our relatives. We are brother and sister to the grass and birds, the rivers and mountains. Our goal is not to conquer, but to befriend the earth.

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* the contemporary mystical writer Annie Dillard shows how contemplation of the intricate details of life helps us celebrate the natural world in all its glory and terror. She looks directly at creation, acknowledging both its pain and beauty.

> The creeks—Tinker and Carvin's—are an active mystery, fresh every minute. Theirs is the mystery of the continuous creation and all that providence implies: the uncertainty of vision, the horror of the fixed, the dissolution of the present, the intricacy of beauty, the pressure of fecundity, the elusiveness of the free, and the flawed nature of perfection.[7]

Dillard's way of encountering creation is based on the conviction that the Word became flesh; matter is good, and things matter. She has learned to listen contemplatively for the sacred presence, and is alert to God everywhere. As her writings show us, the imagination supports our efforts to be contemplatives in action. We can also incorporate it actively into our individual prayer experiences.

Praying with the imagination

One way to integrate the imagination more fully into spirituality is to explore its role in personal prayer. Praying with the imagination means listening to and responding to God in the imagination's own language, at the level of image, symbol, story and ritual. This is the level at which God's word is initially heard and where we first answer that word in faith. Three of the many areas where the imagination can enrich our prayer are in healing memories, enlivening scriptural prayer and sustaining paradox.

All prayer is in a sense healing prayer, since all prayer moves toward wholeness. However, we can engage the imagination in an active way to open us to God's healing. This may mean returning to painful memories through the use of guided imagery. In this kind of prayer we return to scenes from our past in our imagination, but this time with the added dimension of the presence of Jesus or another religious figure who is important to us. We ask Jesus to come onto the scene and interact with us and the other persons present there, speaking what arises in our hearts and listening for God's word of comfort or challenge. Such a form of prayer allows us to re-enter a scene or memory, experiencing the power of its details and allowing a new perspective of grace to emerge.

Praying with scripture is also enlivened by the use of the imagination. When John in his Gospel says that we are to make God's word our home, our dwelling place (8,31), he is telling us that we are to enter into God's word as participants, not remain outside as indifferent bystanders. One way of dwelling in the word is to become the different characters in any of Jesus's parables. By becoming the person in the parable of the Good Samaritan who is left by robbers at the side of the road, for example, we learn what

it means to receive grace from the hands of someone we have named our enemy. Entering into the details and the emotions of the narrative in this way allows God's word to take surprising turns and speak to us in new ways.

We might also take a fresh biblical image for God—God as a woman in the process of giving birth (Isai 42,14) or God as a mother eagle (Exod 19,4)—as the basis of our prayer. As we begin praying with these images, or viewing our life and the world through them, we may meet God in new places. Images or metaphors are like a lens; they bring into focus certain aspects of reality, while filtering out others. Praying with less familiar images of God prepares us for new revelations of God's reality, leaving us ready to know God in ways we might never experience if we cling only to certain images.

Another dimension of the imagination that is crucial to contemporary spirituality is its power to support paradox. The imagination is better able than reason to hold together opposites or polarities such as love and hate, darkness and light. Many of Jesus's sayings are paradoxical statements of truth: we are told that we must lose our lives to find them, that dying is the way to life. Paul says that wisdom is foolishness, and foolishness is wisdom. Paradox challenges us to avoid a too easy identification of our understanding of something with its reality. It is an important dimension of any spiritual journey because it reminds us that we cannot grasp the truth of faith from a distance; we must live into the truth and let it transform us before we will encounter its meaning. Paradox also functions as a constant critique of our religious language, keeping our finite images and symbols from becoming idols identified with the transcendent.

The imagination, peace and justice

Every contemporary spirituality must be concerned with justice and peace. It is here that the imagination provides an especially rich resource. For the imagination is the ground of three movements essential to a justice spirituality: conversion, compassion and hope. The imagination's power in these areas is based on its ability to appeal to the whole person, especially the emotions. It is rooted as well in the imagination's capacity to envision the possible.

