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You cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.

– Mark Twain¹

Only by imagination,” writes Owen Barfield, “can the world be known.” While it is important to develop ever more powerful, ever more sensitive instruments to aid perception, he cautions such perception will not lead to moral action, without the human mind becoming “increasingly aware of its own creative activity.”²

Barfield, whom C.S. Lewis called “the wisest and best of my unofficial teachers,” was not the first to point to imagination as fertile ground for understanding how and what the human mind can know. The philosopher Immanuel Kant, who two centuries earlier described imagination as a “blind but indispensable function of the soul,”³ came, by the end of his life, to a different conclusion: that the faculty of imagination, in its inherently free and creative scope, is inclusive of both the rational and empirical mind. While Kant could appreciate the primacy of individualized imagination, he could not philosophically account for it. Nonetheless, as a new direction, his thinking in the *Critique of Judgment*⁴ inspired some of Kant’s followers to undertake a serious study of imagination and the aesthetic experience.

Post-Kantian Integration of Sense and Reason

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was one such post-Kantian, and in Chapter XIII of his *Biographia Literaria*, he distinguishes between a science that “presupposes intelligence as already existing and complete” and a philosopher who “contemplates it in its growth.”⁵ This is not simply a difference between product

and process. In the first case, a domain of knowledge, in this instance, science, sets and maintains the presumption of intelligence. In the second case, it is the individual who establishes a relationship of inquiry to the living activity of intelligence. Coleridge’s philosopher has not only the right as an independent, thinking person to inquire into the nature of “the worlds of intelligence,” but also the capacity to do so.⁶

Crediting Kant as “an effective pioneer” of this “master-thought,” Coleridge references Kant’s investigation of forces in opposition to each other and raises the question of how two co-existing, indestructible and infinite forces (sense and reason) might interpenetrate and with what result. He famously concludes:

The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree* and in the *mode* of its operation.⁷

With these two sentences, Coleridge makes a very large move toward unity. Unlike Kant or John Locke before him, who both insisted that all cognition must be logical and analytical, Coleridge proposes that imagination is the link between the finite faculties of the human mind and the eternal creative source of human consciousness, what he calls “the infinite I AM.” As such, primary imagination is the unconscious activity that mediates the external world of phenomena and the

internal world of human perception. Secondary imagination—an echo of and not in any way severed from the power and agency of primary imagination—makes possible the process of synthesizing perceptions and thoughts so that the result is a way of knowing that is alive, creative, and fresh.

Coleridge draws a distinction between the vital quality of imagination and something he calls *fancy*, which he describes as a kind of imaginative thinking that does not draw directly from the indestructible and infinite forces of creation. Fancy, as a mental activity, recombines already-known elements of perception and thought but relies upon association and a state of mind that is essentially separate from any continuity between the capacity to think and the generative source of that capacity. For Coleridge, access to primary and secondary imagination is necessary to original and transformative creativity, while fancy serves to make use of creative insights. A mind dwelling solely in the mode of fancy, however, may be subject to recycled or clichéd acts of imagination.

Paradox of Language

At the same time that Coleridge was developing new perspectives in philosophy and epistemology, his good friend William Wordsworth was re-inventing poetry. Using the medium of language to describe his deepening relationship to nature and his own consciousness, Wordsworth also identifies imagination as “the main essential Power.”⁸

In his long autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, dedicated to Coleridge, Wordsworth tracks the journey, not just of his own life, but the life of humanity. Echoing passages from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, he interweaves images of the “Fall of Man” through a narrative of his own coming of age, a parallel downward trajectory. The innocence of his own boyhood

when “the sun / Unfelt shone brightly round us in our joy,”⁹ leads to adolescence when books and schooling claim attention: “Rank growth of propositions overruns / The Stripling’s brain.”¹⁰ While literature and poetry bring the young Wordsworth “touches of deep joy”¹¹ and later geometry offers its own deep pleasure,¹² a mood of melancholy sets in followed by the “stormy course” of his college years.¹³

