



REIMAGINING AND REMAKING SERIES

NOT A BOX

APRIL 12 | REV. BETH DANA

What a week, friends. What a week this has been, right? The joy and hope of Easter and the celebration of resurrection here and now, followed by the ongoing devastation of war and maniacal threats of genocide. Unlikely voices are speaking out, while those who have the institutional power to do something are just along for the ride. We are living in the dystopia that writers imagined many years ago. And so, preaching in these times requires creativity. And being people of faith in these times is an act of bold imagination. The poet Adrienne Rich described war as a failure of imagination, the failure to imagine and pursue other paths. She also said that despair when not the response to absolute physical and moral defeat is like war, the failure of imagination. And of course, we do feel defeated at times, unsteady in an ever-shifting world, longing deeply for something better.

And so, this is the time for us to cultivate imagination. To ask what if, and to envision a way out of this dystopia.

It is in times like these, times of great change and unrest, and moral dissonance that some people, including some of our religious ancestors, have turned to utopian endeavors. Living in a young United States of America in the midst of the industrial revolution, surrounded by the religious fervor of the second great awakening, and swept up in a whole variety of social reform movements. Unitarians and universalists in the early to mid 19th century took steps to make their imagined ideal way of life real by founding utopian communities with varying levels of success. In 1841, Unitarian minister and transcendentalist, George Ripley, was disillusioned with a society that did not live up to its professed values. So he founded Brook Farm, an intentional community that would embody the transcendentalist ideals of principled living, a healthy balance of physical labor and intellectual

development and individual freedom. He wanted to remove class distinctions and uplift all work as valuable.

So everyone in the community was given work aligned with their interests and skills, and they received the fruits of their labor. Hard work was paired with a whole variety of recreational activities and opportunities for personal improvement. The community attracted the support and involvement of numerous famous literary and social figures of the time, some of whom became shareholders in the property. This was how it sustained itself financially, but it was not a successful model long-term. And so, Brook Farm closed after six years. Inspired by Brook Farm, Bronson Alcott, an educator and writer best known in the wider world as the father of Louisa May Alcott, founded a community known as Fruitlands, because the idea was to live off the fruits of the lands. Alcott was quite a bit more austere than Ripley, and he dismissed Brook Farm as an endless picnic. At Fruitlands, they rose early, took cold baths and ate a rather minimal diet lacking in protein.

All of this to build body and spirit, they said. They sought to free themselves from societal and institutional restrictions, from reliance on animal products and slave labor. They wore linen, not cotton, and from property ownership, all so that they may live in harmony with the universal divinity they found in nature. The founders of Fruitlands had big dreams. It wasn't to be a closed community. They said it was intended to be a model on which all future society would be based, but there was a problem. It was all too reflective of common norms and inequities at the time. The men preferred reading philosophy and writing poetry to working the land and were often away at speaking engagements. This left the women to do the hard labor, feed everyone from the land, care for the children, and keep the place going. A few months into this experiment, they realized that they did not have enough food to make it through the winter, and that was the end of Fruitlands.

The community was later satirized by Louisa May Alcott, who had lived there with her family when she was younger, in a short story entitled *Transcendental Wild Oats*, which highlighted the lack of common sense that guided the effort and the absurdity of the whole experience.

The longest lasting of these utopian communities was the Hopedale community, founded by Adin Ballou, a radical minister who served both Unitarian and Universalist communities long before the two denominations became one. Ballou's vision was of a community in which members lived out a more perfect version of Christianity, a religion of love, beholden to God alone and not to governmental institutions, committed to work for justice and peace, and uplifting the most marginalized in society. While the community tried to isolate itself from government influence, it did not cut ties with society entirely. Instead, its members worked for the improvement of the human mind and spirit, and were involved in movements for the abolition of slavery, women's rights, peace, and temperance. They hosted speakers such as Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison and Lucy Stone. Over 14 years, the Hopedale community grew to 200 members and covered an area of 500 acres.

But like its predecessors, it fell into financial bankruptcy. Ballou, however, attributed its failure to moral and spiritual factors. He said, "The movement was too far ahead of and above the world in its

then existing or present state of advancement to be practicable."

