

# Imagination and God's Future

by Len Hjalmarson

*The power of imagination to evoke alternative worlds*

*Imagination is more important than knowledge.* Albert Einstein

In recent years we in the western church have been enamored with words. As a writer, I understand that passion. As a lover, I am intimately acquainted with their limits.

The direction of my soul when I am in love is toward knowledge. Artists are lovers, in love with the world, in love with a particular means of expressing their attachment. Art is a particular way of knowing, and imagination is the link to artistic expression – to incarnation.



And incarnation, we know, is the path to God's future. On this day in the history of the world, and on this day in God's story, we are like those awakening from a long sleep. We have taken the red pill, and we are discovering how deep the rabbit hole goes. We are seeing how deeply immersed and accommodated we have become to a narrow set of values, anchored solidly in a limited Enlightenment

epistemology.. a particular way of knowing the world. Parker Palmer<sup>1</sup> and others are helping us discern the violence of that method, and we are discovering that while science illuminated one set of truths, it lost another. Holy imagination is helping us to rediscover our heart, and in the process, we might also reclaim the church as an alternative culture. Rodney Clapp writes,

Reclaiming Christianity as culture enables us to move from decontextualized propositions to traditioned, storied, inhabitable truths; from absolute certainty to humble confidence; from austere mathematical purity to the rich if less predictable world of relational trust; from control of the data to respect of the other in all its created variety; from individualist knowing to communal knowing and being known; and from once-for-all rational justification to the ongoing pilgrimage of testimony.<sup>2</sup>

What journey could be more important in this hour? The journey to renewed hearts won't be made by those who are immersed in propositions. Walter Ong writes, "Written words are residue...When an often told story is not actually being told, all that exists of it is the potential in certain human beings to tell

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<sup>1</sup> In particular his work, *To Know as We are Known*, and *A Hidden Wholeness* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004)

<sup>2</sup> *A Peculiar People*, (Downer's Grove, Ill: IVP, 1996) 186

it.”<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word for “word,” *dabar* means both word and event. Only what unites mind and heart, word and spirit, is incarnational. What is born of the Spirit in the Holy imagination may then take flesh.<sup>4</sup>

Sadly, artists and poets have not been welcome in the western church. Artists and poets reach for an unseen world, they grasp at transcendence. Moreover, “Poets remove the veil and give language to what people are experiencing. The poet listens to the rhythms and meanings occurring beneath the surface.”<sup>5</sup>

What we see today in the west, according to Walter Brueggemann, is largely a religion of immanence. With the Christendom compact, what had been a missional movement became a civil and settled religion. Civil religion is about immanence, the economics of affluence and the politics of oppression.<sup>6</sup>

When Israel moved from a theocracy to a monarchy then God and the temple become a part of the royal landscape, with the sovereignty of God subordinated to the purpose of the king. From this point forward God is "on call" and access to him is controlled by the royal court. Royal reality overpowers the dimension of hope and the place of imagination. When a nation (or a church) establishes a comfortable and static rule, the last thing they want is people with new ideas to shake things up. And in terms of the economics of affluence, you don't want people delaying gratification in favor of some future hope, you want them seeking pleasure in the eternal now.



The result of all that pleasure is that, “in place of passion comes satiation.” Brueggemann argues that one of the reasons we lose passion and imagination is precisely due to our success at achieving comfort and security. He states that, “Passion as the capacity and readiness to care and suffer, to die and to feel, is the enemy of imperial reality.”<sup>7</sup> TS Eliot links sacrifice and knowledge in “The Dry Salvages,”

*But to apprehend  
The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint--  
No occupation either, but something given  
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,  
Ardour and selflessness and self surrender...*

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<sup>3</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge, 1982) 11.

<sup>4</sup> One of the most profound discourses on the Trinity as a creative paradigm was penned by Miss Dorothy Sayers: *The Mind of the Maker*.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Roxburgh, *The Sky is Falling* (Eagle, ID: ACI Publications, 2005) 164

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001) 30.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 35

It would be easy to assume a dichotomy between word and Spirit for the Holy imagination, but it would be a serious error. I am fascinated that the second story of the creation of humanity displays Adam as the first poet. We observe God's invitation to Adam to name the animals. Imagination is at the heart of knowing, and humankind is a language-maker, invoking new worlds of meaning, a sacramental task. In the act of creation we make visible what was only implied; we connect matter with spirit. Imagination is God's power in us, part of the imago Dei, and it has the power to unite heart and mind and so move us forward into God's future.

"We now know that human transformation does not happen through didacticism or through excessive certitude, but through the playful entertainment of another scripting of reality that may subvert the old given text and its interpretation and lead to the embrace of an alternative text and its redescription of reality."<sup>8</sup>

These are desperate times. We need artists who are prophetic and poetic. We no longer have the luxury of assuming that the old models or established leaders have the capacity to lead us forward. The prophetic task is to criticize the dominant consciousness. We must think seriously and creatively in two worlds simultaneously. Symbols that promise life but breed death are exposed as frauds and alternate symbols are offered.<sup>9</sup> The poetic task is to evoke an alternative future among a people who are so satiated that they have lost the capacity to imagine a new world.

In *The Sky is Falling* Alan Roxburgh notes that the imagination of poets is not expressed in a modern manner. Poets "are not so much advice-givers as image and metaphor framers... What churches need are not more entrepreneurial leaders with wonderful plans for their congregation's life, but poets with the imagination and gifting to cultivate environments within which people might again understand how their traditional narratives apply to them today."<sup>10</sup>

Artists redefine the symbolic world of people so that people begin to see the kingdom of God at work in their everyday lives.<sup>11</sup> I close this article with the words of Peter Senge in *Presence*. Senge writes that a new way forward will emerge from building three integrated capacities: "a new capacity for observing that no longer fragments the observer from what is observed; a new capacity for stillness that no longer fragments who we really are from what's emerging; a new capacity for creating alternative realities that no longer fragments the wisdom of the head, heart and hand; a new capacity for cooperation that harnesses the intelligence and spirit of all people at all levels."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 29

<sup>9</sup> John Frye. Online <http://www.jesustheradicalpastor.blogspot.com/> .

<sup>10</sup> Roxburgh, Op Cit. 166

<sup>11</sup> John Frye, Op Cit.

<sup>12</sup> Senge, Scharmer, Jaworkski, Flowers, *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* (New York: Society for Organizational Learning, 2005)