

Cultivating Imagination: Leading Towards a Just Future

Transcript for Episode 1

Practicing Courage in Leadership: Fostering an Embodied Imagination in Leadership with Vidya Shah and Jacqueline Lawrence

Stephen Hurley:

So today on the podcast, we are joined by three guests. Well, two guests and one co-conspirator, let's say. Vidya Shaw is assistant professor in the faculty of education at York University. Jacqueline Lawrence is the equity advisor for the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. And my co-conspirator today, Meaghan Dougherty is faculty in the Department of Child and Youth Care at Douglas College, and she's also project lead on this project, *Cultivating Imagination: Leading Toward a Just Future*. Welcome to all of you. I wondered if we could begin with Jacqueline and Vidya, and I'd love to know about your current role and in particular the leadership frame that you bring to that role. What's that all about? Jacqueline, let's begin with you.

Jacqueline Lawrence:

Oh, great. Thank you for having me in this conversation. So my role at the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board is that I'm the equity advisor, and what that entails is that I strategize with system leaders to identify and address systemic barriers, that we aim to foster a discrimination-free, accessible, equitable and inclusive learning and workplace environment. I also listen to the space and move forward in terms of, how do I design and facilitate experiential learning and or coaching sessions to transform mindsets and organizational culture? And part of that is also including what we call our roadmap here. So by support, having a team that we work together to develop our roadmap, to identify those critical priorities that will support us in fulfilling these particular objectives, to identify and address systemic barriers in our system.

Stephen Hurley:

So when you think about leadership, Jacqueline, and you are in a position where you're leading alongside of other leaders, what sort of priorities do you see as being important in that role?

Jacqueline Lawrence:

Well, I think, number one, I think one of the things I love about leadership is that it's about definitely having a sense of where the organization, the culture, the climate, the people are asking you to move forward to, it's never about standing still. So there's this constant sense of how do we look forward to be able to see where we are being called to go and in the process, listening for what's right now in the space, to be able to make that happen in terms of working collaboratively with colleagues and the persons that we're serving, being able to build the necessary relationships internally and externally. Because one of the things I think that's a myth is that leadership, when you take it on, is a one person job. That's definitely not the case. It is very much a collaborative space that one is entering into. And I think the other thing for me, with respect to leadership that's so fundamental is I think that leadership is a skill set that we have often relegated to a position. Whereas across the district, for myself, as I work with leaders, I

work with leaders at very different levels in the organization, at all levels in the organization. And I think that's something that's fundamental.

There's a distinction for me between leadership and its accountabilities and the priorities that you're responsible for. But I think leadership is a critical and essential skill that cannot be relegated only to one position. So that sense of vision, that sense of being in relationship with whom you're serving, as well as being in relationship, who can also support you to serve those persons, because when you look at, say, for example, community partners, we don't have the full capacity within our organization to serve all our students, our 72,000 plus students. We just don't have that. But we do have communities who understand specific needs and specific resources that will be able to enhance the services that we're providing. And so that sense of having a vision and relation and the critical skill sets so that you can make ethical and culturally relevant and responsive decisions I think are quite significant and important.

Stephen Hurley:

You've given us a lot to draw on there. And I know, Vidya, you want to pick up on some of Jacqueline's points, but I'm going to ask you to set the context for Vidya Shah. Tell us about your current role and how you see your leadership in that role.

Vidya Shah:

Sure. Thank you so much, Stephen. And thank you, Meaghan, for the invitation to be here. I'm really excited to be in conversation with Jacqueline Lawrence. I was thinking about this question, and I think part of the way that I'm approaching it is that I think of leadership as both formal and informal. And so in my formal role, I'm an associate professor in the faculty of education at York University, and my area of study is anti-racist and decolonial approaches to leadership. And so I think a lot about what it means for leaders to engage in ways that are aware of the systems that we are living in, that we are operating in, and to develop the skill set, as Jacqueline was sharing, to really be able to dismantle some of the harmful structures that are in place and to dismantle some of the mindsets and the orientations that we've been socialized into as leaders because of these various systems of oppression. And so for me, I see leadership as really existing in schools and school districts, of course, in classrooms, but also in communities, also in homes, also among young people, also what we can learn from nature and the more-than-human world as leaders.