As a young man in London, Wordsworth emerges from books and formal learning to become fully conscious of his own alienation from the people and life around him. Seeing a blind beggar “propped against a Wall,” a sign hanging from his neck to tell his pitiful story, Wordsworth experiences a “turning” of his mind and, as if in a mirror, “on the shape of that unmoving man, / His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed / As if admonished from another world.”¹⁴

The city and this time in Wordsworth’s life stand as a dark and diminished contrast to the beloved countryside of his childhood. It is a place where, he writes, “I feel the imaginative Power / Languish within me.”¹⁵ By the conclusion of *The Prelude*, this imaginative power is reclaimed—transformed even—and identified by Wordsworth as “a genuine Liberty.” The commitment to it, he calls an enlarging of freedom.¹⁶

In tracing the development of his creative imagination, Wordsworth delineates a path from the childhood innocence of his “earliest visitations,” when he was not conscious of their import, to the lonely estrangement of his young adult years and to his full maturity “where now I range, / A meditative, oft a suffering, man.”¹⁷ Consciousness of imagination, in other words, does not preclude suffering. The hard-won capacity for rational thinking is what enables the poet to be conscious and literate about his or her own aesthetic experiences, unlike the child. It is, however, this very thinking that can

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separate the poet from the unified state of such an experience, hence suffering.

In *Poetic Diction*, Barfield argues that language itself holds the mystery of this paradox. Etymology reveals that the derivative of most, if not all, words, even the most abstract and contemporary, “referred in earlier days to one of these two things—a solid, sensible object, or some animal (probably human) activity.”¹⁸ Modern languages, he writes, trade in dead metaphors—Emerson’s “fossil poetry”¹⁹—and are mostly grasped by what Barfield calls “logical mind.” Language grasped by “poetic mind” recognizes that the world and the individual self share a living reality that can be known and experienced as the continuum within which perception “flows from two different sources, one of these being the nature of language itself, especially in its earlier stages, and the other the individualized imagination of a poet.”²⁰

A true metaphor, therefore, would be one that activates a sense of connection to living reality, with imagination being the human capacity to experience that reality *and* create a metaphorical representation of its truth. Barfield explains it as a progression from “inspiration grasping the hitherto unapprehended, and imagination relating it to the already known.”²¹ The apprehension of a true metaphor marks a turning point in consciousness and acknowledges a reciprocal relationship between self and world. The experience of a true metaphor is a reminder that everything can be known, in a participatory manner, both as substantive form and dynamic manifestation of source. As Barfield describes it, imagination, as a fundamental vehicle for knowledge, is available to serve all domains of inquiry. Imagination is equally essential to the process of assessing and responding to the unique qualities and needs of each moment or situation.

True Metaphor: In Flight

An example of a true metaphor, from my own experience, arose in response to an incident on an airplane. It was March of 2004 and I had been traveling with my family in France when the train bombings in Madrid occurred. Everywhere we went, security was heightened, along with a general level of anxiety and suspicion, especially palpable in Paris’ Charles DeGaulle Airport as we prepared to head home.

On the plane, I watched as two flight attendants transferred a man from a wheelchair to the seat in front of me. He was wearing his West African robes inside out and for the first hour of the trip chatted amiably in French with nearby fellow passengers. After takeoff, I settled into a book but was

suddenly startled by the sound of wailing. With despairing groans, the man sitting in front of me repeatedly raised his arms high into the air, letting them fall onto the headrest in front of him, each time shaking the whole seat and the woman in it. My first reaction to these wild gestures and strange, despondent sounds was fear, followed by concern, and then curiosity about how others would respond.

