

The Moral Imagination

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Reading

From: Manifesto for a Moral Revolution by Jacqueline Novogratz,

The revolutions in technology and globalization in the past three decades have changed everything. The rate of extreme poverty has fallen to 10 percent and cell phones have connected nearly every individual on the planet. Rights for human beings—and nonhumans—are expanding. On so many dimensions, the world has gotten better. Yet, the same forces that have shaped this world—technology and shareholder capitalism—hold within them the potential to destroy us. We are dangerously unequal and divided. We collectively face the ultimatum of our climate emergency. And many of the institutions devoted ostensibly to improving the lives of the many, not the few, are broken, yet we have not envisioned their replacements.

We need a new narrative. We are too entangled to abide worldviews based on separation, nor can we look to simple technological or market solutions. Those stories have run their course. We will be so much richer, productive, and peaceful if we learn not only to coexist but to flourish, celebrating our differences while holding to the understanding that we are part of each other, bound together by our shared humanity. That narrative will come not from above but from all of us.

Sermon

First sermon of the new year. A new year with much possibility. Good riddance to 2020, but what has really changed? Of course, nothing yet. My days are still the same. Still in the pandemic, though the vaccine is slowly making it way.

Still suffering from political anxiety – now about the transfer of power, and the Senate.

But it feels different. We have a new year ahead that is still all about possibility.

We are pretty resilience now, we are experienced at this pandemic, experienced at politics making us feel sick or angry, or despairing. We have learned how to cope and make the best of a difficult situation. And we are desperately ready for something to change.

It feels different at the turn of the new year because our hopes have a little breathing room now, a chance to expand. We are not out of the woods yet of course; it may be months. But while we wait, we have time to reflect on what comes next – and to use our imagination to vision see what is possible. Imagination is critical now because we must rethink and recreate a lot of things. I know deep in my soul that things cannot go back to the way they were.

Oh yes you will see you friends and eat at restaurants and go the movies and come to our shared space for church services, all those wonderful communal things we miss so much. But the world is different now, we are different. We have been changed by what we have learned and what we have seen. Our eyes are opened to the reality that our systems are not working for most of us. That racism and selfishness are alive and active in our country. That income inequality is the highest that it has ever been, made worse by the pandemic.

We also have the awareness things could turn over – a tipping point that could lead to a more just a sustainable way of being. But it will not happen on its own.

As Jacqueline Novogratz said in the reading I shared, we need a moral revolution.

But first we need to take a deep look at our world and use our imagination to envision what could be.

The term moral imagination has shown up a lot lately in articles and books articulating what is needed to find our way as humans who have made a terrible mess of things. I first came across this idea in the title of a book I read in seminary. It was written by John Paul Lederach who works towards conflict resolution in war torn countries. He has seen the best and the worst of what humans can be, and he sees moral imagination as special capacity of humans that is needed now more than ever.

Our moral imagination is like a compass that helps us find our way in turbulent times, a compass grounded in our values. It requires us to perceive things more deeply than we normally do, to tap into the creative spirit. Using our moral imagination means being rooted in what is but expanding our vision out to what could be.

In these times you can find many examples of people stretching themselves to imagine ways to make a difference in our world. I have been heartened by the moral imagination of some of our youngest entrepreneurs. Children and youth often don't put a cap on their imagination – and they set wonderful examples for us. 6-year-old Paris Williams, of St. Louis started a organization to help people in need. She started by selling t-shirts and use the revenue to buy food and toiletries to put in her care packages for the homeless. Of course, her parents helped her with the logistics – but it was her ideas and energy that made it happen. There are lots of stories like these – there is a classroom in England that raised money by selling bracelets in their schoolyard and then invested the money in microloans to small entrepreneurs in Africa. You likely have your own examples of children using their moral imagination to make a difference.