And so I think as well about my role as a facilitator with the Center for Courage and Renewal. This is the work of Parker, Palmer and circles of trust and the importance of leadership as facilitation and facilitation of inward journeys for people to be able to and myself to be able to explore what's coming up for us, what's present, and what can we learn from that. But I also think about leadership informally, and I think about mentoring relationships, often informal advice that I give and get, learning from ideas. I often see ideas as leaders and so really broadening the sense of what is leadership and what does it mean to be a leader. And I love Jacqueline's invitation to think about leadership beyond a singular person. And in the unleading podcast that I curate, one of the questions we ask is how do we undo and unlearn practices that promote hierarchy, individualism, compliance, power over silence?

Stephen Hurley:

One of the things we want to do in this podcast is make that connection between leadership and imagination. It's difficult to see imagination. We can see the results of imagination and the fruits of imagination. But let's talk directly about imagination. Vidya, when you think of imagination and when you try to describe imagination to someone else, what does that look like? What does that sound like?

Vidya Shah:

I think this is such a great question, and I was sharing with folks earlier that these questions bring me a lot of happiness and joy just to think about. And one of the things I was thinking about with this question in particular is that my answers are informed by who I am and how I live in the world. So being raised in a Hindu and Jain household, practicing various Buddhist philosophies and forms of meditation, thinking about myself as a South Asian cisgender straight woman living in Toronto, as what I sort of refer to as a colonized settler. In many ways, all of these things have influenced how I think about imagination. And so for me, imagination is something that's deeply embodied. It is something that speaks to a kind of... I am most imaginative when there's a deep alignment between what my heart or soul or inner life wants to speak out into the world, what I actually speak out or do in the world, and what I'm thinking about. So when there's the greatest alignment between those three things for myself, I feel the greatest possibility of imagination in my body.

Imagination, to me, is also about freedom. And it's about freedom because it invites me to think about who I am and who I can be, and who we are and who we can be, when we acknowledge the ways in which various systems of oppression limit our imagination, limit who we think we can be. So it's a freedom building experiment to be in a place of imagination. And I'll also say that for me, spending time with imagination, being in imagination, being surrounded in communities that are co-facilitating imaginative spaces, invites a kind of self trust. It invites me to believe in what is possible. Because, again, there's this growing alignment between what is happening internally and what is being expressed externally. And so sometimes the imagination takes on intentional forms, whether it's visualization or writing. And sometimes it just sort of happens through deep insight or inspiration, when I'm kind of in the flow. And that's where that embodiment piece really comes to play.

Stephen Hurley:

Jacqueline, some of that may resonate with you, but you probably have your own conception of imagination.

Jacqueline Lawrence:

Absolutely. I'll pick up on the imagination from a space of possibilities, because I do believe that imagination, for me, is the world of possibilities. If you can feel it, hear it, see it in the mind, it is possible to bring it to life. And I think that's what imagination does. It gives you pictures, it gives you ideas, it gives you a sense of place to play. And I think playing is such a critical part of this. Imagination, for me, is also the seed of our relationships, our dreams, our visions, for our lives,

for our communities, for the world. Imagination, for me, is a seed of creativity, as Vidya was talking about.

