

INAUGARATE YOUR IMAGINATION

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Good morning. To begin our time together, let me ask you this simple question, in the last month or so, in effect, you said either to yourself or to someone else that you couldn't wait to say good-bye to 2020 and welcome in 2021!?" Well, here we are. Say hello to 2021. And in just a little under three weeks, a new president will be inaugurated. Imagine that! In fact, that's what I want to share with you today. We will not have gotten to welcoming a new president, developing a COVID-19 vaccine, or dare I say it, staying connected to others through Zoom, without it first having been imagined. I invite you this morning, in this month, when we will inaugurate Joe Biden to be the 46th president of the United States, as we line up to receive our vaccination, and talk about it on Zoom, to also inaugurate your imagination as we enter 2021 together.

When I started to imagine what I would say this morning a question came to my mind, "Is there a difference between imagination and fantasy?" And indeed, there is. It makes a real difference in whether there is change for the good or not, whether things move forward or stay the same, and whether that moral arc that bends towards justice inches closer to how we live with one another in this world, in Pinellas County, and here at UUC. So, before I can get to our imaginations, I want to briefly say a word about fantasy.

Have you ever bought a lottery ticket? I have. The only reason I ever buy a lottery ticket, and I believe I've probably, in my lifetime, have bought maybe a dozen such tickets, is to simply give myself permission to fantasize. What would I do with 325 million dollars? I could probably spend the rest of this sermon fantasizing what I would do with that much money. And that's just what it would be, a fantasy.

Freud, with his theory on wish fulfillment, would probably have a field day with me. Looking into the term "fantasy" I learned, "Fantasy...In analytical psychology, relies on imagery, emotion, and intuition, without logical or moral constraints. It is closely related to the primary process of psychoanalysis, and it

occurs in dreams and mythology; it is debatable whether it should be called **thinking**. The **fantasy defense mechanism** is a retreat into **fantasy** in order to resolve inner and outer conflicts. The individual achieves temporary satisfaction through the **fantasy** of the imagined achievements. Or a retreat into a **fantasy** world to stop thinking about one's current distress.

Fantasy of holding on to white privilege keeps white folks living not only in a world that was thought to be simply fine the way it was in suburban America, but reveals there is a greater, current distress going on, an inner and outer conflict of how we go about living with one another, not by tolerating one another, but by embracing our differences.

Fantasies seem to me to either center on wanting to go back to recover a former time, place, or relationship when we are feeling distressed, or they propel us into a future that flies us away from the time, place, or relationship we currently find ourselves in. Sometimes it serves us to be about such fantasies as a way to release stress if they do not move us in a direction of greater distress, forgetting the logical or moral constraints that keep us real with ourselves and others.

Take that lottery ticket I might buy on rare occasion so as to give myself permission to fantasize, while sitting in traffic unhappy with the driver in front of me that caused me to put on my brakes, what fun it would be to pay off all my friends mortgages, put their kids through college, and party together on the mega yacht I'd buy. However, were I to spend a portion of my monthly income each week, each day to make my fantasy come true while struggling to pay my Duke energy bill for that month, it would be a signal to me that there is a greater inner conflict going on, in me.

For a moment, take that lottery ticket as a metaphor. Its meaning asks us whether our thinking, our speech, our actions, signal us that there is something a mist in how we fantasize our approach as white privileged people to people of color, or how we will respond to those within our families and friends who choose not to be vaccinated from COVID-19, or when and how we will worship in the future together in the Octagon. If our fantasies take us to a place of nostalgia, of wanting to reclaim the way things used to be, a decision made, a relationship whose waters have already flowed under the bridge we

will find ourselves unrestrained by the values and principles that keep Unitarian Universalists, as I've come to know you, in covenant not only with one another but in a world not in need of our fantasies, but most in need of our imagination.

As we enter 2021, I invite you to leave your fantasies behind about, oh, I don't know, maybe like seeing a president prosecuted in court, or never having to wear a mask in public again or having things at UUC be like they were before the pandemic. Just as we have gladly said so long, good-bye, Auf Wiedersehen, farewell to 2020, let us leave fantasies behind and instead inaugurate our imagination. Inauguration, meaning the start of something, the beginning of a new period, inaugurating what we can imagine together for this time and place we live in, the decisions we will face, and how-to live-in covenant with one another.