Conversion begins in the imagination; it is there that human deeds—whether good or evil—originate. As Paul Ricoeur has said, 'any ethic that addresses the will in order to demand a decision must be subject to a poetry that opens up new dimensions for the imagination'.[8] Conversion requires more than reception of new information; it calls for a kind of participation in the truth which

is able to transform us. John Crossan makes this point when discussing Jesus's parables. We are not meant to analyze the parables, looking for their main point or teaching; rather, we are to step inside the narrative and let the parable reorient us. A parable of Jesus is always a slightly unnerving experience. The proper response to Jesus's parables, Crossan says, in light of the challenge they deliver to our consciences, would be: 'I don't know what you mean by that story, but I'm certain I don't like it'.[9] In other words, the parables are meant to change not reassure us.

The imagination's role in conversation is illustrated by the power of narrative or story to influence what we decide to do. A biography or autobiography shapes our spiritual journeys because we are drawn into its details. The anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff tells in *Number our days* how the story of her life became bound up with the stories of members of an elderly Jewish community in Venice, California, which she set out to study. She wanted to retell the stories of these Jewish elders, but, she says, 'there was no way that I could have anticipated the great impact of the study on my life, nor its duration'.[10] As Myerhoff witnesses, this sharing of lives takes place in community. Storytelling is a community function; in its dialogue we share ourselves with others, thereby contributing to the community's story. In turn, our own stories are shaped by the community. Such life stories present us with embodied truth, showing us how abstract concepts such as peace and justice can be lived out in the concrete circumstances of a particular life.

Once when I was teaching a seminar on storytelling and spirituality, a young man, Mike, came to me the first evening and said: 'I think this is the last workshop I will be taking. I don't see how I can remain in youth ministry, considering how much I struggle with my own faith. I just can't seem to get it all together'. As part of the seminar Mike read Dag Hammarskjöld's *Markings*, and it had a profound effect on him. Hammarskjöld lived through a long period of doubt bordering on despair; yet all the while, he remained committed to his work, interpreting it in terms of Jesus's own ministry. After reading *Markings*, Mike told me: 'I now see that you can still be on the way spiritually, and yet minister to others. Ministry does not demand that you be perfect and without doubts'.

Appeal to the imagination can often bring about change when other approaches have failed. This is because the language of the imagination is indirect and works by suggestion. A truth that is hard to receive when it is direct can be absorbed if it comes sideways or indirectly. That is why hearing a story or carrying out a ritual so often provokes change. Our resistance to a new solution is subverted by the use of the imagination. It leaves us free to

make a judgement and come to a decision. Truth conveyed in the language of symbol or narrative invites us to enter into a process and respond in freedom. The meaning of the story or symbol unfolds in the imagination of the person who receives it.

Often an entire culture or a Christian community is called to conversion at the level of the imagination. This is happening today with our images of God. We know how powerful these images are in determining our vision of reality. Deeper than the statements we make about God or the concepts we formulate about the divine is the power of the images of God we hold personally and communally. They engage us not only on the level of mind but of emotion as well. Because reason is abstract, it is free from strong feeling tones; the imagination captures an event's ambiguity and intensity, its emotional power. Since the imagination works by association, these images gather to themselves qualities from other significant relationships in our lives—the nurturing or judging of our parents, the love of a faithful friend, the majesty of a bird in flight. Conversion at the level of these images strikes at the heart of our spiritualities as individuals and communities.

The imagination is also the seat of compassion. This flows from its ability to take us into the experience of the other, enabling us to feel another's emotion. Speaking of compassion and the imagination, the poet Denise Levertov remarks:

> There must be recognition of oneself as *life that wants to live* among other *forms of life that want to live* . . . No recognition of others is possible without the imagination. The imagination of what it is to *be* those other forms of life that want to live is the only way to recognition; and it is that imaginative recognition that brings compassion to birth.[11]

If we are to become compassionate people, we must have lively imaginations.

