

## IMAGINATION:

### A ROUTE FOR THE JOURNEY

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*You must give birth to your images.  
They are the future waiting to be born.  
Fear not the strangeness you feel.  
The future must enter into you  
long before it happens.*

--Rilke

Some time ago I was involved in one of those unpleasant disagreements with a colleague during a meeting. Afterwards I felt somewhat estranged from her, and a little fearful of meeting up with her again. These feelings became the focus of attention during my own next spiritual direction session. After some verbal sharing, my director asked me if I would like to do some Active Imagination around this issue. The starting point was to focus on a strained pulling sensation in the pit of my stomach. I became aware of both angry and sad feelings along with the tension. My director invited me to attend to all of this for awhile, then suggested that I invite an image to emerge that might capture how I was feeling. Almost immediately I "saw" a lovely, deep yellow daffodil. It was poking through an area of ground covered with snow. My director asked if there was anything I might want to say to the daffodil. "What on earth are you doing in a snowfield?" I inquired. "Well," came the rather puzzled response, "I'm not sure. I feel so out of place here, yet everyone who walks past stops and notices how lovely I look." Although I didn't really understand the meaning behind the daffodil's response, it completely quieted my mind. My stomach calmed down, having caught the meaning of the daffodil's words while my mind was still working to make all the connection.

The next day I felt awkward, but nevertheless went up to my colleague and said that I felt bad about our previous exchange. Her reply took me by surprise. "Oh! Don't feel bad. I felt very cared about by your remarks." Now my mind got it – the daffodil's words matched the overall scene: I had felt out of place in the disagreement, yet those around were struck by something of beauty which I had missed. The image put my experience into perspective and soothed my tension and discomfort.

In Rilke's words, I had at first feared the strangeness of the feelings inside me. But they were all the

while heralding a future waiting to be born. I was grateful that my spiritual director had the confidence to engage me in this skill so that wholeness and freedom were evoked. I am sure some help would have come from simply talking about the conflict with my director, yet I believe it would not have touched the same depth. This personal example, together with others, have given me a conviction that Active Imagination and other similar tools have an appropriate place, indeed a holy place, within the context of spiritual direction.

### Awareness and Dialogue

Active Imagination is a process or tool in which a bridge is established between one's conscious and unconscious self through the use of imagery. The process was promoted by Carl Jung. He believed that if someone wants to make progress in the inner life, Active Imagination is the route to go. During the process, one's ego becomes quite "active" and quite conscious. The starting point is partly conscious – becoming aware of a particular sensation one is carrying. That is, focusing on something that has happened, be it pleasant or unpleasant. One can also realize there is a great deal about a visceral response that is not known – the unconscious dimension. The *yet-to-be-revealed* is the *more* of a particular experience. Imagery enables one to be more concretely present to a reality that may be either vague, or powerfully present and undefined. Images may originate with one or more of the senses. They may take pictorial form, have a visceral felt sense, or carry a smell or a sound. The Active Imagination process can help one use awareness as a doorway through which the unknown segment of total experience can be tapped.

By the Active Imagination process, I am also referring to the facilitation of a dialogue between the conscious and unconscious self once a bridge has been established. Robert Johnson, in his book *Inner World*, says that things change in the psyche as a result of using Active Imagination. The very relationship between the ego and the unconscious is altered. This sets one on a path toward wholeness, toward awareness of a larger context, as a result of having entered into communication with the inner self.

In dialogue, a conversation is held between a person's ego and an image. As in interpersonal conversation, the dialogue is open-ended and could take the form of question and answer. Either the ego or the image can ask a question and give a response. The dialogue could also take the form of listening to

or watching an image, analogous to seeing a movie on a screen. In this journey, the image leads the way. This imagination is called “active” because one’s ego chooses to enter the inner world. The image becomes the doorway and the vehicle

Using imagery to make more conscious dim awarenesses can address a split within a person’s experience. Johnson comments that the “magic” of Active Imagination comes about through the experience itself. An image can trigger a memory, and something specific and real can be healed deep inside in response to a symbolic interaction.

