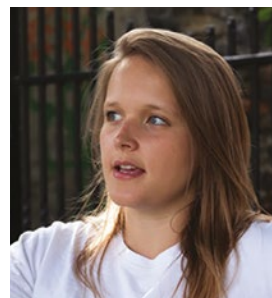


HOW CAN WE  
UNLOCK OUR  
HUMANITY AND  
IMAGINATION?



# REWILDING THE IMAGINATION



**By Phoebe Tickell**

Across all of our discussions over the last year or so, many people have reflected that:

- Our humanity can build bridges and move us to change.
- Collective imagination can make a different future possible.
- There are ways to make a different kind of space to listen deeply to each other, share our stories, and tell new ones.

But some people may feel this is a distraction or are uncomfortable with opening up. How can we overcome that hesitancy and mainstream these approaches? Phoebe Tickell, our thought leader for this strand of enquiry, writes about this here.

How often do you feel that you nourish your sense of a better future?

I believe imagination is an extremely powerful force for change and humanity can build bridges and empower us to create worlds that are more in line with our values. Imagining allows us not just to see a different future but to explore the impacts of it happening through *feeling*. The problem is not that we lack imagination, but that we have often blocked it.

People are often surprised to hear that I trained as a scientist – a molecular biologist – but, when I would read about scientists in the past and about the process of their discoveries, I saw that imagination was

often a huge part of that. For example, August Kekulé, the German scientist who discovered the structure of benzene (a chemical compound in gasoline), had a dream of a snake forming a ring by catching its own tail and this led him to the discovery that benzene was shaped as a ring.

In the past, imagination, science and rational and imaginative processes used to be closer together but in the last 200 years as a result of the industrial revolution there's been a separation between the imaginative and artistic and science and the rational. Art and imagination have been sidelined and stripped of their power as reflected in the defunding of arts education and the superior salaries given to science and engineering graduates.

Art and imagination are seen as something nice to have but nothing to do with making change in the real world. But that's not true, and we need to bring them back together.

But it's not enough to increase imagination in our society. We need to rewild our imaginations. We're all born with natural capacities to imagine. Children have a boundless imagination but as we grow up our imagination is colonised, especially by schools, where there's just one right answer and we learn cookie cutter models of how to think.

The colonisation of the imagination is like the deforestation and monocropping of our forests. The imagination starts as a wild and boundless place, and over our lifetimes becomes more and more constrained, and rigid. Advertising, social media and Hollywood movies crowd the places that used to be nourished by time in nature, time in solitude, unstructured time for play.

There's research in the cognitive sciences that shows that there's one bit of the brain used for strategic, linear thinking and another which operates our creative, exploring and dreaming side, which lead us to discover innovations and a different world. They can't both operate at once and the use of one dampens down the other. So if we don't make time and dedicated space to use this other part of our brains, it doesn't get exercised.

In our society, the spaces for adults to play are mostly constrained, for example, to sports, or going to the pub. And opportunities to live a life of imagination are reserved for exceptionally privileged people, like designers, actors, artists and

film directors. This lack of imagination in our lives is an existential risk for society and humanity. Imagine the collective power we would have if this were not so.

I run an organisation, Moral Imaginations, which helps others to imagine a better world and make a better future possible, as well as to expand our sense of who we are and who we could be. Our methodology uses imagination exercises that evoke a shift in perspective in time perception, identity and connection to place and history.

We need three things to release our imaginative power and exercise that muscle:

- Dedicated time and space to unblock our imagination.
- Permission, which is often withheld in a performance culture, where people may fear humiliation or being laughed at if they exercise imagination.
- Help through portals and exercises, which unlocks not just the brain but also feeling.

An example of our work is the Imagination Lab we held over four days for the Onion Collective in Watchet in Somerset. The Collective brought together 25 diverse, local people to design their dream economy and through the lab they began to connect with a deep sense of time, nature and the place they lived in.

Many confessed that they were initially scared that this would be 'too hippy' but when given allowance to speak, they opened up deeply and personally, sharing feelings and events in their lives with others

in the group in a way that for some was potentially life changing. At the end of the four days, many said that they felt a real sense of grief that the lab had ended, and we started to hold weekly zoom meetings at their request to keep the conversation going. That continued for almost a year afterwards. As well as resulting in real changes – transforming the local harbour into a wonderful community space with exciting social enterprises which have transformed the local economy – the exercise led to a greater well-being and a sense of community for the individuals who took part.

One of the exercises we've created at Moral Imaginations is the Impossible Train Story, in which we imagine we are a group of people who live on that train. We work together to keep the train moving, which never stops, and the work is hard and inhumane. The train has been moving since we can remember, and we can't remember a life that was not on the train.

One day a fire breaks out and spreads throughout. The impossible happens; the brakes that no-one knew existed bring the train to a halt. We open the doors and get off, discovering birdsong and the feeling of the air on our skin, the sound of the rustling leaves of trees. And when we look ahead, we see that the train had been hurtling toward the edge of the cliff.

