

Your Imaginarium

Richard Rohr

The imagination retains a passion for freedom. There are no rules for the imagination. It never wants to stay trapped in the expected territories. The old maps never satisfy it. It wants to press ahead beyond the accepted frontiers and bring back reports of regions no mapmaker has yet visited.

—John O’Donohue¹



Being made in the image and likeness of the Creator isn’t about “getting it right” or rationally understanding God. Jesus taught us that being “perfect even as our heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48) is more about loving than having correct beliefs or following the rules. How do we grow into such loving likeness?

Each of us has our own unique *imaginarium*, an unconscious worldview constructed by our individual and group’s experiences, symbols, archetypes and memories. For example, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Catholics and Protestants live in quite different *imaginaria* (plural). God comes to us in images that we can trust and believe, that have the inherent power to open our hearts.

Spirituality tries to move beyond words to evoke our *imaginaria* at the unconscious level, where real change must first happen.

If your inner *imaginarium* is rich, intelligent and not overly defended, you will never stop growing spiritually. My advice? Read more poetry and literature; watch movies; listen to music; visit museums.

The artist is a prophet—someone who helps us be self-critical and creative so we don’t stay stuck in the status quo. The prophet models and embodies a new way of thinking and being that allows us to imagine a larger, more inclusive way to live.

You cannot even imagine something or do something until you first have an image of it inside you, which is surely why Einstein said, “*I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. . . . [It] encircles the world.*”² In *Art and Physics*, Leonard Shlain (1937-2009)—an author, surgeon, and inventor—made the case that images come before our capacity to verbalize or name what we see:

Whether for an infant or a society on the verge of change, a new way to think about reality begins with the assimilation of unfamiliar images. . . . Because the



Deep Thoughts on the Imagination

“I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.”

— Albert Einstein

“I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge. That myth is more potent than history. That dreams are more powerful than facts. That hope always triumphs over experience. That laughter is the only cure for grief. And I believe that love is stronger than death.”

— Robert Fulghum

“You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.”

— Mark Twain

“Imagination does not become great until human beings, given the courage and the strength, use it to create.”

— Maria Montessori

“Vision is the art of seeing things invisible.”

— Jonathan Swift

“I believe in the power of the imagination to remake the world, to release the truth within us, to hold back the night, to transcend death, to charm motorways, to ingratiate ourselves with birds, to enlist the confidences of madmen.”

— J.G. Ballard

erosion of images by words occurs at such an early age, we forget that in order to learn something radically new, we need first to imagine it. “Imagine” literally means to “make an image.” Witness the expression we use when struggling with a new idea: “I can't picture it,” “Let me make a mental model,” and “I am trying to envision it.”

If, as I propose, this function of imagination, so crucial to the development of an infant, is also present in the civilization at large, who then creates the new images that precede abstract ideas and descriptive language? It is the artist... Revolutionary art in all times has served this function of preparing the future.³

Perhaps the great artists of each generation can help us transcend dualism and move us beyond the exclusive frameworks that are comfortable for us ... if we have the ears to hear or the eyes to see and the willingness to engage!

If you want to go deeper with this concept, take note of what words or phrases in this article stand out to you. Come back to that word or phrase throughout the day, being present to its impact and invitation. □

Adapted from Richard Rohr, Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi (Franciscan Media: 2014).

Notes:

1. John O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (HarperCollins: 2004), 145.

2. Albert Einstein, “What Life Means to Einstein,” *The Saturday Evening Post* (October 26, 1929).

3. Leonard Shlain, *Art and Physics: Parallel Visions in Space, Time, and Light* (William Morrow Paperbacks: 2007), 17-19.