

## Practicing the Truth of the Imagination

“Here, Mommy, some chocolate for you.”

Finn, two years old, offers me his open empty hand.

“Thank you, Finn,” I say, proffering pretend coins into his palm. He drops them into an imaginary bank, and we both chime in, “Ka ching.”

I ask, “May I have some more chocolate, please?” And Finn’s off to the corner of the room in search of a new truffle for his customer.

We spend a lot of time in imaginary worlds these days—flying pretend kites, driving fictitious cars and feeding invisible cats.

In “The Devil’s Dictionary,” Ambrose Bierce defines imagination as “A warehouse of facts, with poet and liar in joint ownership.”

That’s a fanciful way to convey imagination—which “The American Heritage Dictionary” dryly suggests is “the formation of a mental image of something that is neither perceived as real nor present to the senses.”

But Bierce’s linking of imagination and liars rankles a bit. Facts are facts. Sure. A sharp poke with a stick will pierce the skin and bleed. But I prefer to think of imagination along the same lines as John Keats, English poet, who wrote “I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of the imagination.”

A world of pure fact is a boring world. And straddled with our to-do lists and pagers, headlines and bottom lines, we tend to inhabit it way too much.

The “truth of the imagination” is the willingness to engage with “what is” in both literal and metaphoric ways. It is to observe April’s fickle weather patterns as they alternate—five minutes of blue sky followed by five minutes of sideways sleet—and also to perceive how they may correspond to the fickle weather patterns of the heart: Five minutes of “I’m doing great” followed by five minutes of “Everything’s falling apart.”

Bill Plotkin, founder of the Animas Valley Institute, interprets that “Keats does not mean the relatively shallow imagination under the strategic mind’s control, but rather the mysterious imaginings that arise unbidden from the depths, like spring waters.”

I don’t know about you, but I find I have a knack for suppressing “mysterious imaginings.” For a poet, I’m surprisingly literal and practical.

And I guess that’s part of why I am a poet: Because a writing practice forces me to look at things beyond their simple surfaces. I beg things to arise from the depths. And usually, when I pay attention long enough, they oblige.

A toddler helps with this, sure. He’s big on finding me pretend chocolate bars in the park, in the car, in the yard. But toddlers don’t stay toddlers. (Phew.) And let’s face it: having a rich imaginary life makes life a lot more fun.

The etymology implies that imagination is the faculty that allows us to form images of reality. It comes from the Latin *imaginari*, “to picture oneself.” But as philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote in “On Poetic Imagination and Revery,” imagination “is rather the faculty of forming images which go beyond reality, which sing reality.” It allows for the creation of new ideas. It shapes what is and what will be.

As Plotkin writes in a recent AVI newsletter, “The job of our conscious personality is to become a receptive field for those suggestions and then to actualize them with aplomb. We must forge a

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conscious alliance with the Muse, learning to trust her, to seek her counsel, and to honor her with praise and gratitude. We would do well to make ritual offerings to her.”

I asked my friend Deborah what she thought of when I said the word imagination. She responded “openness.” That’s as good a definition as any, I think. As Bachelard wrote, imagination can be experienced by anyone who allows him or herself the opportunity to “dream”—to see the world as a series of content laden images—not as things to be intellectualized but as things to be experienced.

Fantasy would be the extreme version of imagination—a mind given totally free rein. Lionel Trilling wrote, “The poet is in command of his fantasy, while it is exactly the mark of the neurotic that he is possessed by his fantasy.”

If your imagination has gotten lazy and your muse needs a bit of prodding, here’s an exercise. Go outside. Find three objects. A rusty fence, a dried cottonwood leaf and a bottlecap, perhaps. Describe them briefly, either out loud or in notebook. This is the start—getting a literal handle on the things.

Now take a step toward the metaphorical, imaginary world. Pick one object and add something to your description that makes it emotional—that shows that it’s being observed by a feeling person. What is your gut response to the object? Can it relate to something you’re experiencing in your life right now? A fight with a spouse? A promotion at your job? Playing with your toddler? I find that when I walk outside with the intention to discover a connection between my inner landscape and the outer world, I always find one, though maybe not what I was expecting. Isn’t that the nature of the imagination? We just don’t have that much control.

One marvelous side effect of the imagination: the lack of real world consequences. When Finn and I fly our imaginary kites, they never get tangled in trees and there’s always sufficient wind. Our imaginary cats need no litter boxes cleaned. And the imaginary chocolate: not a single calorie. But all of these imaginary dapplings: 100 percent pleasure.

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