A young priest I was companioning in spiritual direction was struggling with the truth of his sexual orientation. This struggle had been an ongoing theme. When he presented it this time, he let me see a deeper pain and a stronger anger with which he carried this issue. At my invitation, he shared some more and then abruptly burst out: “I feel abhorrent in the eyes of God!” The passion and depth of his cry caught us both by surprise and we sat in silence for a time. I was aware of wanting to scream out “No!” But after a moment of checking, I realized I felt moved to tears. This feeling, together with a trust in the vulnerability he had just shown, gave me the courage to say, “I wonder if ‘abhorrent’ would really describe God’s feelings toward you?” The next 20 minutes or so went something like this, in abbreviated form:

M (artin): “Would you want to take a moment of quiet to check out if “abhorrent” is how God thinks of you and your gay feelings?

P (riest): (not too confidently) Okay . . .

(After a time of silence, I noticed him moving uncomfortably, so I asked him what was going on.)

P: (with some anger) Oh, I hear the usual words, but they are just words.

M: What words?

P: Oh, you know, “You are precious in my sight” . . . “I love you.”

M: How do you feel when you hear those words?

P: I feel torn. I’ve preached lots of sermons on them. I’ve used them when someone else is hurting. But they don’t heal me of feeling gay or trying to hide my bad feelings.

M: So you feel torn inside . . . a bit angry?

P: Yeah, and a bit like I’m a fraud. . . and maybe God is a fraud for saying them to me now, knowing that nothing’s going to change.

M: What a tough bind to be in. I feel really sad for you right now. How are you feeling?

P: Just like we said, in conflict, angry, confused.

M: Is there an image that might express all of that inside you right now?

P: (after a lengthy pause) . . . It’s like a black-brown ball of smoldering cinders.

M: How about taking a minute to tell God about the black-brown ball and what it’s like for you to hear those words.

(As the silence developed, I was aware of a totally different feel to the atmosphere around us both. My brave directee was very still and sitting almost softly in his chair. After some time I asked him what was going on. He took a long time to answer and his voice was very tender.)

P. I am remembering a time when I was about six. I had done something naughty and owned up to my mother. The look on her face broke my heart and I started to cry . . . probably I was frightened of being punished as well. But she started to smile and picked me up and held me closely to her. I can still smell her neck right now.

(In previous sessions he had told me that his mother has died when he was in elementary school, so I knew that this was not “one memory amongst many.”)

M: Why not spend some time taking all of that in, the memory, the smell, the feeling of being closely held by your mother . . .

(After a time his body language seemed to be telling me enough time had been given to this, so I prompted again.)

M: What’s happening now?

P: I’m remembering some words of scripture . . . different ones.

M: What are you remembering?

P: "Even if a mother should forget her children. . ."  
(silence again and some moist eyes)

M: Even if a mother should forget her children. . . .

P: H-m-m-m-m.

M: What's it like to hear those words?

(He just shakes his head, a few tears down his cheeks.)

I left that session deeply awed by the way God and my directee's imagination worked together, even conversed, to help heal some pain and conflict. Experiences such as this one are very gifting to me as well. I have become much less hesitant to suggest Active Imagination to a directee if I find myself thinking about it during a session. This is not the end goal, but it can have a holy and wholesome place within a session.

### **Contemplation and Asceticism**

Both Eastern and Western world religions point to two key elements when discerning a genuine transformative experience – contemplation and asceticism. Contemplation is not always a rarified, out-of-body rapture. It can be the more common and lovely awareness of a delicate inbreaking of God. John of the Cross might describe a contemplative moment with that kind of language. Asceticism is not self-abnegation or willful humiliation. Rather, it can encompass an attitude of self-consciousness in standing before God without any repression. Paul Robb, my Jesuit mentor and co-founder of Chicago's Institute for Spiritual Leadership, would refer to this in his conversations and classes as the true virtue of Penance. That is, being able to simply be before God, just as I am, warts and all. Not exaggerating my faults, not minimizing them, not beating myself or glossing over shameful things, not deciding what about me is presentable to God and what is not. Just being there as I am.

