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Imagine That

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Imagine That

We can use our imagination in diverse and valuable ways, not merely for “picturing.” When we start out to consider a possibility, we will often direct our imagination in a specific direction: that way, and no other. By choosing to exercise our imagination while we consider a possible course of action, we add some measure of felt experience to what would otherwise be only a listing of reasons for and against. Imagination provides more than seasoning to otherwise bland food; it enables us to have a full meal rather than a cold sandwich.

When we initiate the process of imagining how a particular choice might or might not be appropriate in terms of actions and outcomes as well as the effects upon our minds and hearts, we do far more than count up the number of reasons for or against. We add a spiritual level of significance to some of the reasons that are under consideration. Imagination, in service to decision-making, is far different from fantasizing for purposes of entertainment.

Imagination is a very useful God-given gift for putting us into experiential contact with reality, which might seem at first to be a contradiction. If we think of imagination primarily as “day-dreaming,” that is merely about mental recreation. But whenever we engage a story of any kind with imagination, we bring all the reality of our lives to this new experience, and are thereby able to make judgments about right and wrong, about better or less good, based on feelings of empathy or indifference in a fully human manner. Whereas, when we keep a story at an emotional distance, abstracting from imagination, and relating exclusively with facts, our judgments are often devoid of humanity. Computers can respond programmatically to data; but we are capable of dealing holistically with all that we know, together with the spiritual sensitivities that accompany our knowledge.

We encounter stories of various types every day: Someone tells us about an interaction with a family member, or we hear a brief description of a news item; we watch a documentary, or read a poem or a piece of fiction. Stories, or narratives, are a significant part of our lives. Through our use of imagination, stories draw us into life, not away from it.

We can direct our imagination to fill in or add to a story of any kind. We often find ourselves drawn into stories in a quite spontaneous manner. In using imagination to relate whatever we receive with our own life-experiences, we are neither adding to authentic “history,” nor are we detracting from it. Rather, we are making essential connections between the

words or images we receive and our personal stories. In this way, we actually come more closely into contact with reality than if we limited ourselves to only observing the stories that we receive from others.

Although a news story about people having their rights violated in some distant land might not elicit a strong personal connection, we will very likely identify with the plight of a colleague or friend who tells us about recently having been injured or ill. We can easily imagine the latter situation, and will readily empathize with the person who relates his or her story to us.

Imagine that.