

# Critical Imagining

041222

Besides learning about critical thinking, it's also important to learn about critical imagining. Together, these skills apply to anything we think about or imagine, at any time, in any place.

Still, there is a difference. Critical thinking anticipates that we can be biased how we think, understand, reach truths. Critical imagining anticipates that we can be biased in how we imagine the drama not only of our personal lives but the lives of people everywhere. Such dramas shape our assumptions about our freedom, our woundedness, our creative possibilities, the common good, how to live authentically, and our ultimate destinies.

## A Drama of Life

Being human, we have many thoughts about the drama of living and our choices within that drama. However, what we think and choose is already shaped by what we imagine. Imagination is active in both our dreams and being awake. Whenever we call to mind "an experience," we draw upon our imagination and emotions. Some experiences are memories; some are rehearsals for upcoming events; some are creative efforts to envision what might be. What often goes unnoticed, however, is that we use our imagination and emotions to pattern our everyday experiences at the instant they occur. An experience at any one instant may or may not pass immediately to our memory. If we do remember an experience, it's because the experience itself affected our imagination and emotions directly. We speak of this as having "an experience."<sup>1</sup> But if the "experience" affected only our five senses, with no imaginal or affective dimension, we will not remember it because we did not notice it while it was occurring.

We also imagine the many events in our lives as scenes in a single, entire, drama of everyone's life. In Morgan Llywelyn's *1916: A Novel of the Irish Rebellion*, Ned Halloran, a lad in his late teens, becomes aware of such a drama:

War and death and babies being born. Ned tried to stretch the horizons of his mind to encompass them all in one world vision. It was the babies, he decided, who made the rest of it bearable, who redeemed the horror adults could perpetrate. A child . . . was created



by the same species that manufactured guns and submarines—but with one added element: the Divine Spark, an immortal soul.<sup>2</sup>

Ned's awareness of a world drama is not unusual. Sooner or later most adults wonder how their lives fit into the grand scheme of things. But, as Bernard Lonergan observed, "we can have hunches that we cannot formulate clearly and exactly, so we tell a story."<sup>3</sup> And not everyone imagines the same story. In their studies of the histories of cultures, Eric Voegelin and Charles Taylor<sup>4</sup> identified several distinct world dramas. In his study of the drama of life, Lonergan identified a bias in the psyche that pits groups against one another.<sup>5</sup>

Relying on their findings, I will describe five such world dramas:

- A Drama of Fate imagines the world as beyond the control of any individual. This *beyond* can be the mysterious gods, the distant stars, or the oppressive government. It can be a fickle God whose acts on behalf of humans seem completely arbitrary, favoring no one. It can be just dumb luck—good and bad—that shapes how we live. But people seek control anyway: this is what superstitious practices are all about.
- A Drama of Groupism imagines the world as a field of competing groups. To be human is to feel connected to a group whose cohesion is secured by social structures, interpersonal relationships, and a symbolic vision of itself. Group members are prone to find other groups strange, unpredictable, threatening. To the degree that members dedicate themselves more to group cohesion and less to being personally responsible for their lives and critical-minded about the values that define their group, they are biased against recognizing what is disordered in their own group and well-ordered in other groups. They assume that "common good" refers only to a good common to members of their own group. Lonergan calls this phenomenon "group bias."
- A Drama of Reason imagines the world as controllable by human reason. It is by reason that we now understand religious beliefs, the stars, governments, and class struggles. Mathematical probability now explains good and bad luck. Evolution explains the emergence of humans on earth. Historians propose economic causes for wars. Psychological events formerly attributed to angels and devils are now attributed to dynamics in the subconscious. A global common good is an ideal to approach through reasonable compromises. Superstitions are unreasonable. Belief in God is unnecessary. Despite the shadow of tragedy that falls on every human endeavor, humanity has no alternative but to be self-sufficient.