There is also transformation happening in the business world with entrepreneurs imagining a successful enterprise where profit for profits sake is not the main goal. These businesses are thriving despite having to swim against the tide of capitalist expectations. One business that has sparked my imagination is Who Gives a Crap. It was started in Australia by 3 young entrepreneurs who make toilet paper out of the worlds most regenerating source for paper– bamboo. They sell the TP for about 10% over the cost of premium toilet paper, and give half the profits to partner organizations who are working to provide toilets and sanitation to the worlds poor. As of 2019 they have donated \$1.7 these organizations. I wish I had been at the meeting, or more likely hanging out time when this idea was hatched. I have been with people where we have come up with similar crazy ideas – but they did it. How many boxes does that tick? Sustainability, saving trees, making a difference for the world's poor? They are not a non-profit – half the profits go to them and their investors, but half the profits go to making a difference. It was not easy and there were many roadblocks placed in their way. Here are entrepreneurs guided by their desire to make a difference, using their moral imagination to break through typical business models as well as the attitudes of those stuck in old business models.

Or consider Phool – from the Hindu word for flower, a company started in India by two entrepreneurs who wanted to use their skill to solve a real-world problem and make a living at the same time. The problem they identified was the million of flowers that were thrown into the rivers by the temple priests after they were used in religious ceremonies. The flowers were

contaminated with pesticides and were polluting the rivers. Their company buys the flowers from the priests, cleans, and processes them into incense sticks – another important item for religious ceremonies. And they hired women from the untouchable class to work in their factories and gave them respect and a reasonable income for the first time in their lives. Win win, Win.

I can't think of a better example of using your Moral imagination to develop something rooted in solving the challenges of the real world by expanding the idea what's possible.

I find all this very inspiring and I hope that you do too. Perhaps these ideas will plant a seed to grow your own ideas into reality. If we can multiply these actions throughout the world our systems will be transformed.

But there is a part of me, and perhaps a part of you too that is saying, give me a break, its only January 3rd I've been stuck inside for 9 months and I am supposed to be ready to change the world. I haven't even gotten out of my pajamas yet.

Great questions!

We're stuck right now, but this is a great time to reflect and prepare. A great time to practice using our moral imagination. What would that look like?

Here are some practical ideas -

When faced with a challenging situation try showing a willingness to embrace complexity without reliance of either/or thinking – sometimes the best ideas come from something outside the dualistic limits.

Practice empathy by imaging the experience of someone quite different from you.

Have faith in your own ability to be creative – and practice it.

Develop a greater acceptance of and tolerance for risk. I do not suggest that you go out without a mask – but that you push yourself a bit beyond your comfort zone.

All of these are skills needed to develop your moral imagination and now is a great time to practice. Start by getting out of your rut- whatever rut you are ready to break out of and apply the skills above – embrace complexity and move beyond either/or, practice empathy, be creative, accept risk.

Make this a moral imagination boot camp, and then when we can return to the world you will be ready – and then the real power of the moral imagination can be put into use.

You know we can't go back to the way things were. You know the reasons as well as I. Our world as it was is simply not sustainable. We must prepare ourselves to be active participants in this great turning to a new way of being.

In the closing of his book *The Moral Imagination*, Lederach has a similar idea for a Moral Imagination boot camp. He imagines a world where all leaders at all levels are required to attend continuing education at the School for Moral Imagination. He proposes starting with just a week – knowing that there would be a lot of resistance. The classrooms would be mixed up to include people who rarely talk to each other in real life. There would be lots of tea and coffee and very few lecturers. Participants would be required simply to talk openly and honestly with each other about their hopes and fears. Every day they would hear a presentation from someone who had overcome huge challenge – refugees, survivors of abuse, or folks who lived with oppression at every step. At least part of each day participants would do art, or listen to music, write, or pursue other creative endeavors. At end of the week, they would plant a garden.

And on the door at the exit there would be a plaque that they would read at the end of each day.

Reach out to those you fear.

Touch the heart of complexity.

Imagine beyond what is seen.

Risk vulnerability one step at a time.

So may it be.