A couple of passengers on either side of the distraught man began to speak gently to him, trying to discern the problem. A flight attendant joined them, and as I observed their interactions, I was struck by their care and mindfulness. They artfully modulated their tone of voice and choice of words as they spoke to him and, as I listened, it occurred to me that I could likewise modulate, not my voice, but my thoughts. I could quietly join the efforts to create an atmosphere that might support the man. I closed my eyes and spent some moments becoming aware of how constricted my chest felt, how tight and raised my shoulders were. Fear had settled into my body even though I no longer felt afraid. I spent some moments feeling the sensations in my body and

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how they evoked an emotional texture of fear. By becoming conscious of the emotion in this way, it no longer had a grip on me. My body became more relaxed, more open. My mind could now return to the situation in a calmer state.

The woman across the aisle from me was also watching the situation attentively. Apparently, she, like me, was choosing to be involved as a silent witness. I remembered what a friend had told me recently about witnessing a compassionate space around one who is suffering. So, as the man continued loudly and fitfully to be in distress, I thought about compassion and imagined it arising in me and spreading into the space around him. I began to be aware of an inner quality, something that felt like spaciousness. Out of this sense of space, silently, came the words: *a blanket of love*.

I visualized the weaving of the blanket, imagining it being woven by the undulating threads of feeling that were present in the spaciousness of my experience. When I started to picture wrapping the man in this blanket, it felt too invasive, too busy. By far the most simple, direct, and powerful way for me to act was to just allow the words to be present, to feel them arise from a source of energetic activity within me.

After about fifteen minutes of our small group's vigilant participation—both visible and invisible—the man put his head back, laid his hands in his lap, and fell asleep for the next six hours. About forty minutes before we landed in Boston, he woke and stayed peaceful for the remainder of the flight.

Imagination and Truth

I thought of this experience while reading an essay written in tribute to Owen Barfield, by the physicist David Bohm. In it, Bohm streamlines Coleridge's somewhat vague use of the terms: first imagination, second imagination, and fancy. Bohm, instead, defines imagination "as the power to display the

activity of the mind as a whole through mental images."²² As clarification, he writes:

What Coleridge considers as primary imagination will then be considered as the display through such images of creative and original *insight*, while what he regards as fancy will be taken to be the corresponding display of the more mechanical and routine aspects of thought. Thus, the one activity, indicated by the word "imagination," is to be distinguished mainly according to the order of its *content*, which moves between the extremes of imaginative insight and imaginative fancy.²³

The word, *display*, as Bohm uses it, points to the phenomenal aspect of imagination and offers a way of understanding my experience on the plane.

At first the phrase, *blanket of love*, evoked a sense that the mood created in the cabin of the plane was like a soft blanket. As I held the image in my mind, I experienced a kind of inner activity that had qualities of weaving, warmth, spaciousness, and energy. It was as if the image-phrase had changed from a noun to a verb. *Blanket of love* had become *love-blanketing*. I began to be less aware of the image and more aware of the qualitative nature of the experience. I was in the experience, not having it. No longer was it just about doing something to support another person; it seemed that I too was being supported. I felt expanded and yet held. This change—I would call it a shift in consciousness—had significance. Even though I could not verify what anyone else was experiencing, I could perceive inwardly that something had changed. External evidence of this could be construed by the fact that the man became calm and went to sleep, an observation that, of course, raises a thorny issue: how can one *know* when an inner experience is true or not?

On the subject of truth, Rudolf Steiner, who as a philosopher and spiritual teacher had a deep influence on Barfield and his work, wrote:

We no longer want merely to *believe*; we want to *know*. Belief demands the recognition of truths that we do not quite understand. But whatever we do not completely comprehend goes against the individual element in us that wants to experience everything in its deepest inner core. The only *knowing* that satisfies us is the kind that submits to no outer norm, but springs from the inner life of the personality.²⁴

Can such a knowing be cultivated and trusted? Arthur Zajonc, physicist and president of the Mind and Life Institute, observes: “We require a way of bringing experience and reason together, a way of perceiving meaning in the given, even when the given arises through deep meditation.”²⁵ Zajonc suggests that the way to bring experience and reason together is through contemplative inquiry. Meditation and other forms of contemplative inquiry provide a discipline that supports entry into the subjective realm where it is possible to investigate the relationship between interior experience and the exterior world with safety and discernment. The faculty of imagination can lead, not to flights of fancy but, on the contrary, to a centered awareness of the unfolding of conscious experience.