Anticipating the inauguration that will take place on January 20th I counted the number of presidents I've witnessed inaugurated in my lifetime. Joe Biden will be the twelfth president I will have seen inaugurated. Out of the eleven presidents preceding him there are only two that I particularly remember and whose inauguration I believe excited the nation....John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama. This isn't to say that the other presidents didn't give fine speeches and may have had good tenures, but it was presidents Kennedy and Obama who invoked our imagination, appealed to us to envision what this country could become. They didn't start with a state of the union address of accomplishments, legislation, or plans, or what their predecessor didn't do. No, in a real sense of the prophetic, they planted those seeds that have today allowed for resistance to those forces that attempt to flatten the moral arc bending toward justice, that have made it possible for two men to call one another husband, or two women to hold one another as wives to each other. It is only by the imagination that such things become possible.

Quote - Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. **The imagination must come before the implementation.** Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing. The same royal consciousness that makes it possible

to implement anything and everything is the one that shrinks imagination because imagination is a danger.”

We as a culture are great at implementing more highways and roads made of concrete and asphalt but imagine almost nothing in how to help people get to their destinations through affordable, convenient, comfortable mass transit. Were we to use our imagination before we implemented the building of those highways and roads, we would be a danger to the oil and electric car manufacturing industry.

We as a culture are great at implementing the militarizing of our police forces in the name of keeping our communities safe but imagine almost nothing in how to reallocate the resources to our communities so the people who live in our communities keep each other safe. Were we to imagine before we implement such an arming of our police, we would be a danger to the military and political machines who profit from our fear of one another.

We as a culture are great at implementing all kinds of ways to buy health insurance but imagine almost nothing in how to access health care without a job or having to live in poverty. Were we to use our imagination before implementing a fix to the Affordable Care Act or providing Medicare for All we would be a danger to how pharmaceutical companies and CMS operate, operate hand-in-hand.

Shall I go on? You know I can, as can you, and I hope we agree with Brueggemann as he continued, “It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.”

What I’ve learned, and continue to learn in my life, is that the thing I imagined, that prophetic call, propelling me to take that first step in implementing what I envisioned, seldom ever materializes in exactly the way I imagined it, and that has always made it not a fantasy, but a reality.

Quote - Margaret J. Wheatley, President of the Berkana Institute, a research foundation working on the design of new organizations, writes, “In this new world, you and I make it up as we go along, not because we lack expertise or planning skills, but because that is the nature of reality. Reality changes shape and

meaning because of our activity. And it is constantly new. We are required to be there, as active participants. It can't happen without us and nobody can do it for us.

We only create this new world by inaugurating our imagination, answering that prophetic call, that takes us into a reality that changes shape and meaning because of our activity. Does it finally look how we imagined? Seldom, if ever. The reality we create with our imagination becomes a process, not a product.

How is that? The thing that makes what we imagine worth implementing, keeps it in process is our ability to empathize. There is no empathy for another person's plight, to be present with them, intervene if required, unless one can imagine what it is like to be them in those things they are facing, feeling, or failing in.

Empathy

Imagination as key to empathy: Quote - Martha Nussbaum, from *Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law* That 'terrified' gay teenager needs, and deserves, equal respect, and a sphere of liberty equal to that enjoyed by others. Before he is likely to get these things, however, something else also has to be present in our world: **the capacity to imagine his experience and that of other gay and lesbian citizens. Disgust relies on moral obtuseness.** It is possible to view another human being as a slimy slug or a piece of revolting trash only if one has never made a serious good-faith attempt to see the world through that person's eyes or to experience that person's feelings. Disgust imputes to the other a subhuman nature. How, by contrast, do we ever become able to see one another as human? Only through the exercise of imagination.

That is our prophetic invitation today as we enter 2021, as we are in dialogue with one another over the seen and unforeseen decisions we will be called upon to make in our lives, in this congregation in the coming year. This month the inauguration of a new president is not the only inauguration the world awaits, we await, hold our breath, for those times, those moments calling out for empathy, that you may inaugurate your imagination.