But I think sometimes when we talk about creativity, we tend to lump it only within the arts. When I think of certain careers, for example, like the medical field, a surgeon has creative elements in terms of, yes, there are some grounding in terms of how they perform a procedure, but there's also this imagination in terms of how do they navigate that space as well. Imagination, again, is also that seat of innovation. How do you take something that you know and discover it newly? And perhaps more important for me, imagination is access to the soul. I'm often intrigued by how we can have persons who do not speak the same language, do not come from the same spaces, but there's something that can connect them in terms of being able to feel something together, being able to experience something together, and that is very much drawn by imagination and that capacity to discover something within ourselves and connect within ourselves. I do believe that imagination is very much innate, and I think it also needs to be cultivated and nurtured such that we can reframe and reset and reimagine and rediscover ourselves in so many different ways, including how we bring those particular skills into our work when we're acting as leaders. And I do believe also that when we're looking at complexities of life, imagination is our critical navigation tool. I love a quote from Einstein who spoke about imagination is really more important than knowledge because knowledge is limited and imagination encircles the world. And that, for me, is a very powerful way of holding imagination.

Stephen Hurley:

Jacqueline, is imagination always and only future oriented?

Jacqueline Lawrence:

No, absolutely not. I think it can very much be about the present because I think imagination is also quite significant in terms of how we problem solve in the moment, in the here. And all those facets that Vidya shared about who she is. Those are all things that we can tap into to be able to support us, to not only navigate. I want to even push it beyond that, to say how we explore and how we discover new things that are in the now and how we may even appreciate things that are in the now. So there's something for me that's there around the sense of imagination as this curiosity compass that supports us to be very present to now, but yet can also give us that forward looking space, and yet at the same time pulling from things in the past that gives us some... I love the Sankofa burden in African cosmology, which speaks of taking the seeds of the past while keeping your feet forward so that you can be able to be present. And I just love that analogy of that. And that, for me, is a beautiful way to hold imagination.

Stephen Hurley:

So, Jacqueline, the subtitle of this project leading toward a just future leads us into a conversation about maybe some of the challenges that we face in today's world and how cultivating imagination can help us attend to those. In your particular context, in your learning community, what are some of those primary problems, challenges, things that need to be addressed?

Jacqueline Lawrence:

I think the learning environment is really the most electrifying area to cultivate imagination. I do think that's, however, stalled in many occasions when we get lost in boxing people into thinking there's only one way of being, or there's only one way to answer, or there's only one way to solve a problem. And I think that when I talked earlier about one of the things I do is work with, particularly our management teams, to be able to listen for what is at the table, to then be able to tap into themselves, to be able to think outside the box, or to be able to explore what the box looks like, that sense of curiosity, that sense of exploration, that sense of being able to see things newly is so significant in terms of how we can move forward, in being able to address many of the things that are showing up within our spaces. Because one of the things I think that particularly from a leadership capacity, there are different ways to lead. There are different types of leadership. And again, it comes back to: how do we work together to be able to do that by bringing our best selves forward and bringing our best ideas forward? So I think the learning organizations, and that's part of conditioning. I understand there's some context to all of that in terms of historical pointers that have led for the development of the systems and structures in terms of how we think and how we move. But I think that's where Vidya's point about how do we deconstruct this, how do we decolonize those spaces and systems and structures that have shaped the thinking and shaped particular ways of thinking and being that proves to be challenging when we're addressing specific issues? So let me give you one critical example. When we have a particular way of thinking around, say, what we construct in terms of what is good behavior, bad behavior, et cetera, in our studies that we have found in our district, we found, for example, that 90% of our suspensions are discretionary. That is significant in terms of when we start peeling back, in terms of what is the anchor that's being used to address or identify behavior that seem to be worthy of suspensions, et cetera. So imagination is really that piece to how do we self excavate, how do we really inquire into what is going on and what is being done, and how do we support our system leaders to be able to bring the full breadth of the knowledge of who they're working with, in terms of recognizing potential biases that may be there so that they can then be able to fully serve the full diversity of students that they're serving.

Stephen Hurley:

This brings us way beyond me as a grade three student, staring out the large windows of my grade three classroom and calling that imagination. This is something much richer, much more robust, and I appreciate that example. Vidya, I wanted to ask you about some of the challenges in your learning community, and if we were able to get inside the imagination of Vidya Shah, what would we see working on those problems?

