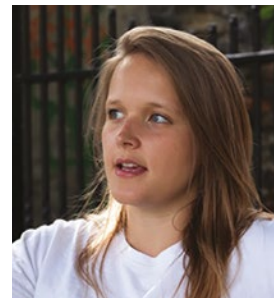


REWILDING THE IMAGINATION



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**.