

The Power of Imagination

Blair Baker

I live in England, an island subject to weather forces from the jet stream, continental Europe and the sea. It's not uncommon for these forces to compete, bringing us all four seasons in one day. It doesn't always rain, but it's good to be prepared, just in case.

One spring day, I was driving to the grocery store with the sunroof open, enjoying the warm sun on my face and pretty countryside all around.

The cover article and artwork on page 1-6 have been graciously contributed by artist & illustrator Blair Baker.

When I arrived, I was walking on air, and it seems I wasn't the only one. The grocery aisles were buzzing with chatter. On sunny days, we have more time for one another and may even acknowledge a stranger with a chat about the weather: "Isn't it lovely today?" On rainy days, inhabitants turn inward. Smiles are hidden as hunched figures, trying to keep warm, may share grumpy murmurs while passing: "Miserable!"

What we didn't realize while we were busy smiling and chatting inside was that the bright sunshine, which had been carrying us on its happy rays, was rapidly disappearing.

As I wheeled my cart to the exit, I noticed the darkness outside. When the doors opened, a cold Arctic wind slapped my face and my heart sunk. It had been such a fine day that I'd forgotten my umbrella. A mighty deluge began to fall between me and my car.

When weather hits like this, you have to watch the locals to see what they do. If they stand there for a moment, you know this is only a shower and it will pass. But no one was standing around this day—people were shooting out of the store like bullets. Shivering in my overly-optimistic summer attire, I knew I too would have to make a run for it.

But something stopped me. I sensed a sinking mood all around me in the hunched figures now wading through the car park. But I wasn't about to let a little rain ruin my day. I stood for a minute, remembering the beautiful yellow canola seed and vibrant green trees I had passed on my drive to the shop. I recognized they were only so lovely because of the rain.

"Trees like rain!" I thought. "I'll make like a tree!" So that's what I did. First, I put a smile on my face. The pelting rain

made me shudder, but I bounced back with, "Ah, this is great!" I imagined my arms were branches and my head full of leaves. I didn't feel the need to rush. The rain soaked me as I loaded my car, but I was a tree, and this was great!

It worked! I kept my happy mood, enjoyed the drive home and stayed on a positive footing all day.



Imagination: A Powerful Tool

Imagination is a powerful tool. It can be used for good, as demonstrated by the eight sports psychiatrists who accompanied the US Olympic ski team this year. They were there to help

athletes with the mental challenges associated with their physical feats. One of these tools is imagery.

Emily Cook of the US Freestyle Team visualizes each aerial as part of her training for the Olympics. She even visualizes the distractions that may come up, like difficult weather conditions or high pressure environments, such as the Olympics. She also uses visualization or imagination as a thought-stopping tool for negative or distracting thoughts so she can return to the right mental space prior to a jump. For Emily, training the mind is at least as important as training her body (“Flying High While Still on the Ground,” *NY Times*).

In contrast, the imagination can also be used negatively. Author and creativity consultant Dan Zadra suggests “worry is a misuse of imagination.” Science confirms Christ’s warning two thousand years ago: **worry is not good for us** (Matthew 6:34).

When we worry, we imagine the worst outcomes, and that’s not good for us because of the mind-body connection and how negativity can make us physically sick. According to Srini Illay, Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School,

“visualization and action are intimately connected, involving the motor cortex. Thinking about our body doing something, raising an arm or walking forward, activates the motor cortex directly” (*Scientific American*).

Social scientist and human

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—Brandon J. O’Brien



performance expert Frank Niles says this works “because neurons in our brain ... interpret imagery as equivalent to real life action. When we

visualize an act, the brain generates an impulse that tells our neurons to perform the movement. This creates a new neural pathway—clusters of cells in the brain that work together to create memories or learned behavior—that primes our body to act in a way

consistent to what we imagined. All of this occurs without actually performing the physical

activity but it helps achieve a similar result.” (WebMD-Physical Effects of Worrying, *Huffpost*).

When we worry, we engage our *fight or flight stress hormone cortisol*, and this can cause digestive disorders, suppression of the immune system, headaches, premature coronary artery disease, to name but a few.

Some Christians worry about the use of imagination because of visualization practices used in Eastern religions. They associate visualizing with New Age gurus and even Christian prosperity preachers who promise anything you imagine.