Many have died in the fire and there is now time to consider how we have been living. What is the purpose of keeping the train going? Could it be different? Some of us get to work, ripping up the track, though others are eager to get back on the train. Some have beliefs and investments in the train and can't face an alternative. It is a life or death situation. The impossible has happened, we've stopped the train.

At the end we ask the questions: How will the story end? What is there to lose? Who will you choose to be? Inviting people to participate in writing the end of the story and giving permission to imagine how things could be different is necessary for our survival.

Our futures lie in our hands.



The Watchet community's response to the Impossible Train story

Phoebe Tickell runs **Moral Imaginations**.

# UNLOCKING HUMANITY, IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY IN THE COMMUNITY



**By Audrey Thompson**

We've heard that collective imagination can make a different future possible and our humanity can build bridges and move us to change, but how can we translate these principles into practical action within a community? Audrey Thompson writes here about her experience of doing this in Doncaster.

How can people from different sections of the community be encouraged to come together – exchanging their ideas, planning together, taking a share of the workload, and sharing whatever resources are available – in order to bring about a fairer, more equal life for all?

Here is a little story I would like to share with you. It starts in 1970 when a new primary school was built in the village of Arksey, on the edge of Doncaster, where I lived with my husband and five children. The local authority decided the community could have the old school building for community activities, provided they could come up with a plan for its use. My husband and myself were invited to a meeting with others from the village to discuss ideas.

Above all, we decided, we wanted a youth club. After members of the community came together to decorate and clean the building,

my husband was appointed as leader, with myself as assistant leader. With the help of the community and a lot of creative thinking and imagination, we turned the old school into a community hub, with not only a youth club, but also a wives' group, a playgroup, a village Gala and more.

But soon a difficulty became apparent. Some children in the community were too young to be allowed into the youth club, and they used to hang around the door, trying all ways to enter and generally making a nuisance of themselves.

Some of the club members thought this was very unfair, but for insurance reasons I could not allow the young children to join the club. So we talked it through, and the club members came up with the idea of having one evening a week just for younger children over five years old.

We worked together and put forward a proposal to the management committee to open one evening a week. A group of young members and adults from the village offered to help. The Junior Club was a great success with lots of activities suitable for the children, using the many talents and enthusiasm of the young people, supported by adults.

This experience, and the learning from it, was valuable for all of us, and it helped grow our confidence, and further initiatives soon took place, drawing again and again on the creativity and imagination and goodwill of local people. In 1972 as part of my youth work training I worked with a group of young people to plan and run a project chosen by them. The outcome was an Easter Playscheme. This was how we set out our plan:

So, how did we make this happen? We started by using the group's contacts to ask for help in any way they could. And this worked very well. The sixth form at Don Valley High School raised funds. The school provided play equipment and craft stuff. Local factories gave us offcuts, wallpaper, lace and material. Even the colliery provided reams of paper, pens, and crayons. The Doncaster Book Club brought their caravan, and this became a base for story times, with books borrowed from the library.

That Easter the weather was cold and it snowed. But some of the residents took pity on us and we were invited into their homes, for toffee-making, storytelling, and singing accompanied by a guitar.

The project was a great success and I was able to produce an impressive folder to

## Proposal for Easter Playscheme 1972

**Why:** Complaints of vandalism and anti-social behaviour on a new housing estate were being reported by all sections of the community, especially during school holidays.

**What:** Provide events and activities that would involve all sections of the community. It was hoped that enjoying activities together and 'rubbing shoulders' with each other might promote good and lasting relationships and community cohesion on the new estate and the surrounding older village and continue after the event finished.

**Who:** All sections of the local and wider community who were interested in supporting the project.

**Where:** The new housing estate in Toll Bar, about four miles North of Doncaster, one of several distinct neighbourhoods within the Urban District Council of Bentley. It was isolated from the main area of Bentley by a hill and a railway line.

**When:** Easter school holidays.

hand in as my youth work project! It was well recorded with visual, audio and written reports. One of the main comments from the young people was that it would have been good to have more parents joining in, to which I replied, 'Where would you contact them?' Their answer came back, 'At school'.

Lots of great things happened following this project, including my appointment at Bentley New Village primary school as a community project worker. I had attended this school as a child.

And so began quite a journey. For over 49 years I have worked with successive generations of young people and with the community in Greater Bentley as a

whole, continuing all the time to find ways to unlock the imagination, creativity and humanity that lies within. But that's another much longer story!

**Audrey Thompson was born in 1935, her father was a miner, she was married in 1954 and her husband died in 2003. She has five children and thirteen grandchildren. She worked for Doncaster Council as a Youth/Community/Social Education worker. She is currently a volunteer/Director of Bentley Library. Her hobbies include: gardening, textile and other crafts and listening to music.**