The true value and meaning of Penance is something deeper than giving up what I might like to do, or to have, or to eat, as a moral discipline. Nor is it taking on an extra burden in order to go against my spontaneous likings or preferences. Such choices may have merit, but in choosing this or that practice "I" am still very much in the driver's seat, deciding what is good, what is bad, what needs to be re-

moved, or what needs to be gone against. Robb challenges me to go deeper, to put a step between my awareness that an action, attitude, or feeling needs to be curbed and the decision to curb it. The step is to pause and ponder what is the truth about me in the midst of it all. Now I am listening and learning rather than deciding and acting immediately. Decision and action may still follow, but the fruit of the intermediate contemplative step will be more wisdom and healing than an earlier choice. Such a receptive attitude requires courage and endurance to cultivate. Facilitating a process of Active Imagination enables me and my directee to attend more fully to inbreakings of God, to cultivate and nourish a receptive state. In this way Active Imagination can be a framework for practicing the true virtue of Penance.

Active Imagination becomes effective when a directee can accept, without censoring nor repressing, all that is truly present in his or her immediate personal experience – both the blockages and the yearnings. There is always more to be learned than can be assessed in the first moment of immediate experience. The preparatory steps foster an attitude of receiving, listening, and observing. A directee can be described as searching for truth - "How am I right now? How is it with me?" At the guide's invitation the directee may pause for a moment, and without judging or changing anything, simply take note, make an inventory of what is going on inside. He or she might observe: "I feel tired"; "My stomach is upset"; "I feel a little (or a whole lot) excited"; "I have a slight headache"; "I'm still caught up in an argument I had." This is the truth of how it is right now. Sometimes it is not the way the directee wishes, but it is the truth of the moment. The most intimate place where God is waiting to meet us is when we are in touch with our truth. Then we are moving toward the God by whom we are known.

### **Another Personal Example**

I often have a strong awareness of division within myself, a tension between two or more energies or sensations. As I become faithful to a simple and non-judgmental attending to the reality, the truth of this. I catch a sense of a much deeper and more compelling murmur within me that has yet to be heard. This experience is essentially self-directed.

Quite recently I was caught in a brief power struggle with someone I know. I was angry with him because he seemed to be treating me rather high handedly. I was angry with myself because I knew my buttons were being pushed and I couldn't turn

them off. I was momentarily frightened, and didn't sleep very well after the incident. I took these feelings to Active Imagination and the image was that of a spinning metal ball in deep space. Every now and then a bolt of lightning would strike the ball and set off buzzes of electricity around it. Even though I felt the image accurate in describing the dynamics, I felt an irritated "and so. . . ?" rising inside me. The tone of the response matched my irritation: "Martin, you can't stop the lightning. You need to move the ball." I found myself smiling at the blunt wisdom I was being given, but still needed to say, "Yes. But I don't know how to." Then the image changed a little and I noticed that there was a reflector shield bouncing the strikes away from me into space. But each strike left the shield a little bruised. "Get yourself a reflector shield," came the words.

The lightning image and the words did not fix the conflict I was having, but it did propel me to some mutual friends for guidance. In a way, this was the reflector shield. I was struck when the first words one said to me were, "First of all, Martin, you are dealing with a very angry person who has burnt some of the rest of us!" The gift this exercise offered me was to free up inner space to allow me to just "be with" how I was and allow a deeper wisdom to be heard. Any traveler of the spiritual journey knows that "attending to," and "listening to" the inner murmur requires courage, strength, and perseverance, as in any ascetical practice. A companion can keep me focused on what I might prefer to walk away from, lend me courage not to give up or be overcome by fear, and alert me to a level I wasn't initially hearing.

The Active Imagination process has a valid place within my life journey because it helps me uncover the truth around specific experiences. I enter into Active Imagination, not for the experience itself, but for its assistance in drawing me closer to the truth and the profound beauty of my experience. By allowing a barrier to come down, I may come closer and deeper into God. Active Imagination continues to be a grace-filled tool in my own transformative process.

### **Facilitating Directees**

For a beginning director (or directee), there may be a feeling of awkwardness or artificiality about using an Active Imagination process. However, consider its basis. Someone who has practiced "attending to" (words, feelings, images) takes a stance very much like contemplation.