The Aesthetic State and Moral Action

As Wordsworth and Coleridge advocate, imagination is a power worth cultivating and appreciating. Both writers insist that this power is about individual freedom in the largest sense. What they don’t address in any detail is the relationship of free-aspiring individuals

to others or to society. This is a subject that Friedrich Schiller, also inspired by Kant, tackles in a series of “Letters” in his book, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Here, he extends the application of art and imagination (words he has transposed into the more philosophic term, *aesthetic*) into the realm of politics and moral action. In a footnote to the Thirteenth Letter, Schiller wrote:

If we are to become compassionate, helpful, effective human beings, feeling and character must unite, even as wide-open senses must combine with vigor of intellect if we are to acquire experience. How can we, however laudable our precepts, how can we be just, kindly, and human toward others, if we lack the power of receiving into ourselves, faithfully and truly, natures unlike ours, of feeling our way into the situation of others, of making other people’s feelings our own?²⁶

Imagination and what Schiller calls the play-drive are what allow for “feeling our way into” the situation of others or into an issue or social question. In Schiller’s vision of a community that embodies

the “Aesthetic State,” love, work, and play are synonymous.

Schiller benefited from an inspired friendship—much like that between Wordsworth and Coleridge—with the great German writer, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Entirely out of his own investigation, Goethe developed a scientific approach to *feeling the way into* nature that he describes as “a delicate empiricism which makes itself utterly identical with the object, thereby becoming true theory.”²⁷ Goethe’s approach allows the theory to stay closer to, even “identical with” phenomena instead of becoming separate and abstract. In my example of applied

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imagination on the plane ride, the theory that I both experienced and could propose is that a person staying present with his or her own inner experience can be open and attentive to another person, thereby supporting the other without compromising self-autonomy.

Theory as Participation as Theory

The word *theory* shares the same Greek root as the word *theater*. Both derive from a verb that means “to view” or “to make a spectacle,” suggesting, as Bohm points out, “that theory is to be regarded primarily as a way of looking at the world through the mind.”²⁸ Perhaps the word *theory*, like the word *theater*, can also be seen to include, in addition to the spectator, the performer—the one who enacts the “spectacle.” Theory can then be understood to result from an activity that is inclusive of two generally polarized modes of participation: one more passive—the perceiving faculty of the *viewer*; the other more active—the activity of the *player* or that which is being viewed. Goethe wrote: “The ultimate goal would be: to grasp that everything in the realm of fact is already theory. . . . Let us not seek for something behind the phenomena—they themselves are the theory.”²⁹

Goethe’s understanding of theory, as the facts of phenomena, by necessity includes the presence of the observer. It is the viewer’s imagination, then, as an infinite faculty, that initiates a process of discerning particular phenomenal content within a participatory unity of wholeness. Therefore, the word *theory* tells us something about how human beings can participate in the world, not just view it. In this new mode of participation, the distinct roles of viewer and actor or player become integrated; they become a way of being. In this way of being, a person’s thoughts and perceptions are not in conflict with their actions

but rather precipitate action. Awareness of the relationship between perception, thought, and will becomes the portal to the domain of freedom and ethical action. Steiner put it simply: “To be free means: to be able—on my own, through moral imagination—to determine the mental pictures (motives) underlying an action.”³⁰ As in Goethe’s way of knowing a phenomenon through direct experience, acting out of moral imagination requires developing a more receptive mode of consciousness toward our own experience, which is exactly what a commitment to contemplative practice can offer.

Theory Loves a Context

Theory is situational; it thrives in a context. In Providence a group of us are creating a learning community—The Mariposa Center—focused on early childhood education. A seasonal, nature-based curriculum in an urban setting is our context; working closely with a diverse group of families is our context; participating in a standards-based state public pre-K program is our context; and a commitment to faculty professional development grounded in reflective and contemplative practices is our context.

