

UNVEILING REALITY THROUGH THE IMAGINATION

Jared Zimmerer on a Strategy to
Fight Meaninglessness

In her spiritual memoir, *Not God's Type*, Dr. Holly Ordway explains the process of her conversion from atheism to Catholicism. Primarily through the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, Ordway was presented with a deeper level of meaning through the imagination that eventually led to her conversion. "I cannot imagine a world more antithetical," Ordway writes of Tolkien's Middle-earth, "to the narrowness, the self-centeredness, the pointlessness of my atheist worldview, in which meaning is at best manufactured as an ever-less-effective opiate against despair."¹ Ordway's conversion led her to meaningful academic work

¹ Holly Ordway, *Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), chap. 6, Digital edition.

that has become a gift to both the universities and the Church. Her keen insight into the necessity of the imagination as a primary faculty of meaning and the use of this faculty as a means of evangelization ought to be shouted from the rooftops at universities, schools, and every single church that cares for its members. In an age of scientism, rationalism, and nihilism, Dr. Ordway has presented a strategy of peeling back the muck of meaninglessness to unveil reality in all its beauty.

One of my heroes, Russell Kirk, despised the problem of living in abstractions. He felt that when the human person is removed from “the real,” other persons become nothing more than an idea, and everything is reduced to its use. When removed from reality, we quickly become the arbiters of our world, and the most powerful individual will triumph over the other pawns in the game. Sadly, the intellectual madness of the last few centuries created this reductionistic attitude. The concept of reality has become subjective and material reality nothing more than a plaything. The problem lies in the fact that because our perception of reality has become so subjective, rational arguments alone cannot convince others of what is real. What Dr. Ordway has so convincingly taught over the years is

that it is through the imagination that rational argument meets the real.

Think, for example, of Ray Bradbury's work, *Dandelion Wine*. Leo Auffmann's famous happiness machine, in which fabricated dreams quickly become existential nightmares, is an attempt to live in the abstraction of happiness without anything of substance, without anything real. The machine represents man's desire to create meaning based on a shallow understanding of happiness. It aims at a world with no sadness, no emotional rollercoasters, just an abstraction of what makes us feel happy. After the disastrous results of the experiment with the machine lying in ashes, Leo's wise neighbor, Grandfather Spaulding, unveils what truly makes one happy. "You want to see the *real* happiness machine?" says Grandfather Spaulding, "The one they patented a couple thousand years ago, it still runs, not good all the time, no! but it runs. It's been here all along."² He then proceeds to bring Leo to the window of his own home, where he sees his children playing on the floor and his wife lovingly preparing supper. In other words, the actual happiness machine is what is most real and precious — a world

² Ray Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine* (New York: Bantam Books, 1964), 62.

in which love sits right alongside the risk of being hurt. And further than that, once reality is unveiled as the actual happiness machine, the world itself is imbued with wonder and intensity. As a Christian and evangelist, Ordway brilliantly explains that our world has been trying to enter the fabricated happiness machine and notions of meaning are far removed from the Gospel.

In the course she produced for the Word on Fire Institute titled *Imaginative Apologetics*, she walks the students through the problem of meaning gaps in the language we use. For example, the word God can mean very different things to different people. An atheist might hear this word and think of some big being in the sky who arbitrarily commands the world through dominance, or she might think of a being akin to the Easter bunny. As Christians, we do not believe in that god either, and Ordway makes a keen insight into the need to correct such language and meaning gaps. She states that “if we are to correct the cultural narrative, we need to identify, challenge, and correct false meanings, using our reason, and we need to generate new meanings to replace the false ones, using the imagination.”³ She

³ Holly Ordway, *Imaginative Apologetics*. Word on Fire Institute. <https://wordonfire.institute/courses/imaginative/>.

points out that reason is the organ of truth, and imagination is the organ of meaning, promoting an integrated approach to evangelization. Through numerous human faculties, an evangelist unveils Christianity as the most meaningful depth of reality. She states that,

Our Catholic faith covers all of reality, so it can't be reduced to a single argument. Instead, we see multiple aspects of our faith that, when we bring them together, show a full, true, meaningful, convincing picture of reality. So we actually see that a cumulative case is more convincing. This imaginative, integrated approach, where we have both imagination and reason, is actually more compelling because it involves all of our faculties: our reason, our imagination, our emotions, our experiences.⁴

This style of meaning-making, what John Henry Newman calls real and notional apprehension, yet in an active evangelical mode, is the style the Christian church needs to focus on today.

Dr. Ordway reminds us, especially as Christians, that through wonder, assisted by the great fairy tales or beautiful images, we come to see, really see,

⁴ Ordway, *Imaginative Apologetics*.

what is right in front of us. Through the imagination, a bird is not just a group of bones and sinews; it is a great messenger, a singer of God's majesty, an example of man's desire to soar the heavens. In the same way, many today view Christ as nothing more than a great teacher or a softy with a heart for the downtrodden. Through the great works of imagination, we can experience a deeper sense of the reality that is Jesus Christ. And in doing so, we remove the blindness of those around us and help them see reality as it is because Jesus Christ is the deepest sense of reality. Through Aragorn, Gandalf, and Frodo, we come to experience in a real way, Christ as king, suffering servant, and wise man. Through Aslan, we come to know Christ as dangerous, majestic, and sacrificial. If our descriptions of Christ as Messiah fails to reach the modern mind, it is because the modern imagination fails to interpret that term with meaning. As Ordway explains, "Images and metaphors are ways of communicating the truth, through the imagination, which allows for more meaning to be generated, making that truth concrete, graspable, memorable—not just abstract and easily forgotten."⁵ By cultivating the imagination, an

⁵ Ordway, *Imaginative Apologetics*.

evangelist imitates Grandfather Spaulding's wisdom.

The modern West is suffering from a lack of purpose and meaning. We have placed ourselves in the happiness machine by way of scientism, rationalism, and nihilism. Those with the wisdom of truth, as Kirk states, "look upward from this place of slime, this world of gorgons and chimeras, toward the light which gives Love to this poor earth and all the stars."⁶ The human heart cannot help but seek meaning, but very few know where to find it. Dr. Ordway, whom I am honored to work with and call a friend, is just the warrior we need to unveil the real. It's as if she is standing at the edge of a thick forest, sword in hand, inviting mankind to follow her as she hacks away the brush, fights off the dragons of our self-interest, and unveils the sun.

⁶ Russell Kirk, *Prospects for Conservatives* (1956; New York: Imaginative Conservative Books, 2013), 21.

Bibliography

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