

Sermon: Imagination as a Spiritual Power by Janet Shortall, May 25, 2025

**Opening Words:** Adrienne Maree Brown's "Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds."

Adrienne was born in the United States and raised primarily in the American South. Her early experiences with racial justice, feminism, and community organizing deeply shape her worldview. Her concept of "emergent strategy" asks movements to mimic patterns found in nature—resilience, fractal change, cooperation—as blueprints for social transformation. With her sister Autumn she is a co-host of a podcast entitled: "How to Survive the End of the World:"

*"Imagination is the seed of everything we do. What we cannot imagine cannot come into being. We are in an imagination battle. The dominant narratives of our time are showing us death and endings—capitalism and white supremacy are offering us apocalypse as the only option. We have to imagine beyond those endings. We have to imagine while we build, while we fight, while we win. We have to create compelling visions of the world we want to live in, and be moved by them, even as we work and organize and resist. Imagination gives us permission to dream new futures, to shape them into being."*

## The Sermon

Imagination is a spiritual power—perhaps one of the most human things about us. Through it, we dream and create. We build bridges between the present moment and the world we long for. Imagination gives birth to poetry and protest. It is the inner landscape through which we interpret the outer world, the unseen force shaping not only our hopes but also, sometimes, our fears—and always our choices. But imagination is not always a liberating force. It is shaped—sometimes warped—by what we carry. When fear takes root, imagination can become its accomplice. Instead of creating, it catastrophizes. Instead of opening new paths, it retreats into avoidance or loops through worry.

I remember such a day this past March—March 27th, to be exact. It had already been a hard day, one of those days when the weight of the world feels just a bit heavier. On my lunch break, I read an article about Timothy Snyder, the historian of fascism, who had made the sobering decision to leave the United States. His reasoning—an urgent warning about rising authoritarianism—shook something loose in me. It wasn't just what he said—it was how he said it. The clarity. The urgency. The way he and his colleagues were no longer asking if it could happen here, but when. As I drove home that evening, fear overtook me. Not just for myself, but especially for my young adult children, far away. I imagined being unable to reach them. I spiraled into dread. My imagination had been hijacked.

This wasn't rational worry—it was something deeper. Something more primal. An

anxiety that had been simmering beneath the surface, suddenly rising. I felt my inner world closing in, bracing for an impact I couldn't name but felt was inevitable. That night, the understanding landed in me—not just in my thoughts, but in my body: this is what it means for imagination to be held hostage by fear.

Imagination doesn't arise in a vacuum. It's shaped by the terrain of our lives—both individual and collective. It's shaped by what we've experienced, what we've survived, what we've feared, and by how we've learned to protect ourselves.

Each of us has these invisible routes our minds take, especially when we are under stress or facing uncertainty. These are old patterns, etched deep within us. And here's the thing: most of those internal maps were drawn a long time ago. Often in childhood. They were shaped by what we feared, what we lacked, what we learned we had to do to feel safe.

For me, part of that story began with moving. As a child, I moved often—so often that I felt unrooted and vulnerable. Always the new kid. Always trying to catch up. Never quite sure where I belonged or who I could trust. Growing up with limited financial means only added to that sense of instability. That constant searching for safety left a deep imprint. It created internal narratives that still try to shape how I respond to fear or change.

So I want to invite you to turn inward for a moment.

As you hear my story, consider your own.

Think about the way your life has been shaped.

What messages do you carry about yourself—

messages you didn't consciously choose but somehow came to believe?

Maybe they were planted in childhood.

Or maybe they took root in moments of pain or confusion you never had the chance to name.

Notice what stirs.

This kind of noticing is sacred.

Because when we become aware of those old maps inside us—

those deeply worn patterns of thought and feeling—

something begins to shift.

Their grip can loosen.

We discover a pause—a space between what happens and how we respond.

And in that sacred space,

we begin to see the possibility of another way.

A way shaped not by fear or habit,

but by courage, by love,

by holy imagination.

For some of us, fear doesn't explode outward. It turns inward. We shrink into retreat.

Imagination becomes not a compass, but a shelter. And sometimes, we need that.

Escape can be a necessary survival tool. But when avoidance becomes the primary use

of our imagination, we lose touch with its deeper power. Instead of helping us envision new possibilities, it shelters us from truths we need to face.

Let's be clear: we are all being shaped right now—every day—by what we're absorbing. The headlines. The commentary. The chronic corruption and dysfunction. If we're not paying attention, this saturation begins to write its own script beneath the surface: that things are too broken to fix, that nothing we do will matter, that despair is the only reasonable response. And when that story settles in, resignation can start to feel like realism. It sounds like: "It's just how it is."

This week, in my own reflection, I became more aware that I've been keeping my fears at arm's length—not because I don't feel them, but because naming them felt like opening a door I wasn't sure I could close again. I thought that if I gave them voice, they might take over. That naming them would be surrender. But I've come to remember a deep spiritual truth: Naming our fears is not the same as surrendering to them.

When we speak our fears—not with panic, but with tenderness—when we pause long enough to notice the stories we've attached to them, we begin to reclaim our agency. Because fear, unexamined, tends to dictate. But fear, seen clearly, can begin to loosen. It's not the fears themselves that hold us captive.

It's the stories we tell ourselves about what those fears mean.