- A Drama of Morality imagines the world as *not* controllable by human reason alone. Although reason opens vast possibilities for what we *can* do, morality is needed to determine what we *should* do. While reason can explain how technologies and economies *actually* function, morality explores how they *should* function. Many people who believe in a creator God imagine that God has left us creatures with the gifts of our friendships, our reason, and our moral sense, so that we might live as we should.<sup>6</sup> Friendship enlivens us. It opens individuals, families, and nations to a common good that stretches across group borders. It helps us overcome the dysfunctions in our reason and moral sense. Moral living is rewarding. Our destiny after death will be everlasting joy in heaven or horror in hell, depending on whether our lives were morally good or evil. But God has left us to work this out by ourselves.
- A Drama of Grace imagines the world as not fully controllable by human faculties alone—neither by our reason nor by our moral sense nor by our openness to friendship. As history abundantly attests, we distort our reason to justify our misdeeds; we narrow our moral sense of “good” to just “good for me or us;” we confine our friendships to our family, city, religion, or culture, while securing our confinement through a resolute animosity toward all outsiders; we pursue a global common good based only on our distorted reason and narrowed good will. In the Drama of Grace, however, God has not left us to work out things by ourselves. We realize that we come from love and are made for love. We discover that our yearning to transcend ourselves is already being in love with the giver of our selves, our gifts, our company in the many struggles and heartaches of life, and of the final, mysterious destiny of all humankind. One's world belongs neither to oneself nor to one's group; it belongs to God. Our ever-present tasks to maintain our houses, health, and personal relationships are not to be resented. They are to be welcomed and trusted by each of us as our Creator's way of sharing divine life with us. When facing particular difficulties, we count on the gift of faith to see with God's eyes what is truly good; of hope to weather any storms of opposition and overcome any barriers to the desires God plants in our hearts; and of the inner power to reach out in love at any time in any situation. We count on God's love to heal our distorted reason, strengthen our feeble moral sense, and widen our loves without any self-absorbed conditions. We envision a global common good as an achievement of a Beloved Community of God<sup>7</sup>—a cross-cultural community that retains the meanings and values unique to each particular community while depending of the saving graces of God.

All five types will be familiar to many people.<sup>8</sup> An individual can abide in one drama for years, months, days, or just hours. Yet our spiritual makeup demands consistency in our imagining, thinking, feeling, choosing, and loving. If we ignore this demand, our imaginations will easily flit from one drama to another, giving us no consistent vision for actually *leading* our lives. More fundamentally, our spiritual makeup demands a “critical imagining” that embraces a world drama that is fully trustworthy because it presents the actual and full dimensions of living.

## ***The Christian Drama***

No doubt, the Christian view of the drama of life is a Drama of Grace. While other religions have dramas of grace, none explains its beliefs as thoroughly as have Christian philosophers, scripture scholars, and theologians. At the same time, many sincere Christians imagine their lives in dramas other than the Christian drama. It seems appropriate, then, even urgent, that we consider the world drama of the followers of Christ.

There are three factors that make each one of us the unique persons we are. (1) There is the unrepeatable *history* of events that shaped the opportunities before me at any time and place. (2) There is that peculiar, winding current of loves in my *heart*. And (3) there is my *freedom* to deal as I please with what my history and my heart present.

1. My *history* presents Jesus of Nazareth, in whom his followers recognized the true and only Son of God, full of his Father's own Holy Spirit of love. In Jesus, the Father shows his love for us by giving what is the absolutely most precious thing imaginable to people in biblical times: his only son. Jesus not only gave up his life for others out of love; he also pours out his Father's actual Spirit of Love into the hearts of his followers. He founded a community of believers that continues today. In many ways, mostly hidden, he and they have shaped the heritages of countless cultures.

2. My *heart*, like hearts of people everywhere, longs for love. It always presents me with opportunities to live more deeply in love. Jesus is a Founder in our common history whose own divine Spirit truly lives in human hearts as love. It is an unrestricted love, loving with all one's heart and mind and strength. It is a comprehensive love, loving God above all, loving one's neighbor as oneself, and as loving one's world as God's own world.

3. By my *freedom*, I can decide for myself whether I will play a role in this drama. I know from experience that love is hard for anyone. I'd be deciding for myself to give up my independent self to become a "we" not only with other human persons but also with God as understood in



the Christian tradition. If I say Yes, then I am a member with others in the historical community of Jesus, sharing in the same Spirit of Love, to help God's Kingdom to come wherever we are. The plain act of joining others at the Supper of the Eucharist reminds me that this is their self-story too.

