

Introduction

Scenes of the Crime

2 *imagination first*

L

et's imagine three scenes.

Imagine an eight-year-old girl growing up on a ranch in eastern Washington state. Imagine her as she steps into the yard under the clear night sky, after all the chores are done and the dishes washed, and begins constructing a vision of herself aloft, amidst that starry train. She searches for plumes of fire. She picks out the luminous object that moves. She tracks its arc across the dome. She swells with purpose and resolve, and walks across the moonlit grass back into the house to tell her father that when she grows up she is going to be an astronaut. He snorts, and says with a killing chuckle, "That's no life for a lady."

She never leaves the atmosphere.

Imagine a biologist working at one of the country's great cancer research centers, doing what he calls "high-end bricklaying" in a large scientific project funded by a large government grant. One day his infant daughter dies. The death is sudden, unexpected. He is distraught. He goes into a dark, deep hole, and finds that the only way out of the hole is to think about mortality. Or rather, immortality. He reads science, fiction, science fiction. He reads myth, religion, poetry. He comes out of the hole with a clear vision. He can no longer just do his bit part in a large endeavor of someone else's making. That's normal science. He needs his own project. On how to stave off death, to borrow enough time so that someone who suffers sudden trauma, who slides quickly toward death, can be treated, healed, saved. He goes to his division director and says *I have to be able to do my own thing here at the lab or I have to leave*. The director ponders this and says, "I'm sorry you feel that way but if I let you do this, I have to let everyone, and I can't do that." The biologist blinks.

He goes back to bricklaying.

Imagine a young but not-so-young-anymore man who's been working at the same family services nonprofit in Harlem for ten years, running it for the last five. There's a lot he can be proud of: lots of individual kids he's helped,

lots of thankful notes from parents who needed that helping hand. But something is gnawing at him, and it's a sense that there is a bigger invisible web, an inactive latticework around him, and his efforts are not connected to it. He can build his little tiny bulwark and protect his tiny cohort from the tide, but all that means is the tide swells more heavily to his left and to his right. He reflects, he asks, he listens, and then an idea comes: he will make that web visible, that latticework active. He'll tie together all manner of social service agencies, and leverage public dollars, and he'll save not just a few kids here and there—he will save a whole generation in Harlem. He will break a cycle. He goes to his board and says he wants to create a cradle-to-college ecosystem of community initiatives that will educate parents to be parents and let Harlem's children be children. The board puts him off, asks him to focus on the job at hand.

He stays in his corner of the web.

In each scene, a kind of murder was committed. Each story was marked by the calculated or offhand killing of a person's sense of possibility.

Now, imagine if in each instance something had gone differently.

What if that eight-year-old's father had nodded with encouragement? What if he'd given even silent assent to her ambition? What might've happened? Well, she



might've turned out like Bonnie Dunbar, a pioneering NASA astronaut and space shuttle crew member who would inspire countless young people and would later become director of the National Museum of Flight.

What if that cancer researcher's boss had said, "Yes, I think you can do this and I think you should"? What might've happened then? He might've turned out like Mark Roth, who won a MacArthur fellowship in 2007 for his discovery of a method that uses tiny doses of toxic gases to literally suspend animation in mice and small mammals, and allows them to be reanimated without ill effect. His company, Ikaria, is developing the method for human application.



What if that nonprofit entrepreneur had had the courage of his convictions? He might've turned out like Geoffrey Canada, the creator of the Harlem Children's Zone, one of the nation's most ambitious and original efforts to change the lives of poor, forgotten black children, and an initiative that President Obama aims to replicate across the country.



In her essay "A Room of One's Own," Virginia Woolf asked us to imagine that William Shakespeare had had a sister, every bit as talented a poet as her brother, every bit as attuned to the nuances of human interaction, every bit as inclined to step onstage and express those nuances—but barred: barred from exercising or cultivating her



imagination by the sheer accident of her gender; mocked when she dared express a desire to write plays; turned away at the theater. The tale of this hypothetical sister is not only the tragedy of womanhood; it is the universal tragedy of untapped talent, of imagination fully seeded but never sprung.

Think about your own life. Find a moment, from five minutes ago or five decades ago, when someone or something killed your imagination. Chances are, you can't stop with one. Chances are, you can create a roll call of such internal deaths. Our unsung, unread autobiographies are littered with them: an unkind word from a boss, a sneer of mockery from friends, a painful penalty for coloring outside the lines, a threatened and threatening look from a spouse.

Or think of broader patterns in our society. Everywhere we turn, the scene is littered with evidence of the killing of imagination.