When we look directly at fear, we can ask:

☐ Is this story true?

☐ Who taught us to believe it?

☐ Does it still serve me/ us—or our community?

Because here's another truth: fear isolates. It urges us inward, to silence, to secrecy. It says: keep it to yourself.

But that's the lie fear tells. We were never meant to carry it alone.

This, I believe, is one reason why we come to church.

Why we seek spiritual community at all.

Because somewhere deep inside, we long for a space where our fears can be spoken and still held in love.

Where vulnerability is not a weakness,  
but a path to connection.

Where courage isn't solo heroism,  
but something we build together.

In community, we remember:

We are not the only ones who feel afraid.

We are not the only ones who doubt.

We are not the only ones struggling to hold hope.

And in that remembering, something begins to shift.

We move from isolation to companionship

From quiet despair to renewed courage.

When we name our fears together, and examine the stories beneath them, we're not just venting—we're opening space for real companionship. Because even as dread is contagious --so is hope.

A grounded hope can spread like light on glass—quiet, but radiant.

It reminds us of what is still possible.

Together, we help each other reflect inward—and also outward. Not just at the world as we wish it were, but at the world as it is.

Historian Timothy Snyder reminds us that democracies don't usually fall in a single moment. They erode slowly—through attacks on truth, the breakdown of trust, the loss of shared meaning. We are being called into a politics of imagination—one rooted in moral courage and collective resolve.

James Luther Adams, our Unitarian ancestor, lived through the rise of Nazism. He warned that liberal religion can drift into fear and helplessness. He taught that democracy doesn't sustain itself—it must be renewed, again and again, by people of conscience willing to let go of false peace and step into deeper truth. And that courage is alive right now.

**Indivisible** is organizing neighbors into civic networks—one district, one town hall, one conversation at a time. Born in response to political despair, **Indivisible** offers practical tools and moral clarity, equipping ordinary people. Every Thursday, **Indivisible** co-founders Ezra Levin and Leah Greenberg help wade through the week's news, answer citizen's questions, and provide timely calls to action.

Labor unions are rising again—with new energy, new coalitions, and renewed moral power. They are saying: our labor is not disposable. Our lives are not negotiable. With chants and picket signs and community support, they are reasserting a sacred truth: people matter more than profits.

And they are not just fighting for themselves. Labor unions are also standing on the front lines against political efforts to erode workers' rights—including those spearheaded by Donald Trump and his allies, who have long sought to weaken the National Labor Relations Board, dismantle collective bargaining power, and strip away labor protections. In response, unions are mobilizing with renewed urgency, forging strategic alliances with immigrant rights groups, climate activists, and faith leaders. They are defending not only wages and benefits but the very principle that workers deserve a voice in shaping the systems that govern their lives. Their resistance is a moral act, a testament to the enduring belief that democracy belongs not just in the ballot box, but on the shop floor and picket line alike.

Indigenous leaders are defending land and life—often at great personal risk. From Standing Rock to the Amazon, they resist environmental destruction and corporate

exploitation. But more than resistance, they offer ancestral wisdom and spiritual traditions that see land as sacred. Their courage calls us to reimagine our relationship with creation.

Marginalized communities—often bearing the deepest wounds of injustice—are leading with vision and love. Black-led movements for racial justice continue to ignite moral awakening.

Trans and queer organizers are creating models of mutual aid and radical inclusion. I loved learning about an invitation to participate in three local Gender Affirming closet free pop up community events/ inviting all of us to bring new, or gently used clothing, shoes, accessories (anything fabulous) to share. A beautiful program sponsored by two local therapist.

All of These communities, forged in struggle are showing us what beloved community can look like

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The Poor People's Campaign is marching again—echoing the unfinished dreams of Dr. King Jr.. As of May 2025, the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) is actively mobilizing across the United States to confront systemic poverty, racial injustice, and policy rollbacks under the Trump administration. Their efforts encompass grassroots organizing, public demonstrations, and strategic alliances aimed at resisting recent federal actions that threaten vulnerable communities.

I am so inspired by how many ordinary citizens are creating podcasts to educate, inspire and empower. Others using their creative energies in investing in public art installations, bringing resistance messages at rock concerts (thank you Bernie Sanders). These acts may seem small, but together, they form a powerful mosaic of resistance and renewal—a quiet revolution of imagination made real.

These movements teach us: transformation begins in small, deliberate acts. When we root ourselves in restorative stories of resistance—when we reflect, serve, protest—we together cultivate liberatory imagination: narratives of dignity, vision, and resilience. These practices can deepen our roots. So that when fear rises, We stay grounded.

We remember: we are part of something larger.  
And from that rooted place, we act—not from panic, but from purpose.  
Not alone, but together.  
Despair thrives when imagination withers.  
But when we reclaim imagination as sacred and purposeful,  
we unlock its power to animate hope and action.  
The stories of resistance—past and present—remind us:  
Another world is possible.

So, my friends:

Let us not waste our imagination on fear.

Or hand it over to wishful thinking.

Let it be our compass.

Let it be our courage—lifting our eyes from what is, to what might still be.

And when we falter—and we will—may we return to one another for compassionate listening, and encouragement.

May we continue to create a sanctuary of spirit:

Where fear is named but not obeyed.

And where imagination is free to do its sacred, world-healing work.