

## The Absence of Imagination

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We notice it when we say 'Kids don't know how to play anymore.' Gone are the games of dress-up and make-believe. The more specific and recognizable the toy, the more popular; least favourite are the ambiguous toys, the ones with so many possibilities.

Later, we observe and lament the fact that the students don't know how to amuse themselves. They can't sit quietly. Discipline problems abound. They are bored, school is boring, everything is boring. Their style becomes, necessarily, one of passivity. Or perhaps reactivity. But not proactivity--it takes imagination to initiate.

Why is this so? Why is there this absence of imagination? Well, human beings are like most objects: we choose the path of least resistance. It takes less energy to watch tv than to read a book. It's easier to put on a prepared costume, use prepared props, and follow a prepared storyline than to make your own costume, props, and storyline. Sure, the latter is probably more satisfying. But how is the kid to know that if s/he hasn't experienced it? (And precisely because she hasn't experienced it, hasn't experienced the imagining, she can't imagine it.)

What to do? Well, anyone will tell you that forcing someone to do something is the quickest way to make them hate it. But given the contemporary context, it's unlikely the kid will voluntarily choose the seemingly less attractive and certainly less popular option.

And yet we'd better find a solution soon. As Celine says in Journey to the End of the Night, "Everything's allowed inside oneself". (He obviously wasn't a Roman Catholic--the sick doctrine of sinful thoughts.) Using one's imagination is the perfect escape: anything goes and no one gets hurt. People denied that escape route may be pushed to find another, less perfect one.

But not only might the unimaginative become the dangerous, the unimaginative becomes the deadweight: the unimaginative preschooler who becomes the bored (and boring) teenager becomes the useless adult. To improve, to change, requires that one imagine an alternative; in a thousand and one ways, our world is desperate for improvement, for change. But if we can't

even imagine it, we sure as hell won't be able to make it happen.

My response to the current ozone depletion, as one who read the biochemical facts and then gave up aerosols in the 70s, is 'You can't say we didn't see it coming.' But I'm realizing, with more horror than accompanied my first conclusion (that 'we' were selfish, irresponsible, and just didn't give a damn), that 'we' didn't see it coming. We couldn't. People couldn't extrapolate from A to B: to anticipate the effect of a cause, the consequence of an action, requires imagination.

In the same way, I'm appalled to hear teenagers say what a good program it is that gives them a tour of jail or takes them into the operating room to see a gunshot wound. They 'didn't know', they say. What? What did you think happened? Well, they didn't. They didn't think. They're not used to doing that. It requires a sort of 'let's pretend' mental activity that's simply not within their repertoire.

Ditto for the 'carrying the egg or bag of flour around for a week' exercise. I certainly didn't need to do that to understand what's involved in being a parent. And I'm the youngest child, so it's not like I saw it. I imagined it. I thought about what my life would be like if I had a child--and on that basis decided not to have one. Simple. Apparently not.

Imagination is necessary for the consideration of options, of alternatives; it's the prerequisite for choice, for exerting one's will, for having control over one's life. Without it, we are doomed, as individuals and as a species. It's what separates us (well, some of us) from lower life forms: if a horse could imagine life as a deer, my guess is it would jump the fence in a second. And while I'd like to say 'See ya', we're all in this together.