

# **Imagine**

**a reflection  
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church  
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When I remember December 8, 1980, I remember a cold, and utterly unremarkable, night. In our tiny apartment, I had settled down in my living room for a long winter's night watching Monday Night Football. My first wife was curled up on the couch beside me, asleep. It was just another quiet evening at home for a young couple with their entire lives ahead of them.

I knew something was terribly wrong the instant the normally bombastic Howard Cosell spoke. His voice was shaky, his tone strangely hesitant. Cosell was interrupting the first downs and the passing statistics to give ABC-TV viewers a news bulletin: John Lennon had just been murdered.

There's a strange thing about moments like these; they tend to serve as mileposts in our cultural history, unifying events in our collective societal psyche. Everyone has such a story - or several - and when they are shared, these stories somehow connect us across the years, across the miles, across different lives, different philosophies.

"I'll never forget where I was when I heard the news..."

As Howard Cosell's words began to sink in, a flood of terrible memories came crashing back over me - the fear and panic I had experienced in kindergarten the day my teacher, tears streaming down her face, sent us home after telling us the President had been killed; the utter helplessness I felt when I learned about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.; my despair and disbelief just a couple of months later when Walter Cronkite reported that Bobby Kennedy had been gunned down in California.

And I'm sure, as they heard the news about John Lennon that night, for some of my parents' peers, the attack on Pearl Harbor - "The Day That Will Live in Infamy" - was still fresh in their minds, for it had been memorialized just the day before.

But for many of my generation, it is December 8, 1980, that will live in our hearts as the day the music died, the day something fragile and idealistic was torn from us by the bullets that snuffed out the life of John Lennon.

And for me that night - as if reliving the tragic assassinations of my childhood weren't enough - I also, quite unexpectedly, came face to face with the possibility of life alone. For as I sat there sobbing, simultaneously feeling a tremendous sense of as-yet-unarticulated loss, while experiencing once more the pain of past public murders, I shook my wife to wake her, share the horrible news, and seek solace. But to my surprise, she seemed unaffected, unmoved by what had transpired, unable to share my grief and loss. In retrospect, I now know, that terrible, empty moment was my first indication that we didn't have, and in fact had never had, the kind of shared value system and deep personal connection necessary to sustain a marriage.

Less than a year later, we had separated.

It is the fate of many public figures, in death, to become larger-than-life symbols. If that death is somehow tragic or unexpected, the glorification can become even more pronounced. In the immediate aftermath of John Lennon's murder, I - like many others - found comfort, at least in part, in an idealized, idolized Lennon. But that was literally half a lifetime ago; in the twenty-two years that have transpired since, I have come to recognize, and appreciate, the greater depth of meaning contained in the very human symbol that is John Lennon.

For it is the way he lived his life - flawed as it was, tragic as well as triumphant - that has inspired me as an adult. Long after he left us, Lennon has remained, for me, a continuing source of insight into many of my own deepest, most personal struggles.

Thus it is more than a bit ironic that, prior to his death, Lennon was not particularly important to me. He wasn't even really my favorite Beatle. As an over-protected child, largely insulated from the heady reality of the Sixties, I found Lennon just a bit dangerous - which, of course, he was. Unlike many

of his fans, it was only after his untimely death that I began to develop a relationship, as it were, with the talented and troubled man from Liverpool, an ongoing conversation of shared life experiences. It was only in the years following his murder, as I myself grew and changed, as I lost a marriage and found new partners and new paths, that I came to admire many of the things John Lennon sought to do, many of the ideas he espoused.

I never did, and still don't, glamorize his many faults - he was a man, after all, who cheated on his wife, fought drug addiction, was painfully aware of and never fully overcame his own sexism, was often sullen and arrogant, and frequently mistreated those closest to him. But Lennon never hid these things, and it was his searingly honest, painfully public life that was perhaps his most important gift to us all.

John Lennon was never about being the ideal man, but he was always about striving toward ideals - both in himself, and in the world around him.

