

What is it Good For?

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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When living in Toronto, my partner and I would take some walks around the neighbourhood, and one time we ran across an odd-looking storefront... we couldn't figure out what it was. The marquee above the doors read "Intergalactic Travel Authority". Huh?

It took us a while to get there at a time when they were open, and when we finally got in, we found a neat little café and boutique with odd space- and alien-themed merchandise. We got curious and asked what the place was all about.

As it turns out, the Intergalactic Travel Authority was just a front – the *real* business was in the backroom, which was a workshop space where a team of properly-vetted volunteers led story-telling and story-*making* workshops for children of various ages. This non-profit organization is called Story Planet. Part of their mission statement reads:

“We believe that empowering young people to share their stories, while listening to and respecting the voices of others, will help them be catalysts for compassion and change.”

Through creative writing workshops, they seek to inspire imagination in children, and develop critical communication skills.

This mission resonated with me, so I joined up as a volunteer, got screened, vetted, and trained, and joined a team in leading a story-telling and story-making workshop. I still have friends in that team, and some other time I might share some of those stories.

(As a footnote, I’ll say that The Intergalactic Travel Authority *storefront* is no longer there, but the Story Planet organization still thrives in Toronto, now hosted by a downtown library, and currently online.)

What I found at Story Planet was a deeper appreciation for how important it is to offer guidance to children in finding their voice, in expressing themselves truthfully *and* respectfully, and in working with each other, listening to each other, and figuring out creative solutions to collective challenges. One of these included the development of a story-making app – and it was quite an involved process.

As I worked with my teammates, it struck me that, in addition to having fun, we were also doing active work toward peace. It occurred to me that, often, when folks run out of the words to truthfully and respectfully express their needs, and when folks have problems listening to others as they express *their* needs – that’s when the punches start flying.

In his 1969 classic hit, singer Edwin Starr asks “War, [huh, yeah] what is it good for?”

His answer is very simple: “Absolutely nothing.”

Now some historians might object to that simple dismissal, pointing out that many of the landmarks of progress that we have today would not have come about without the catalyst of war – computers, rockets and spaceships, commercial air travel, progressive taxation, the Red Cross... technological and medical innovations that are too many to list, or that we might even be aware of. Things that often make our life easier or more enriching... things and processes that are often lifesaving.

We might counter that it wasn't war itself that prompted those innovations and life improvements, but the *challenges* that war posed. And we have plenty of challenges to go around as it is.

About a century before militaries in World War Two developed computers to help calculate missile trajectories, or to crack enemy codes, Ada Lovelace had already been figuring out how to make code for a theoretical analytical machine, and she is often considered the first computer programmer – in the middle of the 1800s – recognizing that these computing machines could have practical applications. And warfare applications were not high on her priority list.

Years before Germany started launching V-2 rockets toward the United Kingdom, Robert Goddard had already pioneered rocketry with an entirely different mindset. He had no intention of throwing his rockets at anyone or at any place. He simply thought they'd be good vehicles for going further up than people had gone before. And while his imagination had made significant progress for one person's lifework, the real barrier was when those around him lacked the imagination to collaborate in that goal.

As I remarked a couple months ago, pursuing the challenge of space travel and exploration – due to its sheer complexity – spurs plenty of opportunities to use our creativity to offer solutions to those challenges, which in turn have spin-off benefits beyond the space travel industry.

The catalyst is our creativity, and how we use it to address the challenges we face. And that creativity can only be channelled

constructively if we can communicate effectively and can identify the needs of our people on planet earth as those needs are expressed.

In considering the anniversary of D-day, I took an opportunity to chat with one of the veterans in our church – and we have a few.

He was in the military because it was what his government required him to do, and he fulfilled that duty, but it wouldn't have been his first choice in encountering the world. He remarked to me, “Jaw-jaw is better than war-war” – which is to say that, to move our jaw and talk things out, is better than other alternatives, like landing punches or launching missiles.

Rev. Robert Fulghum once suggested we make a “Crayola bomb”, which we could launch whenever there was a world crisis – it would spread deluxe Crayola boxes (the large sets of 64 with built-in sharpener). And then, people could use their imagination to come up with creative work that didn't involve violence. He admits this may sound absurd to some folks, but when he considers how much money governments set aside for weapons, he doesn't find that option any less absurd.

I certainly find a “Crayola bomb” less absurd than the alternatives. Perhaps the specifics of launching packs for crayons over the site of a global crisis might be less than effective... but something to the effect of reminding people of, and guiding them, into the power of their creativity and imagination may well lead to more inspiring outcomes than the harmful effects of brute force.

And, my friends, we don't need the crisis of war to put our creativity and imagination to good use – we have plenty of challenges without it. This past year or so, we have seen the collective creativity and imagination of countless scientists, medical professionals, and government agencies, build upon the work of previous generations to

reduce the harms of the pandemic, with – among other things – offering us a selection of effective vaccines in record time... never done before in under a year and surpassing even the most optimistic expectations. Challenges remain, including making their distribution more equitable for all of our sakes.

The challenges of the climate crisis have spurred the creativity and imagination of scientists, entrepreneurs, and (some) world leaders. Much progress *has* been made – the challenge remains for us... and so do our most valuable tools of creativity and imagination.

My friends, our church, like many communities of faith around the world, has faced its own set of challenges... at different times in our history, and most memorably over the past year, or so. We have met many of these challenges with our imagination and creativity – many remain. And, my friends, those invaluable tools of creativity and imagination also remain with us.

So may it be,
In Solidarity, in Love, and in Peace
Amen

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Opening Hymn #100 I've Got Peace Like a River

Words: vs. 1-3 Marvin V. Frey, 1918(?)–1992, © 1974 Marvin V. Frey,
vs. 4-6 Anonymous
Music: Marvin V. Frey, © 1974 Marvin V. Frey
WHITNEY 7.7.10.D.

Closing Hymn #159 This Is My Song

Words: Lloyd Stone, 1912- © 1934, 1962 Lorenz Publishing Co.
Music: Jean Sibelius, 1865-1957, arr. © 1933, renewed 1961 Presbyterian Board of Christian Education
FINLANDIA 11.10.11.10.11.10