In other words, he was saying its members were not able to live up to the community's strict ideals and utopian imagination. So what made these communities successful or not? One factor seems to be the extent to which they isolated or engaged with the world around them. Privileged intellectuals escaping the restrictions of the world and its institutions so that they could be in harmony with the divine did not fare well. Those who sought to live by their principles and engage with the world more deeply from that place were able to sustain their experiment a while longer. Another factor seems to be the expansiveness of their imagination. If Ballou was right in his assessment of the Hopedale community, the imagination of the enterprise is what kept it going for 14 years, but it also ended up being its downfall, because the imperfect human beings who were a part of it weren't quite there yet and couldn't fully live into their dreams.

Our world today calls for something different than these utopian communities, which were formed around a vision set by a founder that the people could never seem to live up to. What I believe we need today is a different kind of imagination, a collective imagination rooted in creativity and crafted in community. It begins with our minds and hearts, like the world within that Emily Bronte writes about in her poem, *To Imagination*, where thou, meaning imagination, and I and liberty, have undisputed sovereignty. In this world within, imagination whispers with a voice divine of real worlds as bright as thine. So often I see the word imaginary used synonymously with fake. But for Bronte, imagination shows us real worlds. It shows us what is possible. Imagination is a tool for surviving and thriving in the midst of what is, for making a meaningful life and crafting resistance and resilience, and for shaping reality, not escaping from it.

Human imagination has the power to put us in boxes and it has the power to break us out of them. Writer and activist Adrian Marie Brown says that most of the inequalities that we face begin with a subjective idea that is positioned as the truth and forced onto others. "Once an idea is brought into the world," she says, "reality can be structured around it. Ideas can become systems of oppression." She goes on to say, "Imagination has people thinking that they can go from being poor to a millionaire as part of a shared American dream. Imagination turns brown bombers into terrorists and white bombers into mentally ill victims. Imagination gives us borders, gives us superiority, gives us race as an indicator of capability. But here's something I believe strongly. Oppressive systems were created by the human imagination and they can be dismantled by it, by the stories that we tell and the images we share which shape our imagination and our reality."

Brown says that she often feels trapped inside someone else's imagination and must engage her own imagination in order to break free. Those words really struck me. "I often feel I am trapped inside someone else's imagination and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free."

This is illustrated so simply and yet brilliantly by Antoinette Portus, author of two children's books, *Not A Box* and *Not A Stick*. Thanks to these books, no cardboard box may ever leave my house before it is transformed into a jellyfish, a cat, a bed for a stuffed animal, an article of clothing, or anything else my daughter's imagination can conjure. When the cardboard box was inducted into the National Toy

Hall of Fame in 2005, the speaker said, "Inside a big cardboard box, a child is transported to a world of their own, one where anything is possible."

Now on the surface, these books are about the narrowness of the adult imagination and the limitlessness of the child's. Hey, be careful with that stick. Look where you're going with that stick. Watch where you point that stick. Don't trip on it. Why are you sitting in a box? What are you doing on top of that box? Why are you squirting a box? Now you're wearing a box? And every time the invisible character says something like this, the response is, "It's not a stick," or, "It's not a box." And you see a simple drawing of what it is. It's a fishing pole, a wand, a galloping horse, a paintbrush, a race car, a robot, a mountain, a rocket ship. Not A Box sends with a picture of them taking off into outer space, the earth in the background on their way to who knows where, perhaps to fly around the moon like happened this week.

These stories invite us to consider how imagination influences reality and whether something can be more than it first appears. And they raise the question, does imagining something make it real? What do you think? Does imagining something make it real? It can, yes. Some may say, "Yes, because when you're playing, when you're in your imagination, it feels real."

Others may say, "No, because, well, duh, it's still a box or it's still a stick."

But both of these responses point toward an important truth. Imagination doesn't necessarily replace reality, but it adds another layer of meaning to it. This imagining layers of meaning, embodying the possibilities of the realities we dream of, this is the work of theology. It takes imagination and creativity to make meaning of the stuff of life, especially in the midst of the chaos and violence and nonsense of the world right now. With imagination, we are able to embrace the mystery beyond all our naming and connect with what is sacred in the present.