As a spiritual director, I yield to a contemplative attitude as my comfort level increases. My own stance does not distance or detract me from quality presence with the directee. Rather, it deepens the respect and attentiveness with which I accompany her or him. During the same process in which God and a directee draw more closely together, I may also become delicately aware of God's closeness to me.

Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh says that God cannot catch us unless we stay in the unconscious room of our hearts. I find his insight a compelling reason to suggest Active Imagination at an appropriate moment during a session, a time when I sense that the directee seems to seek help in letting go of a certain defensiveness, in letting him- or herself be caught by God.

It could be a moment when the directee seems stuck in a familiar pattern of feelings: "I always feel this way and never seem to break out of reacting like this." Or the directee reports feeling lost, overwhelmed, confused, helpless in a particular relationship or situation. A directee might say: "I feel there is something I need to learn from this, something seems to be nudging me," or, "This feeling reminds me of the time when . . . ." During these delicate moments I wish to companion directees in such a way that they will be receptive to following an Active Imagination process again. They will want to be caught by God over and over, because they have come to know the fruits of letting go.

Facilitated Active Imagination can enable a transformative process in which the directee moves from reporting or reflecting on God's work toward being present to God at work at that very moment. The process can prepare a directee for a contemplative moment within a session, and can also be the context within which a contemplative moment occurs. As director-facilitator, I have witnessed the inbreaking of God in my directee and been touched deeply enough myself to be surprised into open-eyed silence. Surely my being rendered speechless is a sign of grace at work!

After the moment passes, it is helpful for the two of us to talk about what happened. When a directee owns the grace received and finds words for the experience, she or he will more readily recognize grace in the future. In a contemplative moment, the directee may or may not need my help to be "caught." This is where I must be especially discerning. Humility about my role as a facilitator of Active Imagination has grown over the course of my practice. My directees teach me how to understand my role more fully.

When a directee has worked honestly and hard to face some truth about herself, there may be yet more to be plumbed. In the moments of quiet when the work seems “finished,” I may unexpectedly be aware of God being with us. Such a moment may be focused by asking: “What are you aware of as you sit here before we finish up for today?” By the way, the directee’s response can help me know if my facilitation has led her toward or away from where she needs to be. I am struck, however, by how often the directee will respond, “Oh, I am just aware of God being very close.” Then I may suggest that she commune with God about God’s closeness and be open to whatever else she may hear. Sometimes, however, the directee will say that she is not really thinking of anything much but just feels very tired or hungry or ready to go home. That, too, is worth the check.

### **Personal Learnings**

In reflecting on Active Imagination, I have come to three realizations. First I am aware that God uses human persons to facilitate a moment of God’s self-revelation. Clearly, my presence is not required for intimacy to grow between God and a directee; however, in an Active Imagination session, a facilitating director seems to actively help intimacy occur. I find it quite wonderful that the heart of God is not hesitant or troubled by making use of a human agent. I feel drawn to worship and love a God with such a quality.

Second, I have learned about the gift of mutuality in spiritual direction. I am aware of being called to participate as facilitator before God and the directee. I am aware of God’s spirit at work between a directee and myself, and between myself and the directee. God’s desire is to become more fully known to both of us. As I listen to the directee, I learn yet another piece of Good News about God for the directee and for myself. The full circle of mutuality is precious and powerful.

Third, I am learning about my own growing edge as a spiritual director. The presence of grace includes a call to growth. At this mid-stage of my life journey, I have been hesitant about spiritualizing a here-and-now experience and wary of introducing a change of focus into a directee’s dynamic. However, I am coming to trust my own instincts with Active Imagination. I have done some personal work under supervision about why I hesitate when suddenly finding myself keenly aware of God’s presence. Now I find it easier to companion others and ask what they might be aware of in the present moment.

### **Concluding**

Active Imagination can have a holy and helpful place in spiritual direction. It can assist in disposing a directee for a transformative moment. Other practices such as Focusing, Dreamwork, or Guided Imagery can also be helpful in a spiritual direction context. These are not ends in themselves, but means to growth in self-knowledge and knowledge of the ways of God. As with any practice, discernment of the fruits must be done before embracing or dismissing a practice that has the power to bring about change.

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### **Recommended Reading**

deMello, Anthony. *Sadana, A Way to God*. St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978.

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