Vidya Shah:

I think one of the things that various systems of repression have done, maybe the most brutal thing, is that it cuts so many people off from their access to self actualization, their access to creativity, their access to imagination, their access to self actualization. And so I think, just for a starting point with this question, is that we don't all have access to our imaginations in the same way. And that is very sad. I hold a lot of grief around how we move in the world. Given these

different levels of access to what should be and can be a right. I feel like our imagination is a right that we all have. I also think about in these times, and I've been saying that since long before 2020, but especially since 2020, these times that feel like they are full of despair and full of grief, that they are extremely polarized, that they are filled with tension and heartache and grief of all sorts. It's hard sometimes to move into a place of imagination when so many people are dealing with the day to day realities of trying to just stay afloat, trying to support themselves and their loved ones, to take their responsibilities seriously. In this time, it feels like imagination is so far away at times. And sometimes in these places of despair, we also have so little access to joy, to pleasure, to play, that Jacqueline mentioned earlier, to rest, to humor. And these, to me, are all conditions that give rise to the possibility for imagination in ourselves. So I think, in my mind, one of the things that I try to do is think about how to hold my despair and my grief at the state of the world with a little bit of distance, and how to intentionally center joy and pleasure and play and rest and humor into my world, and not in a way that wants to bypass the very real material consequences of what is happening in our world. Because I don't think that that's actually imagination. I think that's just bypassing, it's escapism. But I also hold that intention with, again, staying somewhat detached from the level of despair of the current moment.

Because when I'm only in that place, it's really hard to imagine otherwise. It's really hard to access the parts of myself that can. That can see different futures, but also different presents. And so, for me, imagination, that building the muscle of imagination is one about being comfortable being in paradox, being comfortable, and being in tension. And the more that I feel that I can sustain tension in my body, in my mind, the more that I feel that I can cultivate tension in communities that I am part of. I feel like the greater access we have to a kind of imagination that is not separate from or devoid from the material realities of our world, but also aren't so attached to them that that's all that we can see.

Stephen Hurley:

I'm going to push you for an example. On the outside, if I were with you on a team working through some of the challenges or problems that I know you deal with. Can you give an example of maybe where I would have seen your imagination at work?

Vidya Shah:

When I work with various educational leaders or senior leaders in school districts, one of the ways in which I often promote a kind of learning is, again, back to this very sort of embodied, self reflective way of thinking about who we are as leaders. Much of what I read and even much of what I've written about has been these academic journals that say, here's what it means to be a leader that is committed to antiracism or anti-oppression or anticolonialism. Here's a list of skills and competencies. I mean, I've written these articles. I've written these articles, but what I find is that there's the cognitive ability to understand that and take that in, and then there's the emotional, physical capacity to actually live in and through those capacities. And so what I find is when the learning conditions for leaders move beyond the cognitive and center what's happening in our internal spaces, center the fears that are coming up, that center our desires for innocence and our desire for comfort and safety. And when we can attend to that part of ourself

as full human beings, what becomes possible in enacting various forms of leadership that our mind tells us is important is that our body follows, or sometimes, oftentimes, our body leads. And that kind of possibility is not something that you can teach people. No article or reading will teach somebody the possibility of insight, the possibility of alignment and self awareness that comes from deep within. And so, to me, one of the most important ways to cultivate that kind of imagination is to invite embodied experiences of learning alongside cognitive ones.

Stephen Hurley:

Okay, so much more to explore there. I wanted to bring Meaghan into the conversation as our expert on some of the tools that we can bring into this particular discussion around cultivating imagination. Meaghan, I'm going to turn the microphone over to you. You've been listening intently. I know your insights and maybe bringing us forward into those cognitive tools.