A new kind of empathy was born in a woman student of mine, Marjorie, as she read Etty Hillesum's diaries, *An interrupted life*.[12] These diaries of a young Jewish woman who died at Auschwitz in 1943 at the age of twenty-nine reveal Etty's remarkable spiritual growth during the last two years of her life. They also document the enormous evils of the Holocaust. Reading *An interrupted life* after many years of studying and teaching German language and culture, Marjorie found herself for the first time grasping the suffering of the Jewish people during the Holocaust. Out of that experience she said she received a new commitment to making her spirituality one of global concern.

Along with conversion and compassion, the imagination keeps hope alive in us. The imagination offers us alternatives when we feel mired in destructive patterns. We literally cannot accomplish what we cannot first imagine. This hopeful quality of the imagination is especially crucial today when we feel drawn to despair by the sheer magnitude of the evils that confront us. Spiritually serious people are often tempted not so much to ignore the evil in the world as to feel overwhelmed by it, frozen by a sense of futility. William Lynch points out in his classic, *Images of hope*, that the imagination is the healer of hopelessness.[13] Hopelessness is characterized by a sense of entrapment, of knowing no options. Imagination opens a way out by envisioning new possibilities.

Hope is founded on memory. The imagination takes images from the past and shapes them into new constellations. This can happen on either the personal or the community level. The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that the Hebrew prophets challenged their people by restoring their collective memory. Hosea reminds Israel of her early history of openness to God's love, and uses these recollections to show the enormity of her present infidelity and ingratitude. In the process traditional symbols are transformed. In presenting their vision of the future, the prophets frequently employ the images of poetry. The prophet Isaiah, for example, invites Israel to a fresh future in these terms:

> The wolf lives with the lamb,
> the panther lies down with the kid,
> calf and lion cub feed together
> with a little boy to lead them.
>
> They do no hurt, no harm,
> on all my holy mountain,
> for the country is filled with
> the knowledge of God
> as the waters swell the sea (11, 6-9).

As Brueggemann comments: 'The speech of Israel's poets did play upon the imagination of Israel, both to bring old worlds to an end and to initiate new worlds into their awareness'.[14] The imagination thus creates a sphere of freedom, a sphere in which we may move to bring about an alternative future.

Attention to the language of the Hebrew scriptures, as well as that of the New Testament, assures us that incorporating the imagination more fully into spirituality is not a matter of current craze or passing fad. It is rather the recovery of a long-standing

spiritual tradition, the renewing of a lost spiritual resource. The revival of the imagination can connect us to the mystery in our midst, enrich our personal prayer and enlarge our sense of the possible as we move into the next century.

NOTES

[1] See Hart, Ray L.: *Unfinished man and the imagination* (New York, 1968), p 241.
[2] *Imagination is reality* (Texas, 1980), p 24.
[3] Trans Joseph Cunneen and Patrick Gormally (New Jersey, 1988), p 3.
[4] *Early Christian rhetoric. The language of the gospel* (Cambridge, 1971), p 80.
[5] *To make a world* (Berkeley, 1981), p 4.
[6] *Gerard Manley Hopkins. Poems and prose*, ed W.H. Gardner (Baltimore, 1953), p 27.
[7] (New York, 1974), p 3.
[8] Quoted by Frederick Herzog in 'Liberation and imagination', *Interpretation. A journal of bible and theology* vol 32 (July 1978), p 228.
[9] *The dark interval. Towards a theology of story* (Illinois, 1975), p 56.
[10] (New York, 1978), p 12. See also the articles in *The archaeology of the imagination*, ed Charles E. Winquist (Michigan, 1981).
[11] *The poet in the world* (New York, 1973), p 53.
[12] (New York, 1985).
[13] (New York, 1965).
[14] ' "Vine and fig tree": a case study in imagination and criticism', *The Catholic biblical quarterly* vol 43 (April 1981), p 189.