Mariposa co-founders and faculty engage in on-going contemplative and reflective inquiry to deepen our understanding of how the teacher perceives and learns from the activity of the children and how the children perceive, imitate, and learn from the teacher’s activity and presence. Through imaginative consciousness, each teacher cultivates awareness of his or her own body in space, his or her own experience of thinking, feeling, and willing. Cultivating self-witnessing supports the teachers’ capacities both to *see* the child and experience *being seen* by the child. The teachers become conscious of a process that happens automatically and

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unconsciously for the children as they take in, absorb, and learn by imitation and their own developing imagination.

One way to imagine the exchange between teacher and child is to picture a horizontal figure eight. On one side, the teacher brings forth—out of his or her own enlivened imagination—story, song, movement and gesture, images, ideas, and feelings. On the other side, the child absorbs what is received, and a process of integration begins which may become activated and furthered through imaginative play. The more intentional and sensitive the teacher can be to the mood created in the classroom and by his or her own presence, the more receptive the child can be. The teacher may observe and reflect upon what the child reveals of his or her inner learning process through play, speech, drawing, and interactions with others.

Witnessing such moments provides creative opportunities for teachers to adapt and develop curriculum and intention accordingly, looping the expression of these back again to the child. Needless to say, this figure-8 picture of relationship is not a static image, programmatic model, nor is it necessarily a smooth, unhindered process. Instead, it is a continual unfolding of possibility, of learning and shared connection between and within both teacher and child, of teachable moments that may take minutes or months to integrate.

This central relationship between teacher and child that forms the heart of Mariposa is held in an encircling gesture of support that requires participation, offered out of individual freedom, from families, staff, board members, and the wider community. We are all learning from the process while doing it.

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Imagination and the Theater of Everywhere

Human freedom arises spontaneously when inner self-awareness, or I-consciousness, responds to and interacts with life as it spontaneously manifests. Remember, Wordsworth calls the power of imagination an *enlarging* of freedom. Without imagination, a person cannot generate ethical ideas. Such a person, writes Steiner, “must receive these ideas from without.”³¹ Imagination is essential in order to maintain the freedom to think and act independently. Steiner adds that “freedom is to be found in the reality of human action” and by this he means action that realizes “conceptual intuitions”³² or what he elsewhere refers to as “living thinking.” The word *living*, as applied to thinking, suggests that a person may experience “*in consciousness* the intuitive thinking that also has reality beyond consciousness.”³³

Bohm, too, discusses qualitative distinctions between kinds of thinking and notes the difference between reactive thought, based on memory and association, and reflective thought, which occurs when an experience proves to have variables that call for a review of what would otherwise prompt a reactive response. He asks: “How then can thought respond to a problem or a difficulty without being dominated by an irrelevant, confusing, and generally destructive mechanical pattern of reaction?”³⁴ Bohm’s antidote is “a quality of insight” that transcends reactive or associative thinking. Insightful thinking must be “fresh and new, creative and original.” And here, Bohm, the scientist, reframes Coleridge’s understanding of imagination, replacing it with the word, “intelligence.” Paraphrasing Coleridge, Bohm writes, “The deep source of intelligence is the unknown and undefinable totality, from which all perception originates.”³⁵

The challenge, it would seem, is to bear the humility of seeking knowledge in the larger context of “the unknown and undefinable totality.” No single system can absolve that challenge. The best recourse, suggests Bohm, is to have “a general alertness, which makes us aware, from moment to moment, of how the process of thought is getting caught in fixed sets of categories.”³⁶ With such presence of mind, the poet and the scientist, the teacher, the parent, and the community member can meet in the theater that is everywhere. With a modest intent to be “just, kindly, and human toward others,” may we bring our powers, our intelligent imagination and our imaginative intelligence to the shared endeavor of knowing the living-world, even as we continue to make the creative mystery of it more explicit.

Endnotes

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- 29 Op. cit., Goethe.
- 30 Op. cit., Steiner, p.191.
- 31 Ibid., p.221.
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