Meaghan Dougherty:

Sure. Thank you so much. I have been listening intently and writing feverishly as well. There's just so much richness in what both Vidya and Jacqueline are sharing, and I really appreciate all of your answers, so thank you so much. I wanted to pick up on Vidya's idea about something that really kind of resonated for me when you said the body follows or the body leads in some cases. And I'm seeing some connections between Jacqueline's ideas around imagination being this access to the soul or our curiosity compass and this critical navigation tool. And Vidya talking a bit about this embodied experience and the alignment between who we are in our heart and our soul and what we're doing and thinking and saying. So I'm curious from both of you, how do we, as potential leaders in educational or other settings, how do we cultivate kind of that embodied sense of imagination within ourselves with the hope of promoting change or promoting the development of imagination in others? How do we kind of tap into that embodied experience? Jacqueline, did you want to start?

Jacqueline Lawrence:

This is what I call the juicy part of the work, because I think when you create an environment where you can develop a trusting relationship with participants in a space, you get to watch them bump up against... you get to watch them dance with their thoughts, their ideas, and to do some real self excavation work, which is not easy work because you're really bumping up against conditioning and then folks really getting into questioning. I thought I had this whole package of who I am, and then discovering that maybe there are some missing parts or missing links that I didn't know. And so one of the tools I definitely use is conversation. One of my favorite quotes is that transformation occurs in conversations. And to really facilitate conversations that can support persons to move within the different spaces that they occupy, move within different ways of being. And so they're listening to what they're listening to. They're listening to what they're listening for. It can bring up some fascinating things that they may have lost access to and or that they may have never had access to. And so I think that conversation is a really powerful one. When it comes to that whole space, we can take the conversation a little bit deeper. So that self excavation piece is one aspect of it. But then when we get into kind of the decolonization of our curriculum or environments, we can also get into harder conversations, which are really looking at the inequities and video reference 2020. The world

before 2020 and the world after 2021. Of the things that I called one of the gifts of COVID was that all the inequities, financial, judicial, educational, health, every single inequities on the table now.

And so it's a real invitation, I believe, in terms of how we can even start listening for how to navigate these spaces and to listen for what systems and structures and ways of being that are being called for so that we can move together as human beings, or to even recognize the access, opportunities or outcomes that have impacted specifically our students and staff within the learning environment. One of the tools I love using is really awakening folks to the systems that they're operating in, because I think sometimes what happens is we normalize things without understanding what's natural or what's neutral in many ways. And so this sense of getting to see what's natural in a natural element, in a natural way, gives a very different conversation about what we've been normalized to accept, what we've been normalized to believe, what we've normalized to accept as the status quo. And so by being able to listen for the systems and structures that are there, we're able to support persons, to apply an equity lens to systems in a systems-thinking format that enables us to, again, do some self excavation, but also have some critical conversations, but then kind of work through, to get through, to then be able to see what's the vision for themselves as a team, what's the vision for themselves as a manager, as a leader within the space, or for a particular program that they're developing or designing. And so by being able to apply this kind of systems thinking process, it gives us some cognitive spaces to look at in terms of how do we identify trends and patterns? And then that also gives us a sense as leaders. Are we reacting to something or are we responding to something? And when we get to that systems level, we really get to dissect the policies, the procedures, the power dynamics, the purposes, the behaviors that may have some potential impact on such things as safety, sense of belonging, attendance or engagement within a space. And all of those things are fundamental to what Vidya was talking about, in terms of how do we create that emotional space, that spiritual space, in a sense, to be able to also give access or room to let the imagination play.

Meaghan Dougherty:

Lovely. Thank you. I really like this idea of excavation, digging it up, you mentioned, like self excavation, and we're really pulling on this idea of imagination being rooted and grounded and requiring nutrients, and cultivating these ideas and kind of reaping and sowing these environmental contexts that we're looking at. So I like that idea of not only excavating kind of our assumptions and take it for granted, normalized processes within ourselves and in conversation with others, but also really deconstructing those inequitable systems and bumping up against kind of what's not working for different people, and why. Vidya, did you want to add on to that in relation to maybe how we can kind of use tools to help us cultivate that sense of embodied imagination.