In the beginning, of course, there was just the music. The words Lennon wrote, the music he penned, affected an entire generation, and had an incredible, literally worldwide impact that endures to this day. I'll never forget the afternoon I walked into a coffee shop in a small town in what was then the Soviet Union, and right there, behind the counter, was a large, hand-painted portrait of Lennon, replete with fabulously misspelled English lettering that read, "The Life and Legen." The proprietor was ecstatic to learn that I, too, was a Lennon fan, and we talked - in broken English and even more broken Russian - about both the life, and the legend, that was John Lennon.

This was during the Reagan era, with its militaristic posturing and pronouncements about an "Evil Empire" in the Soviet Union. So my newfound Soviet friend and I eagerly shared our views on the non-violent, Give-Peace-a-Chance Lennon, the man who had at first blundered into being a spokesperson for the anti-war movement, then had quite consciously used that position to gain maximum publicity for the cause. It seemed to us, there, that late afternoon in Moldavia, that no one now living had anything nearly as relevant to say as what we could find in the full body of music, film, and prose Lennon had left behind. Their timelessness, undoubtedly tinged with more than a bit of nostalgia, gave us hope for the future - and faith that love might indeed be all we need.

It was at about the same period in my life that I happened upon Unitarian Universalism. Here a different John Lennon - the religious iconoclast - offered me some perspective as I began to explore a new path in life. I took belated delight in the flap he had created in my native South by off-handedly commenting that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. I reveled in lyrics like "God is a concept by which we measure our pain;" lyrics like "I don't believe in magic ... I don't believe the Bible ... I just believe in me."

Soon, as I began a new romantic relationship, I saw in my own life parallels to the way Lennon had "started over" - remarrying this time for all the right reasons; staying married, again, for all the right reasons. I admired the tenacity with which he had managed to hold together his second marriage, despite shaky periods of separation and doubt; I found in the genuine partnership he and Yoko Ono had created, against all odds, a model to aspire toward in my own relationship. And, I'll admit, the introverted recluse in me has often yearned to be able to retreat into the safety and seclusion of home and hearth, as Lennon did in his last years.

More recently, of course, it has been Lennon's struggles as a committed father that have provided me with food for thought. As he did in every other aspect of his life, Lennon lived out his fatherhood on the extremes - on the one hand, an absentee father for his first son, Julian, who was born during the heyday of the Beatles; on the other, a fully absorbed house-husband and doting dad to his second son, Sean.

Biographer Ray Coleman recounts an incident during Lennon's first marriage in which the rock star returned home from a Beatles tour, and, at the dinner table with wife Cynthia and son Julian, "stood up and blew his top, screaming at the little three-year-old boy" for throwing his food. Contrast that father with the more mature man who, in an interview in 1980, admitted, "The pressures of being a parent are equal to any pressure on earth. That's why I try so hard to be a really conscious parent, and really look after that little person's physical and mental health. It's a responsibility most of us - including me - avoid far too often, because it's just so hard."

In those final years of his life, it seemed as if Lennon were trying to atone for all the mistakes he had made with his first son, while at the same time - in his typically high-profile way - lending a new air of respectability to fatherhood in general, and stay-at-home fatherhood in particular.

Shortly after he dropped out of the rock music scene to devote his full attention to raising Sean, Lennon was quoted in a magazine article as saying, "I tell my friends, 'I'm baking bread,' and they say, 'Yeah, but what are you really doing?' And I say, 'I'm looking after the baby,' and they go, 'But what else are you doing?' I say, 'Are you kidding? There are no secret projects in the basement... Bread and babies, as every housewife knows, is a full-time job!'"

"Don't get me wrong," he continued. "I'm not into putting out an image of this person who knows all about children. Nobody knows about children - that's the thing... But now I feel as though at least I've put my body where my mouth was, and tried to really live up to my own preaching, as it were."

Folks, I can't tell you the exact moment when I knew I wanted to give over a part of my life to being a stay-at-home father - but I do know that John Lennon's very public example of a man's joy at primary parenting is what inspired me to place my own body, as he put it, where my mouth was, and spend three years at home with my son Patrick. They were the three hardest years of my life - and also the three best.