Fifty million Americans without health insurance. The Lower Ninth Ward still in tatters. Public schools that every day leave millions of poor children behind. Fragmented families and communities. Unchecked man-made climate change. A sharp decline in American patents, scientific research, and economic competitiveness. A total debt that outstrips our nation's productive capacity.

Each one of these persistent problems sits like an open sore on the body politic, visible to all and never healing. Our habit, as citizen-spectators, is to behold these failures and to speak of them as failures of *will*: to assert or assume that Americans no longer have the national life force, the willpower that we had last century, to face these problems head-on and to solve them.

But in fact, these are not primarily failures of will. They are failures of imagination. We had stopped imagining, as a people, what it would look like if every American had the health care needed to live as a full human being. We generally do not imagine a Lower Ninth Ward where the nation applies sustained attention and resources and where stability and opportunity emerge. We struggle still to imagine public schools that truly keep the promise of a fair shake for all who start life with the least.

The general assumption is that a will to act must precede imagination—that you decide to do something before you imagine what it is. The reality is that imagination comes first. It must. Until and unless we have the emotional and intellectual capacity to conceive of *what does not yet exist*, there is nothing toward which we are to direct our will and our resources.

Nelson Mandela first *imagined* a multiracial democracy when all around him on Robben Island was only the

stony monolith of apartheid. *Then* he summoned the will to outlast the monolith. J. K. Rowling first *imagined* a world of wizards and limit-bending acts of magic when all around her was only the harsh scarcity of welfare and single motherhood. *Then* she put her vision to the page, fully realizing that world and conjuring from mere wisps of inspiration a very real juggernaut of a media franchise.

A New Path

Every one of us lives in a world shaped by what social scientists call “path dependence,” which is what happens when an institutional arrangement gets locked in and becomes self-reinforcing. The classic example of this is the QWERTY layout of the keyboard. The first typewriters were clunky and prone to jam, and so the awkward QWERTY layout was invented to keep certain common letter pairs from clashing. Why do we have it still? Because it became an industry standard early on and it got entrenched. An economist might note that the “switching costs” of changing to a more intuitive keyboard today are too great. But the truth is, almost nobody even *contemplates* the possibility of a friendlier format. We do things the way we do them because that’s the way we do them. The lock-in effect is a great enemy of imagination—and this is true everywhere, not just in keyboard design. Life is filled with QWERTYs.

And it's becoming more difficult than ever to tolerate them. We live in a time of tremendous and accelerating change, at every fractal scale of society. Everything, in ways both empowering and disorienting, is now fluid: Our ability to define our personal identities in an authentic way. Our ability to make and remake our families. Our ability to find neighborhoods that give us a sense of place rather than isolation. Our ability to make our work meaningful and our enterprises purposeful. Our ability to sustain a sense of common cause as the nation separates centrifugally into ever-finer social slivers. Our ability to master, rather than be mastered by, globalization and its consequences. Our ability to expand the meaning of *our* and *us*.

At each scale, the challenge is the same: How do we unlearn a habit of helplessness and acceptance? How do we see each moment as a potentially critical juncture for new possibilities, rather than part of a foreordained flow? How do we see ourselves as agents rather than victims of change, or even its passive beneficiaries? How do we learn to see with new eyes what is, what could be, and what must be? The gating factor here is not willpower; it is nonblindness. The obstacle is not just path-dependence but also path-*acceptance*.

When the 9/11 Commission wrote its final report and recommendations, it described a litany of failures: of planning, implementation, follow-through,

communication, coordination. But the most damning failure it enumerated was a failure of imagination. The government had failed to imagine that terrorists might strike at America in such a stunningly symbolic, asymmetrically powerful way. Perhaps an analyst here or a case officer there had conceived of the possibility that this could happen. But the government—the collective of analysts and officers and policymakers and citizens—had not conceived of it and consequently did not prepare for it. “Imagination,” the Commission observed drily, “is not usually a gift associated with bureaucracies.” And so its telling recommendation was that going forward, our intelligence agencies had to learn to “routinize imagination.”

Routinizing imagination is not the work only of heroes—the geniuses, the luminaries, the elect. The work belongs to every one of us. Nor can this work come merely in response to crisis. It must come every day. What’s most revelatory about the study of imagination is, indeed, the everydayness of it. Imagination can be embodied in its most developed forms by a great figure or in great history-bending acts. But we believe that enduring, systemic change comes when every one of us develops, in an abundant bloom of acts and choices, at work and home and play, our own mindfulness about being imaginative. We can all use imagination across every part of our lives—and we can all learn to do it better.