Vidya Shah:

Sure. I'll first just say that I love everything that Jacqueline says in general, but the last piece that she shared, I was just nodding, and you can't see me because we're on a podcast, but nodding profusely. So thank you, Jacqueline, for sharing all of that. And this invitation to

question what we have taken for granted as normal and natural is such an important part of how I see the importance of fostering imagination. We actually can't be imaginative in spaces where what we have normalized and naturalized is the opposite of that. And until we're aware of the ways in which the logics of these systems, the calculus of these systems, the semantics of these systems, operate in and through us and in and through our ideas, we can't actually create the space to imagine. Now, one of the things I think about in this work as well is, and Jacqueline shared this, too, is that imagination is actually a relational concept. It can be an individual concept, but we co-imagine. You know, I'm in conversation with all of you right now, and imagining differently because of the relation, because we co-constitute each other, and therefore our imaginations are co-constituted. And I think about this, even one of the things that I think is so important, that's linked to this idea of also challenging what's normal and natural and status quo, is how our sense of selves are dependent on how we see other people. And so if I want to determine that I'm innocent and I'm pure and I'm good and I'm benevolent, there must be somebody who is guilty and evil and impure and not generous or not benevolent. In order for me to constitute myself in this way, if I want to see myself as a civilized person, as a normal person, there must be an uncivilized other that I'm imagining. There must be an abnormal other that I'm imagining. And I think one of the things that imagination does is that as much as it invites us to imagine beautiful possibilities of our presents and our futures, it also, if not attended to, can invite us to imagine the worst of others, to construct the worst of others, because of our need to see ourselves in a particular way. And that's something that I think when we think about imagination, it's often hard to sit with, because it's often seen as this really, again, positive, outward facing, forward facing construct without attention to the ways in which we are imagining all the time. And often those imaginations are really cruel and harmful to others and to ourselves. And so, for me, embodiment of this means, in a way, who am I in relation to others? How have I constructed myself in relation to others?

Meaghan Dougherty:

I love that you bring up, Vidya, the idea that imagination in itself isn't a benevolent concept or isn't necessarily an inherently positive thing, but that imagination can lead both to positive possibility and also create inequity or reproduce inequity in certain ways. One thing that keeps coming up for me, listening to both of you, is that this embodied experience of imagining things in a new way and disrupting existing systems, this is not comfortable work. This is hard work. Vidya was talking about the paradox of living in this place of tension, and it kind of reminds me of the concept of the tempered radicals that you bring into some of your work as well, like that place of tension being within, but also working against at the same time. And Jacqueline mentioned bumping up against these kind of commonly held ideas or things that have been normalized for people. So this seems to be like a real place of almost like it has the potential for explosion. There's a lot of tension, I think, embedded in this imaginative work in leadership. And as we kind of push things forward. Do you have any comments about the challenges or the... I guess I want to say discomfort in relation to holding that tension? Jacqueline.

Jacqueline Lawrence:

Oh, you've just hit on, like, talk about another juicy spot. Sitting in the discomfort, I think, is one of the best ways to transformation. It is the gateway to transformation. We bump up against it

because I think part of the conditioning that we have been embroiled in is this notion that change is not constant, but change is actually constant. And so in this movement that we go through, the invitation for imagination is to support us to move from our comfort zone or move through our comfort zone to our fear zone. And that fear zone is where we tend to bump up against our thoughts, our beliefs, our experiences, all of those things. And if we stay there, however, we lose the opportunity to go into the learning zone, then the growth zone, and then the transformation zone. And I think one of the things that imagination, for me, is it gets us to that existential question, those two powerful words. How do I answer this question? Who am I? And that I am whatever follows I am. As we go through that journey, that change journey, that change dynamics and to be able to explore, bring the self excavation and bring the skill sets that we're discovering, bring the ways that we are discovering ourselves newly. It's all being driven by the imagination for me. And so I think that's one of the things that I get really excited about in terms of... And again, it's a cultural thing where we don't tend to like discomfort. We want to have things manicured and perfect in many ways. And I think one of the things that the imagination, I think, is when I said earlier, it's the seed of the soul for me, because I think that's where we truly expand. And I really do come from a space that if we are not imagining, there's a particular type of death that's occurring for us. And it robs us of gifting what we're come here to deliver to this world.