Lennon, of course, like me, eventually returned to the work he loved. After his five-year self-imposed sabbatical, Lennon resumed his music career with a renewed energy and newfound maturity. Yet the decision to return to work was not one he made lightly, nor one without profound implications for his family. As he told one interviewer: "I hadn't been in the studio for five years, and Sean was used to me being around all the time. Suddenly, I was gone a lot. One day at breakfast, Sean said to me, 'You know what I want to be when I grow up?' And I said, 'No, what's that?' He looked me right in the eye and said, 'Just a daddy.'"

"I thought about that for a minute and said, 'Oh, I get it, you don't like it that I'm working now, right?' and he says 'Nope!' So I said, 'Well, I'll tell you something Sean, it makes me happy to do the music. And I might have more fun with you if I'm happier, right?' Sean got this funny look and then said, 'yeah,' and that was the end of that."

Within a few months, Lennon was dead. One of the last songs he wrote was "Beautiful Boy" - the song you heard earlier this morning. Sometimes at night, as I put Patrick to bed, after the bedtime stories are done, after I have turned out the light and I'm staring up at the ceiling, feeling him breathing

next to me, I think of other fathers, and other sons - of John Lennon and Sean, of work, and family - of how life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans, and how, sometimes, death is, too... And I simply sigh, and let myself treasure the moment.

Yes, John Lennon's life and death, his music and his myth, have offered me, and countless others, a guidepost as we negotiate the joys and sorrows of this life. And - as only Lennon could do it - the whole package seems to come neatly tied up in that haunting, supremely challenging, one-word epitaph: "Imagine."

Before I became a minister, I spent some time teaching high school English classes. When I first met with a group of students, I often would hand out the lyrics to "Imagine," and ask the students to react to them, as they would to a poem. Invariably, there was at least one person who could not get past the first line: "Imagine there's no heaven."

"How can there be no heaven?," they'd say. "Of course there's a heaven. What would the point of life be, if there's no heaven?"

Exactly, I would say.

Then I would go on to remind them that the poem doesn't say "There is no heaven," it says "Imagine there's no heaven." A lively discussion usually ensued in which I challenged the students (and they challenged one other) to consider new ways of looking at everything from daily life to the afterlife. Preconceptions fell by the wayside and paradigms shifted. Whether it was for a lifetime or just for an hour, these young people examined radically different models of living, and envisioned ways of being in the world, and in community, that were - without exception - improvements over the ones we now have.

Through this exercise in imagining, the students came face to face with their own, very different and very individual, ideals. They were picturing how life could be - at its best - and articulating the discrepancy between that vision, and the real world they saw around them. Which is exactly what John Lennon did.

Herein, to me, lies the meaning of "Imagine." When I sign an e-mail or a newsletter column with the word "imagine;" when I somewhat flippantly

respond to an innocent question with "imagine;" when, for my ordination as a minister, I ask a dear friend to do an interpretive dance piece to the music of "Imagine;" when I tell my wife that I want "Imagine" to be played at my memorial service - when I do these things, I am inviting others, and reminding myself, to be open to the limitless possibilities offered by our imaginations - for it is the imagination that enables all growth. When I do these things, I am inviting others, and reminding myself, to have the courage to strive toward our ideals, for it is by that quest that we are transformed.

The true beauty of the simple imperative "imagine" is that it doesn't tell us what to imagine. As Lennon himself once said, "My role in society, or any artist's or poet's role, is to try to express what we all feel - not to tell people how to feel. Not as a leader, but as a reflection of us all."

The task for us, then, isn't to be ideal people - but rather to be people who have ideals, people who work together toward those ideals. You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one.

In fact, I'd say most of us are dreamers. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here, in this community of hope.

Let us always share our dreams - for ourselves, for our church, for our community, for our world - and may we always continue to IMAGINE.

Amen.