

The Two Uses of Imagination

Anxiety and creativity run on the same faculty. What separates them is authorship.

Ask a room of senior people whether they consider themselves imaginative and about a fifth will raise a hand. Ask the same room who lay awake last night running a version of a conversation that has not happened yet, and the hands go up across the board.

Both are the same capacity doing the same thing: making an image of what is not present. The mind constructs a room you are not in, puts people in it, and gives them lines. It does this constantly and it does it well. Almost nobody calls the three-in-the-morning version imagination, and it is.

| The faculty is not the problem. The direction of it is.

Where this comes from

The idea is old. Aristotle used *phantasia* for the image-making capacity standing between sensing something and thinking about it, and held that the soul does not think without an image. Jung built a method on the same ground, entering images deliberately and letting them answer back, and called it active imagination. Winnicott located playing in a space that is neither wholly inner nor wholly outer, and treated that space as where a person becomes capable of being creative at all.

Three traditions, three vocabularies, one observation underneath: imagining is a faculty of relation to the not-yet-real, and it can be undergone or it can be exercised.

STATED PLAINLY

Anticipatory dread and creative rehearsal are the same act performed with different degrees of authorship. In one you are in the audience. In the other you are in the chair.

An honest complication

One influential line of research on worry, associated with Borkovec and colleagues, describes chronic worry as largely verbal and abstract rather than pictorial, and treats that abstraction as part of what sustains it. Worry talks; it rarely shows. The vagueness is doing work, because a blurred catastrophe never quite arrives and so never quite resolves.

That complicates the neat version of the claim, and it also points at the practice. If the loop runs on abstraction, making it concrete is the intervention. Bringing an image into focus tends to change what it does to you, often in the direction of manageable, because a specific disaster has edges and a specific disaster can be prepared for.

Four differences worth knowing

	UNDERGONE	EXERCISED
Authorship	It starts without you and continues without permission	You choose to begin and you can choose to stop
Number	One outcome, repeated with small variations	Several outcomes, held at once, none of them settled
Focus	Abstract and verbal. A sense of how badly it goes	Concrete and sensory. A room, a face, a line of dialogue
Body	Held still. Breath high, jaw set, attention narrow	Moving. Breath low, posture loose, attention wide

Each row is an available lever. You do not have to stop the imagining, and stopping it is mostly not possible anyway. Change one parameter and the whole thing reorganizes.

WHERE THE EXERCISED VERSION PAYS

Every strategic act is imaginative before it is analytical. Someone pictured the reorganized team, or the conversation that clears the air, or the product that does not exist yet, and only then went looking for the numbers. Judgment under uncertainty is applied imagination, which is why it does not survive being outsourced.

Three practices

ONE · BRING IT INTO FOCUS

When you catch the loop, stop asking how bad it will be and start asking what it looks like. Where is this happening. Who is in the room. What is the first sentence anyone says. What are you wearing. Sensory detail costs the loop its vagueness, and it converts a mood into a scene, and a scene can be worked on.

TWO · MULTIPLY IT

Run the same scene three more times: the version where it goes well, the version where it goes strangely, and the version where the thing you fear happens and you handle it. Three takes, no editing. The point is establishing that the future has more than one script in it and that you are the one holding the pen.

THREE · PUT IT IN THE BODY

Stand up and say the difficult line out loud, to the wall if necessary. Actors rehearse standing for a reason: the body learns something the head cannot, and a line you have said aloud once arrives differently the second time. This is the most reliable of the three and the one most people skip.

Try it once

Fifteen minutes, on paper, with the thing that has been running.

THE SCENE AS IT CURRENTLY RUNS

Write it as a scene rather than a worry. Setting, people, first line spoken.

TAKE TWO : IT GOES WELL

TAKE THREE : IT GOES SIDEWAYS IN A WAY YOU DID NOT PREDICT

TAKE FOUR : THE FEARED THING HAPPENS AND YOU MEET IT

This is the one that does the work. Write what you say and what you do next.

NOW SAY ONE LINE OF IT OUT LOUD, STANDING. WHAT CHANGED?

LIMITS, STATED HONESTLY

This is a framing for ordinary anticipatory anxiety: the presentation, the difficult conversation, the decision with real consequences. Persistent anxiety that interferes with sleep, work, or relationships is a clinical matter and responds to clinical treatment, and no amount of reframing substitutes for that. If the loop is running most days, the useful next step is a therapist rather than a worksheet.

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Sources referred to: Aristotle, *De Anima* III.3–8; C. G. Jung, “The Transcendent Function” (written 1916, published 1957); D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (1971); T. D. Borkovec et al. on the cognitive avoidance model of worry (1998).