Meaghan Dougherty:

Vidya, do you want to chat a bit about that idea of tension and sitting in the discomfort?

Vidya Shah:

Sure, and I just want to say I love this idea that there are parts of us that are dying, as Jacqueline was saying, because we are not allowed to, or allowing ourselves to imagine. And I think that's such an important point to hold up. What is the cost of not imagining, or one of the many costs I should know. I think about this idea of challenges to employing imagination in leadership also as Jacqueline was sharing, as opportunities. And so when we think about one of the challenges being that it's really scary sometimes to imagine otherwise. And it's scary because when we imagine otherwise— and Parker Palmer speaks to this in his work with the Center for Courage and Renewal, the concept of the tragic gap— when we imagine otherwise and we imagine possibilities that can exist, and maybe we've experienced those possibilities as well. And then we look at where we currently are, as individuals, as communities, as a world, the disconnect between where we are and where we could be is what Parker Palmer refers to as the tragic gap. And I think about this concept, I think about how hard it is sometimes for people to be able to imagine. It's a painful journey when there's a part of you that isn't sure if that imagining will lead to something different, if that imagining will only increase that gap. And yet, at the same time, as Jacqueline was sharing, I think that being in that gap, being in that tension, being in paradox, is really the birthplace of transformation. And so it's developing the capacity to be in this fear, to be in grief, to be in discomfort, to be in what is deemed, quote unquote, negative emotions, emotions that we try really hard to run away from, to sweep under the rug, to avoid in so many different ways, the more that we can develop our capacity to be with those emotions, to invite them to move us in different ways. I think those seeming challenges become fundamental opportunities for different ways of being and living and loving and learning in this

world. And so I would just share here that all of these seeming challenges, whether it be the systems of oppression that cause us to not be able to imagine, also become birthplaces of some of the most imaginative possibilities for living differently. The fear of what might be at some point, and we're not yet there as a society. That grief also becomes the birthplace of something truly beautiful. And a lot of this speaks to another challenge is that folks are often scared to know themselves. They're scared to engage in a deep kind of self awareness, a deep intimacy with the self, because they don't know what's going to come up. They don't know what fears and desires and fantasies and hopes are going to emerge in that space. And yet it is from that place that such fundamental change is possible.

Stephen Hurley:

And in the final reel, as we close this conversation off, I wanted to move to the final part, the object of this project. Leading toward what? Leading toward a just future. And I wanted to talk, or have you talk about justice in terms of social and ecological justice. And how cultivating imagination, growing imagination, could support a more ecologically and socially just future. Jacqueline, I wondered if we could begin with you. What does that mean to you? Social and ecological justice.

Jacqueline Lawrence:

You know, I'm often intrigued by the concept of ecology because there's a system within ecology in terms of nature. But sometimes organizations are referred to as also the ecology of the organization, the environmental spaces. And the crux of this, for me, in terms of this work around leadership and looking at social and ecological justice, is really how do you create spaces for the brilliance and the potential and the possibility of each person to bloom where they're planted? And again, as I said earlier, how do you create those spaces where the resources are distributed in such a way that we are identifying the needs and addressing the needs, as opposed to limiting those opportunities, limiting access, limiting opportunities. And building a narrative and staying true to a narrative in terms of what the outcomes can be for a person or a group, or a community, or a region or a space. That is a false narrative. And so I think the invitation is really about how do we truly humanize the process, and how do we truly see ourselves in each other, and how do we truly create environments where we can really honor the dignity and respect of each person, each being. Because some cultures see the natural environment as well as a living, breathing entity within an ecological framework. So I think there's something there to be spoken about, in terms of how we distribute resources, how we tap into being present to how we treat each other, how we engage with each other, how we're in relationship with each other. And how we're able to navigate this journey called life together in this moment in time. And then what do we leave as legacy for future generations to build on?

