

The Power of Imagination

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According to the 9/11 Commission, a “failure of imagination “on the part of the intelligence community and our nations leadership was a contributing factor in the horrific September 11th Tragedy. If officials had let their imaginations roam, it's possible they could have anticipated what terrorists were capable of doing; then measures could have been taken which might have thwarted a terrorist attack.

This same conclusion is being applied to the attack on Pearl Harbor during World War II. The author of a new book on the subject details that American Political and military leaders exercised little or no imagination related to what the Japanese government might be planning. And the “FAILURE OF IMAGINATION” criticism is now being heard in the wake of the tragedies of Hurricane Katrina.

The opposite of a FAILURE OF IMAGINATION is an ABUNDANCE OF IMAGINATION. Albert Einstein once said “imagination is more important than knowledge”. We can see one example of this abundance in the success of business where the imagination of employee's results in new products and services that make life better!

What if we applied the FAILURE OF IMAGINATION and ABUNDANCE OF IMAGINATION concepts to disability issues? Let's get the bad news over with first.

During the past 35 years, our nation and our 50 states have dedicated more laws, programs, services and funds (billions and billions) for people with disabilities than at any other time in history, and we probably have more “disability stuff” than any other nation in the world. Early intervention services are intended to “maximize the potential for individuals with disabilities to live independently in society;” special education is supposed to educate children with disabilities so they can enter the workforce; vocational-rehabilitation and other employment services are –duh!– supposed to help people with disabilities achieve gainful employment. But after decades of “progress”, too many children with disabilities are in segregated special ed classrooms, the estimated (and shameful” 70-75 percent unemployment rate of people with disabilities has changed only a few percentage points, and children and adults with disabilities continue to be excluded from the mainstream of American society despite all the laws and programs to encourage inclusion.

We have the money (billions) and we have thousands of people to do the work (teachers, service providers, therapists, and professionals of all kinds). So what's the problem? A FAILURE OF IMAGINATION to see *the possibilities* for people with disabilities.

We're hypnotized by labels and what we think they mean (“deficits” and “problems”), while ignoring the strengths and abilities of those we have labelled.

We're seduced by the (false) promises of treatments, interventions, and cures, and pay little attention to what people with disabilities really need.

We react to IQ scores, standard deviations, and any "abnormalities" with more tests and evaluations, which so cloud our vision that we can no longer see that people with disabilities are more like people without disabilities than different. Our senses are dulled by rules, regulations, and red tape, so we robotically go through the motions.

These issues and many other sabotage our ability to imagine what's possible. And just as a failure of imagination contributed to the tragedies of 9/11, Pearl Harbor, and Katrina, our failure of imagination can lead to tragedies – the loss of hope, diminished opportunities; an uncertain future, and more- for people with disabilities.

Now for the good news. Great things are happening for some people with disabilities. Some boys and girls are successfully included in general ed classrooms and typical community activities. Some men and women are working in real jobs for real wages – some are self-employed – and living in their own homes! These "exceptions to the rule" are the result of abundance of imagination within people with disabilities, parents, teachers, service providers, and others who are making things happen regardless of the type or "severity" of disability.

Let's turn the "exception" into the "rule". We can begin by imagining the "worst-case" and the "best-case" scenarios, and letting those images drive our actions: doing what it takes to prevent the worst and ensure the best. And throughout this process, we need to continually ask, "What if..." for both the best- and worst-case scenarios.

When my son, Benjamin, was three, I met several adults with developmental disabilities in the Partners in Policy making leadership development programs (www.partnersinpolicymaking.com). A few were employed and living Real Lives; most were not – they were in congregate living settings and day programs. My husband and I wanted Benjamin to live Real Life, just like his sister. We imagined that outcome, then did what was needed to make it happen, while also doing everything possible to prevent our son from living a life of segregation, helplessness, and dependency. Along the way, experts told us we were "unrealistic". We turned away from those who had a failure of imagination and embraces those who imagined with us. Today, at age 18, Benjamin is enjoying his first year of college.

Maintaining an ABUNDANCE OF IMAGINATION can change people's lives – and it's fun! Once the imagination machine is turned on, *actions that cause change are automatic*. So begin: create pictures in your mind, write your ideas, draw pictures in a "beautiful future" scrapbook, talk with others, or use any mechanism to *imagine with abundance*! As you brainstorm, keep in mind the "TOOLS"

needed to ensure successful lives: assistive technology (AT) devices, supports, and accommodations. And remember: these are not the unique needs of individuals with disabilities – people *without* disabilities need AT of one kind or another, supports and accommodations every day!

Parents: imagine your child's future, in short- and long-term. Imagine your 3-year-old who's not talking; now listen to him say, "I love you, Mommy", with his communication device. What a sweet, precious sound! Imagine your 3-year-old child who's not walking; now see her rushing to hug you while driving her power chair. Imagine your 7-year-old child on a T-ball team, taking karate lessons, and playing with friends. Keep going up the age ladder and imagine. What will it take to make these things happen?

Think long-term now: imagine your child as a successful adult, employed, living in the home of his choice with whatever supports he needs. What experiences, opportunities, and TOOLS does he need *today* to grow into a successful young adult tomorrow?

Teachers and Parents: Imagine a child with a disability in a general ed classroom. *What great potential is in that child!* What TOOLS do we need to provide so her potential will be realized? How can we support her learning? Imagine the pride everyone – including the student- will feel when she demonstrated her success! Imagine what a great friend she'll be to others. Imagine how much others will learn *from her!* Now imagine her in college or entering the workforce. She can do it, if we imagine for her and do whatever it takes to make it happen. We're not only imagining, we're investing in her future.

Parents, Therapists, and Early Childhood Providers: Imagine a child with a disability participating in typical age-appropriate activities with children who don't have disabilities. *Are your attitudes and actions* making that possible? Does the child have the TOOLS to make it happen? Imagine the child helping around the house, spending an allowance, and engaging in other ordinary (and precious) childhood activities. *All children* need these typical opportunities and experiences!

Adult Service Providers: Imagine a person with a disability in his dream job. *You have asked what that is, haven't you?* What will it take to make it happen? Who else can you call on for help – like someone outside the system who has expertise in that field? Better yet, imagine helping a person with a disability *learn how to get his own job*, instead of you doing it for him! Imagine the power you're transferring, imagine the pride and excitement you'll both feel when he makes it on his own! Next, imagine a person with a disability in her own home or apartment. *You moved to your own place before you were ready, and you made it!* Imagine the same can be true for people with disabilities, with assistance from the natural supports in the community. Now imagine a person

with a disability as a contributing citizen. Everyone needs to be needed! Imagine him joining a service club or participating in other inclusive activities.

Think “what if...” not “what is”. Don't think, “yes, but-“. *That's not allowed when imagining! Be unrealistic, daring and wild-* and expect great outcomes! But don't expect perfection. In the river of life, the water is not always smooth, and it's wise to change course when the current is too rough!

This brief article has just scratched the surface of what can happen when we have an abundance of imagination. So much more is possible and so many lives can be changed in my own family's life. Imagining and achieving success – large or small - was energizing and affirming, which then led to more imagining and more great outcomes. And it's *contagious* – an ABUNDANCE OF IMAGINATION in one person can quickly spread to others! It however, you choose to not exercise your imagination, the least you can do it *get out of the way* of those who *are* creating positive change with their ABUNDANT IMAGINATIONS!



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