Dr. Brandon J. O’Brien, co-author of *Misreading Scriptures with Western Eyes* and *Paul Behaving Badly*, responds to this objection. He explains, “because

the imagination is the ability to visualize what we cannot see, it's something we need for faith, because faith requires us to imagine a world we cannot see." Imagination based on the truth of Scripture helps us look beyond our own narrow experience.

Anchoring Our Imagination

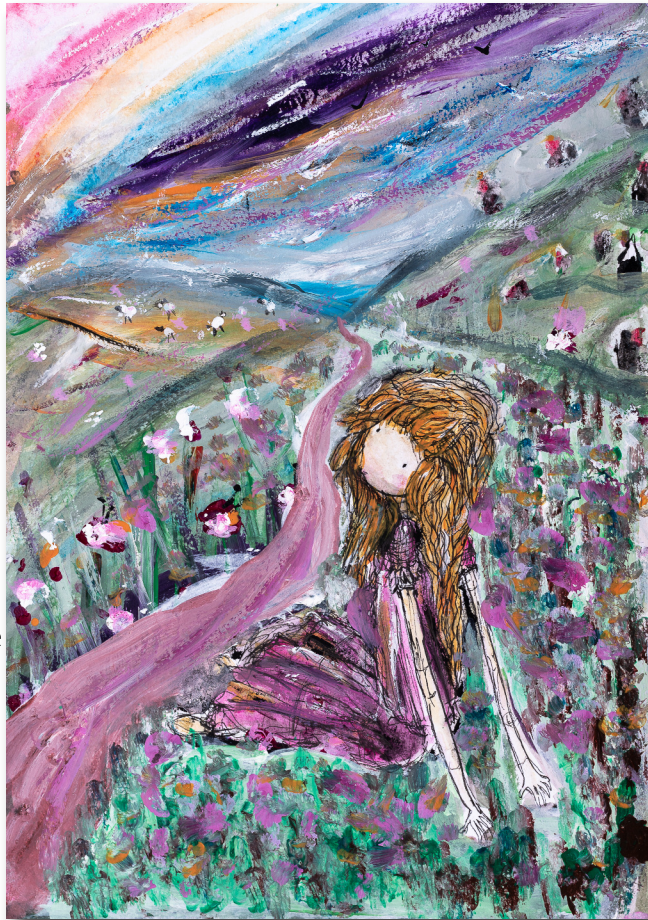
How can we foster an imagination that helps us see what God sees and guide us through this life? When we come across Bible stories or word pictures such as *"We have this hope, as an anchor for our soul, firm and secure..."* (Hebrews 6:19), we can dwell on that scriptural image—we focus on the anchor of hope that secures us as we read or hear disturbing news.

Isaiah 61:10 also uses imagery to help us better understand the righteousness of Christ: *"He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; He has covered me with the robe of righteousness."*

I used this visual tool the other day while taking my dogs for a walk. I knew I would probably bump into the same grumpy man I see regularly who ruffles my feathers with negative comments. I donned my imaginary robe of righteousness. I thought about what Jesus looked like walking down the road in his robe of righteousness. I felt the big open sleeves and the drape along my back. It worked so well that I felt transformed. And as I passed the grumpy man I only felt like greeting him.

The Apostle Paul expresses a vivid, sanctified imagination in his letter to the Philippians. He supplies the perfect remedy for anxiety: engaging our imagination,

"Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is



pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things (4:8).

Paul, whose past could have haunted him if he thought about it long enough, made a concerted effort to keep his eyes on the prize of the upward call of Christ (3:14).

Hebrews 11:13 shows the type of sanctified imagination employed by great men and women of faith who *"... all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were*

strangers and pilgrims on the earth."

The imagery of pilgrims and strangers evokes a different set of spiritual/cultural norms that can take the sting out of spiritual culture shock.

The old adage "a picture paints a thousand words" was never truer than in the picture-story of the wise man who built his house upon the rock in Matthew 7:24-27. Here we have Jesus' answer for the unpredictability of life—hang onto his words.

Taking time to practice imagining how Scripture may apply to our own lives now and in the future gives us powerful tools to invoke when the storms of life hit so we never have to be caught out in the rain. □

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