

"Imagine, If You Will..."

A talk by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister

First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

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<https://www.youtube.com/fusmpls>

The reading was excerpts from ["We are falling on our face because we are jumping high,"](#) by Anand Giridharadas.

We woke up on a Wednesday morning in Amarillo, Texas. That may sound like the first line of a country song, but for my partner and me, it was just reality - Amarillo was a convenient stopping point on a long drive. Never having been there before, and thinking we might never get there again, we decided to seize the moment and go visit an iconic outdoor sculpture a few miles outside the city limits: Cadillac Ranch.

If you are not familiar, Cadillac Ranch is an art installation that consists of ten Cadillac sedans partly buried on a pancake-flat stretch of open land. First created in the 1970s, Cadillac Ranch has no visitors center; just some parking spots along a frontage road, and a narrow gate that lets human beings in but keeps any cattle from wandering out.



The Cadillacs are ever-changing in color. They're continuously repainted by visitors, who are invited to add graffiti, or messages, or their own artistic touches.

All this sounded good in my imagination - cars that look like they fell out of the sky in formation; an art installation like no other in the world; and a chance for audience involvement. But as strong winds propelled the two of us across the field and toward the Cadillacs, the reality turned out to be more complicated.

The cars were in somewhat rough shape after being out in the weather for decades. But humans clearly had made things worse by making off with various parts of the cars. And on what was once pristine grassland, there was little grass and so much trash. The barbed-wire along the road had caught countless plastic bags, which flapped in the breeze like a string of tattered pennants. Even more abundant were the empty spray-paint cans, strewn everywhere and tossed in haphazard piles that shifted with the wind. The plastic caps from the cans, in whole or in fragments, were embedded in the dry soil in every direction. And the ground itself had been spray-painted innumerable times in unrecognizable patterns.

I tried to appreciate the spirit of imagination that had brought Cadillac Ranch into being; I tried to let the art take my mind in new directions. But as I looked around, there was a word that I couldn't get out of my mind: Desecration. Desecration. Disregard for what once was beautiful land, disregard for the art, disregard for those with whom we share this world, and those who will come after.

As we trudged back to our car, we found ourselves leaning into the wind at an angle much like that of the Cadillacs. And as the gusts blew the noise from the interstate into our faces, I had to wonder: Is there anything more American than desecration? This scene from Amarillo is not an old road-trip memory from decades past; this story took place right here in 2021, our shaky new year. As we drove away from Cadillac Ranch that afternoon and headed deeper into the American West, my phone started giving us breaking news from back east. "Armed insurgents storm U.S. Capitol." "Senators taken to secure location." "Shots fired."

While we had been gazing at the Cadillacs, Washington, D.C., had plummeted into chaos - historic windows smashed, lawmakers in hiding, human bodies beaten and killed. My question was not even an hour old -- *Is there anything more American than desecration?* And this was an answer.

Our theme this month here at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis is imagination, and today I want to look at how imagination can have tremendous power, both as a force for good and a force for evil. Imagination can be essential to success, and when imagination fails us, the effects can be devastating. And imagination is everywhere right now, from those who embrace preposterous yet deadly conspiracy theories, to those of us who are trying to imagine the good that might come of these next four years. It's a good time to reflect on imagination.

Let's continue in the car for a bit, on the road trip that my partner and I took earlier this month. I should mention that we traveled with the pandemic foremost in mind - no airplanes or airports or indoor restaurants; no staying with relatives or having meals at the kitchen tables of friends. We wore our N95 masks into every grocery store and rest area. There were a couple of afternoons when we visited, distanced and outdoors, with a few relatives at a time. Otherwise, we kept up our pandemic regimen of isolation.

But you can't isolate from the news when your country's in turmoil.

As we continued our drive on the afternoon of January 6th, the Texas panhandle gave way to New Mexico's extinct volcanic cones and snowy mountain peaks. We found ourselves surrounded by beauty and grandeur that contrasted so starkly with the unfolding horror at the Capitol.

As someone who's been following authoritarianism's rise in the U.S. for the past five years, I was shocked by some of the brazenness of the attack, and by the poor security preparations. But overall I was not surprised by the actions of the mob.

The values underneath the insurrection have been in place for a long time - white supremacy, patriarchy, violence, desecration. Authoritarians love those things - they're useful for incitement. And chaos and suffering are tools that demagogues like to wield to help them stay in power.

As we listened to the news coverage, a famous quote from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. came into my mind. "A riot is the language of the unheard." I pondered this for a bit. The people in the mob at the Capitol had hardly been unheard, were hardly marginalized, yet there they were, by the thousands, in what was being described as a riot.

I soon came to realize that Dr. King's quote was not wrong; rather, what was wrong was the use of the word "riot" to describe the day's events. This was not a riot, not a spontaneous outpouring of anger in the streets. It was a highly coordinated terrorist attack, by armed men who hoped to carry out assassinations. And they were able to get as far as they did in part because some Capitol officials had a failure of imagination.

I'll admit, as a person who's imagined a number of terrifying scenarios over the past four years, I hadn't imagined that one. But I have gotten used to the idea that human cruelty shows up in ways most of us might not imagine.

The road trip that took us through Amarillo also had taken us through Tulsa, where my partner lived for a few years when he was a kid. Back at that time, no one in their family had ever heard about the [1921 Tulsa Race Massacre](#), in which a white mob killed as many as 300 African-American citizens and burned to the ground dozens of blocks of black-owned businesses and homes.

This massive massacre became a secret, one that was buried and rarely discussed for most of a century. Notably, when the massacre began to come out of the shadows

and grow in the public consciousness in the past couple of decades, it was first referred to as the Tulsa Race War or Race Riot, as though there may have been very fine people on both sides. In more recent years, it has been appropriately called a massacre.