### ***A Test of Beauty***

The Christian Drama of Grace reveals the awesome realities of that ragged Nazarene and this slippery heart of mine. They touch my deepest hope yet baffle my understanding.

How to keep stories of grace in mind? How to stay awed about the mystery of ordinary living, particularly in light of the uncanny gospel news that the innermost Word of the divine Source of everything comes as a Founder who truly labors in human history and whose innermost Love truly loves in human hearts? I propose a simple principle:

A prior awe about life as an abiding mystery is essential in both those who would preach and those who would welcome the good news.

Referring to the habit of seeing the sacred in the profane, Bernard Lonergan remarked, "Nothing is ever just something."<sup>9</sup> And the poet Gerard Manly Hopkins: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."<sup>10</sup> It is not by psychological self-analysis or biographies of Christ and the saints that we fully allow the drama of grace become our story. The most direct media we have are biblical narratives and the liturgical rites that gather believers into the awesome mystery of God's healing love.

More indirectly, we have the many poems and plays over the ages that convey a sense of mystery in ordinary life. We also have music, painting, sculpture, architecture, attire, dance, and so on. By appealing to our thirst for beauty, the arts draw us at every level of our consciousness—by the allure of the possible, the harmony of the ordered, the exquisite uniqueness of an actual event or person or community, the splendor of goodness, and the liberating invitation to be ever more open to love. They intimate that there's more to *everything* than meets the eye. In a discernment of world dramas we keep the Drama of Grace in mind by a habit of letting beauty open our entire selves to what is ever beyond ourselves. We resonate with the tensions we feel during a ballet or while listening to a symphony or while contemplating a painting because they mirror the same seasons of hope that we, along with our brothers and sisters everywhere, experience in our lives. We repudiate dramas of fate, groupism, reason, morality, and any other

drama in which our lives and joys are not completed through an active share in the life and joy of the lover who created us.

## -Tad Dunne

---

- 1** John Dewey, "Having an Experience" in *Art as Experience* (New York: Berkley Publishing/Penguin, 2005), ch. 3 (36-59).
- 2** Morgan Llywelyn, *1916: A Novel of the Irish Rebellion* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates/Forge, 2010), ch. 30 (ebook p. 663).
- 3** Bernard Lonergan, "Reality, Myth, Symbol," in *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1965-1980, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 17 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), eds. Robert Croken and Robert Doran, 384-390, at 386.
- 4** Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1952) 76-77. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); see index entries for "exclusive humanism" and pp. 112-45.
- 5** Bernard Lonergan, *Insight*, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 3, eds. Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran, 210-214. Originally published in 1957.
- 6** The view that God gifted us with reason, moral sense, and openness to friendship—but now rests in an eternal sabbath, without further direct involvement in human affairs—has been named deism. It emerged in England in the 1800s as way to end wars based on denominational differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants regarding how God "graces" humanity. It discounts claims regarding God as Father, Son, and Spirit—specifically, that in the historical Jesus and in the intimacy of our hearts God is personally at work healing our fractured lives.
- 7** Martin Luther King named this global common good God's Beloved Community: ". . . the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men." from "*Facing the Challenge of a New Age*," 1956.
- 8** Surely there other world dramas have affected history, some in cultures long gone, others in various cultures today. David Korten, in his *Change the Story, Change the Future: A Living Economy for a Living Earth* (Oakland, CA, Barrett-Koehler Publishers, 2015) proposes that a "Sacred Money and Sacred Market" story is an influential but corrupt world drama today. Postmodern rejection of grand theories is itself a grand world drama of all human life.
- 9** Bernard Lonergan, in R. M. Doran and R. C. Croken, ed., *Early Works on Theological Method 1*, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 22 (2010), 311. Originally published in 1962.
- 10** "God's Grandeur," in W. H. Garner, ed. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (Middlesex England, Penguin, 1971) p. 27. By "charged," Hopkins probably imagined recently discovered electric charges.