

What do I mean by a “responsible imagination”? Laurent Daloz, Cheryl Keen, James Keen, and Sharon Parks completed a study several years ago that sought to identify what if anything people who had lived long lives of commitment to the public good might share in common. Among other things, these scholars identified what they termed a “responsible imagination.”

The people we studied appear to compose reality in a manner that can take into account calls to help, catalyze, dream, work hard, think hard, and love well. They practice an imagination that resists prejudice and its distancing tendencies on the one hand, and avoids messianic aspirations and their engulfing tendencies on the other. Their imaginations are active and open, continually seeking more adequate understandings of the whole self and the whole commons and the language with which to express them.

Their practice of imagination is responsible in two particular ways. First, they try to respect the *process* of imagination in themselves and others. They pay attention to dissonance and contradiction, particularly those that reveal injustice and unrealized potential. They learn to pause, reflect, wonder, ask why, consider, wait.... They also learn to work over their insights and those of others so that they “connect up” in truthful and useful ways. They seek out trustworthy communities of confirmation and contradiction.

Second, they seek out sources of worthy images. Most have discovered that finding and being found by fitting images is not only a matter of having access to them but requires discretion and responsible hospitality — not only to what is attractive but also to what may be unfamiliar and initially unsettling....

Living with these images, the people in our study appear to know that two truths must be held together — that we have the power to destroy the Earth and the power to see it whole. But unlike many who seek escape from the potent tension this act of holding requires, these people live in a manner that conveys a third and essential power: the courage to turn and make promises, the power of a responsible imagination. (Daloz, et. al., 1996, 151-152).

They also had something to say about daily practice:

It is said that faith is “meant to be religious.” Faith seeks language, a *shared* system of symbols with which to interpret the whole of life. If imagination is the process of “shaping into one,” religion may be understood, in part, as the distillation of shared images, powerful enough to shape into one the chaos of our experience. In other words, stories, habits, and the rituals of everyday are the content of the imagination by which people know who they are and what they are to do in the world. It is the work of religion, in concert with the whole life of the commons, to do that well (Daloz, et. al., 1996, 142).

Taken from: *Common fire: Lives of commitment in a complex world*. By Laurent A. Parks Daloz, Cheryl H. Keen, James P. Keen, and Sharon Daloz Parks. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.