I first learned about the massacre while I was in seminary, and it was something neither I nor my partner's family ever would have imagined. And after all that silence, Tulsa now has monuments and interpretive signs to bear witness and to tell the story to residents and visitors. The massacre is now an accepted part of Tulsa's history, and [the reckoning is ongoing](#).

The complete destruction of Tulsa's "Black Wall Street" by resentful whites is part of our long national tradition of pathological, often racialized greed. [Anand Giridharadas described this ethic in our reading](#): "if you're torn between doing what's good for money and what's good for people, always do what's good for money."

He was describing the prevalent politics of the last 40 years, but it's also the politics of the past four hundred years, and was on vivid and deadly display these past four years. We are all right now just emerging from the trauma of seeing what happens when our country is given over so completely to greed and a lust for power. The result is desecration and death on an epic scale.

We do need to talk about what happened these past four years, to accept the reality of all that took place, to not sweep it under the rug. The current calls for unity fairly raise the question, "Unity with whom? White supremacists?" As many voices have been saying these past few weeks, there can be [no healing without accountability](#), and there is much work to do.

At the same time, we can use this transition to reorient our imaginations. We might continue to be surprised by horrors of the past as they are revealed, but we need not spend energy trying to imagine them. When a hard new truth is uncovered, we can welcome it and be grateful for the knowledge, and begin the reckoning from there.

We might best use our imaginations to conceive of a more peaceful and life-sustaining present and future, and what it might take to get there. And our collective and individual imaginations might have some recovering to do. [As Michelle Goldberg wrote in the New York Times](#) in late October:

A perpetual state of emergency isn't healthy or sustainable. Living in Trump's panic-inducing eternal present is bad for art, but it's also bad for imagination more broadly, including the imagination needed to conceive a future in which Trumpism is unthinkable....

Every moment spent thinking about Trump is a moment that could have been spent contemplating, creating, or appreciating something else....

Trump has blocked out the sun. Only when he's gone will we see how much we've been missing.

This past Wednesday, a Wednesday very different from the one two weeks before, the sun came out, shining a bright light on what we've been missing:

*Being American is more than a pride we inherit.
It's the past we step into and how we repair it.*

Those were among the many frequently quoted lines from ["The Hill We Climb," the inauguration poem by Amanda Gorman](#), whose blossoming art blessed the occasion. She challenged each of us to be the light the country needs, and was a bright voice herself.

After watching her, I realized that all my imaginings about Inauguration Day had been about what could go wrong; I had not reoriented my imagination to conceive of how much might be beautiful.

Many of us may be understandably wary of being optimistic. Congregants I spoke with this past week had a range of feelings about the turn of events, from tremendous relief to a distrust that things are truly going to be better.

But I've decided that I'm going to dare to do some positive imagining. The earth's climate is in serious trouble, but our government is now acting in ways that will help. Migrant children will no longer have their lives jeopardized by the federal government to be used as political pawns. The pandemic, while still in its worst phases, is being addressed with science, and lives will be saved. And the new president named white supremacy as something that must be confronted and defeated.

This new administration is still made up of many privileged politicians who will sometimes need to be nudged, cajoled, or pressured to do the right thing. But my core humanist values around human dignity and care for the earth and for each other are more likely to be upheld by my country, lessening the fear and dissonance and helplessness and trauma.

We know there are still no miracles and there are no miracle workers. We know that all the factors that brought us to the January 6th “revolt against the future” are far from being resolved. And we know there are still tens of millions of people living in imaginary, death-dealing worlds of conspiracy theories. But we can choose to try to imagine better days ahead.

I want to share a few thoughts from Eleonore Wesserle, a Twin Cities activist and communications strategist. She talks about how the theft of imagination is part of an intentional strategy by those who benefit from the status quo - in order to keep things as they are, in order to keep people from hoping and dreaming and working against the systems that may hold us back in this life. Wesserle points out mere negation and critique are not enough to move the world forward. [She first shared these words just before the previous inauguration](#), and they are just as true and helpful today:

For my entire life, I have experienced individuals, organizations, movement moments, political leaders, academic thinkers, media outlets, even artists and visionaries, proclaim everything that we're against. I have been a part of this chorus. And this articulation is absolutely, inarguably, necessary. It has to happen. It's obligatory...

The people who currently dominate political and economic power have absolutely no trouble or hesitation articulating exactly the reality they're looking for. It's one where every single person is completely on their own, and if you have lots of money and power that means you're a great person and deserve more money and power, and if you don't have lots of money and power, that means you're shit and deserve nothing.

We can win only if we tell the story, out loud, again and again and again, of the world that we want to live in, the world that we're striving to create, of its sights and sounds and smells and feelings and experiences and relationships.

We can win only if we treat this world as a reality we're aiming for and a goal for us to orient toward, an actual destination that's possible for us to reach, and the

way we reach it is through all of the work that we're all doing, day in and day out.

We can win only if we can communicate what's vibrant and present and full in this reality that we're striving to create.

Wesserle's thoughts are echoed in those of Anand Giridharadas: "There is a different story to tell ... about something great we are trying to do. We will actually create a country that's better for every single person. But we have to be willing to tell that story forcefully."

So, as we move forward from this historic week, may the sacred spaces of our minds never again be desecrated by profane leadership. May we listen to every true story, and clearly share our own visions for the world we want. And may we fully re-energize the positive sides of our imaginations. As Amanda Gorman put it in her stunning poem, "Somehow we weathered and witnessed a nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished... We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover."

And you and I know that the work and the imagining are ours to do.