Stephen Hurley:

So all of that, Jacqueline, is an act of deep imagination, is it?

Jacqueline Lawrence:

Absolutely. Absolutely. It is absolutely built on that. And so that collective consciousness. And so, for me, it's how do we support persons to wake up to their own potential and possibility. Such that they can contribute to the evolution and the unfolding? I wouldn't say evolution, but the unfolding of what is possible. The world is waiting for that.

Stephen Hurley:

That's where you began this conversation. And I love full circles. Speaking of full circles, Vidya Shah, your take on social and ecological justice and how your conception of imagination can help us explore that a little more.

Vidya Shah:

Yeah, yeah. I love this question, and I really agree with Jacqueline's take on the word ecological. It's a rhizomatic notion, deeply rooted, deeply rooted in so many different places. And I think that, to me, various justices are really about a radical interconnection between humans. Between humans and the more than human world. All our relations, like this concept of all our relations and ubuntu and interbeing and various knowledge systems know this concept in different ways. That we are literally extensions of each other. And so I think about the role of imagination here being one that invites us into— it allows for the conditions for us to live into our most grounded, our most joyful, our most creative, our most free, our most expansive selves. That, to me, is what imagination— the possibility of imagination. And that means that we are decentering any one way of knowing, any one way of being, any one way of leading, of learning, any one species. I remember during COVID reading a number of pieces that talk... there's lots of people speaking to what Covid has done to us. But what if Covid was its own entity speaking? What if we were to imagine what Covid had to say to us about the state of the world, about the way that we were living, about the kind of shifts that were needed? What if? And I think, as well about this idea that as we see things as deeply interconnected, we see systems of oppression as deeply interconnected, and we also see possibilities for liberation as deeply connected. In the words of Leela Watson and others who talk about the fact that we are bound up in each other's liberation, that we cannot do this work of liberation as separate individuals, as disconnected individuals, as disconnected to the various parts of ourselves. This work is spiritual. This work is emotional. This work is about challenging, fighting, loving. And in many ways, I see imagination as a privilege. It's a privilege to be able to access imagination, but it's also a right. I see imagination as a discipline. Marianne Kabba talks about hope as a discipline, and I see imagination as a discipline, something that we need to practice, that we need to grow. I see it as a joy, something that can actually help close that tragic gap that I was talking about earlier, the gap between where we are and where we know we can be. And I see it as a struggle, and it's a struggle that is worth fighting for. It's a struggle that's worth risking for, and it's definitely a struggle that's worth loving for.

Stephen Hurley:

Well, it's hard to imagine a better closing statement than. But I'm going to bring in Megan and ask you, Megan, what have you heard in this almost hour long conversation that is capturing your imagination as we move forward?

Meaghan Dougherty:

Oh, my gosh, so much. I'm just going to be going back over my notes again and again, and I like to star things or underline things that are important so they stand out when I go back over my notes. Unfortunately, now everything is underlined and starred and circled. So I have a lot to process moving away from this. But I love what Vidya is saying about this kind of more-than-human approach to understanding our relationality and how responsible we are to one another or how we need to act in ways that are responsive to one another. And it reminds me of Karen Barrad's work and how she talks about this practice of justice being an ongoing practice, and it's continually coming about with each new interaction that we have, so that each moment is a new moment of connection. And like Vidya is saying, possibility and despair and joy and embodiment. So it's just a reminder, I think, for me that there's so much work to be done and it's uncomfortable, very challenging work, and it's so hopeful. So I see hope having a kind of agential force in that overall interaction as well. And I'm just so grateful to both of you. For sharing all of your amazing insights and ideas, and I really feel very energized. And I just find the way that you think with these concepts is so generative for me. So I really appreciate all that you've offered to us today. Thank you so much.

Stephen Hurley:

Yes, Echo, my thanks. Vidya Shah, Jacqueline Lawrence and Meaghan Dougherty. Until next time.