With creativity, we're able to make real the things that we have only imagined to live out our beliefs and values in tangible, impactful ways. Creativity is sometimes spoken of as something that comes out of nothing and nowhere, a spark of inspiration that strikes, a mystical experience, which we then channel into some creative endeavor. But what if it is more about weaving connections and doing something new with the materials that we have, with the life we have, with the world we have in all its beauty and brokenness and possibility.

Robert Fulghum said, "I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge, that myth is more potent than history, that dreams are more powerful than facts that hope always triumphs over experience."

And there's something in this sentiment that feels very true to me right now. Though knowledge, history, facts, and experience are very important, we need more. It's imagination, myth, and metaphor, dreams, and hope that inspire us and help us to break out of the box of what is and to shape something new. It can be scary to imagine things being different, scary because it requires us to change, not just in ways that we are yearning to change, but in ways that may stretch us and make us uncomfortable. Scary because imagination takes us out of the comfort of our boxes and into the wide open, into experiences and worlds beyond what we know.

Aurora Levins Morales encourages us in her poem V'ahavta. When you inhale and when you exhale, breathe the possibility of another world into the 37.2 trillion cells of your body until it shines with hope, then imagine more. When we draw this breath of possibility into our bodies, imagination becomes a practice of the spirit. It connects what's in our minds and hearts and cells with the holy possibilities around us. And when we practice imagining collaboratively with others, it becomes even more powerful. Connect with someone who thinks very differently from you, who can help you see beyond the scope of your experience. If those utopian community leaders had done that with the people that they wanted to include, I wonder if they might have imagined something entirely different together that had a more lasting impact.

Our church is beginning a new class today that's based on the book *Social Change Now* by Deepa Iyer. In this book, Iyer talks about the social change ecosystem and all the different roles that people can play in our communities, weavers, experimenters, frontline responders, visionaries, builders, caregivers, disruptors, healers, storytellers, and guides. Now, the visionaries who go right to the big picture vision of imagining social change need the builders to help them create an infrastructure for success. The builders need the experimenters who will point out an opportunity to do something differently. The experimenters need the frontline responders and caregivers for when an experiment goes sideways, or to anticipate ways of minimizing harm. The weavers make the most of the materials available and make connections between different roles to build a strong community fabric. I wonder which of these roles you play in the communities of which you're apart. How do you contribute to a collective imagination of what's possible?

I said before that being people of faith in these times is an act of bold imagination. Imagining these layers of meaning and possibility, and then making our dreams real through enacting and embodying them. How do we take the materials that we have, the good and the bad, and make something new with them? Like in *Not A Box and Not A Stick*, things are not always as simple as they seem. That chalice is not just a flame in a vessel, but it's a beacon. It's a flaming torch of freedom and liberation. It's a reminder of the fire of commitment that burns inside of each of us. This sanctuary is not just a room in which we gather for worship. While it was imagined by the architects as a clearing in the forest, it's not a place to escape the world. It's a place where we find clarity, where we imagine together and where we build the faith to go out into the world and change it.

And this dynamic extends far beyond these walls through livestream technology, around the city, around the state, the country, and the world, the playground outside, and the rooms in which our children gather to learn. These are not just fun places for kids to play. They are places where children can be creative and imagine new ways of being together, to build roots here in this beloved community, so that they can be bold and creative, even when it's a little scary. The shambles of democracy and the infectious corruption in our government, maybe it's revealing a shadow side of humanity and its cruelty is converting even those who were initially supporters. Maybe it's gone so low, fallen so far that it is opening a way for something new and better for structures that embody integrity, honesty, dignity, and compassion. What if? We can hope, right?

Now you might be thinking, "Oh, Beth, you're so naive, so optimistic."

But I have to be hopeful. So I just keep inhaling the holy possibilities into the cells of my body that they might transform into deep hope, grounded in what is, but making it something new, because the alternative is despair, a failure of imagination. "Don't let despair sink its sharp teeth into the throat with which you sing," writes Aurora Levins Morales.

Instead, escalate your dreams. Make them burn so fiercely that you can follow them down any dark alleyway of history and not lose your way. We hold this lamp of dreams and hope high to light each other's way and to illuminate the possibilities for our world if we can just imagine them. We can build a new way together. May it be so and amen.