Albert Einstein conducted thought experiments that enabled him to make leaps that other scientists of his time—even great ones—could not. It wasn't that Einstein had lots more determination or computational brainpower than his near-contemporary Henri Poincaré, who came tantalizingly close to many of Einstein's most famous insights. The difference, according to biographer Walter Isaacson, was imagination: from the time Einstein was young, he practiced visualizing things in novel ways. What would it be like, he asked himself, if you could run alongside a wave of light? What if you were in an enclosed elevator accelerating up through space? By starting with such questions and playing with them, instead of accepting the "givens" of normal science, Einstein was able to take his already prodigious mind and open it even more. And thus was birthed his theory of relativity.

Any conceptual breakthrough requires imagination first. We don't have to be Einstein to see this—or to conduct thought experiments of our own, about whatever matters most to us.

We start by deciding to take note of our blindness. We proceed by inquiring about its origins. We grow by developing new ways to see and reroute our perceptual apparatus. Imagination can unfold in the conscious and deliberate and in the unconscious and intuitive. It unfolds in flights of fancy and in hands-on play. It can emerge from crisis or from calm. *Routinize* imagination?



We don't know whether it's possible to do that, at the CIA or anywhere. But the charge is inspiring. And it'd be a crime not to try.

What We Aim to Do Here

This short book has a simple purpose: to show you that it's possible to develop and cultivate imagination—at every concentric circle of human endeavor, from the personal to the global—and to show that we have no choice but to do so.



This is not a frivolous book. Some books on the topic of imagination or creativity try a little too hard to be creative. They sprinkle the text with loopy doodles, funny fonts, and random asides to show just how wacky this topic can be. In our view, such an approach can sometimes reinforce in the reader the misplaced belief that *I'm not one of those creative types*. It can marginalize imagination even as it tries to make it accessible.



At the same time, this is not a “heavy” book. Some books on the topic of imagination or creativity try a little too hard to be serious. They litter the text with scientific argot, data-filled graphs, and double-blind studies to show just how substantive and nonflimsy this topic can be. In our view, such an approach can reinforce in the



reader the reaction that *all this academic jargon dresses up the truth—either you got imagination or you don't (and I don't).*

We've read shelves of both types of books. What we're trying to do in these pages is offer another choice, an approach that neither places imagination on a pedestal nor trivializes it.

We believe that a developed imagination matters profoundly to the health and promise of our society. We've got an argument to make about that and some myths to bust. We also believe that imagination can be cultivated, and that everyone—*everyone*—can raise their level of imagination and readiness to apply it. Put those two beliefs together and you get a third: that it's time for our society to get going on an intentional, dedicated, and systematic effort to up our imagination quotient—the *real IQ*—at work, at home, in school, at play, and in our community life.

We come to our beliefs through experience and collaboration. Scott has for fourteen years led Lincoln Center Institute, the educational arm of the world's leading performing arts center. LCI has been unlocking the imagination of children and teachers for decades and, through its Imagination Awards for courageous public schools and through nationwide Imagination Conversations, it is, popularizing and democratizing the

idea. Eric, after serving as a speechwriter and then a senior policy adviser to President Clinton, has helped spark a national movement around mindful mentorship through his book *Guiding Lights*. The Guiding Lights Network convenes experiential conferences on the art of imaginative mentoring, bringing together leaders from business, education, politics, and other walks of life. We've cross-fertilized efforts for years. We believe in a pedagogy of possibility.

There are three parts to this book: the *premise*, the *practices*, and the *purposes*. This first part lays out our overarching argument and vision: what we mean by imagination and “imagination first”; the myths that we need to clear out of the way; why imagination matters so much; why we nevertheless resist it.

The second part is focused on what can be done in the face of that resistance. It lays out a set of twenty-eight-and-a-half practices, much like a field manual or a handbook. We culled this list from our two years of research on this project—countless sessions of watching, talking to, and playing with practitioners from all over the country and from all walks of life. And the third part distills themes from all these practices and then asks what we aim to *do* with all this imagination.

We like our list of twenty-eight-and-a-half practices. And maybe you'll like it so much that you'll conclude they

capture all there is to say about how leaders, parents, teachers, and managers can spark and stimulate the imaginative capacities of the other human beings in their lives.

Rather more likely, though, you'll find that our list is just grist—that it inspires you to append, amend, revise, and create. You'll have four or forty more ideas to add, and some to delete. That's why we've created a Web site—imaginationfirst.com—where you can describe your *own* practices and where you can add or revise ideas in an open-source spirit.

So consider this small volume the start of a conversation. And consider yourself now one of many coauthors of a never-ending book.