

A Call to Integrity: Giving Birth to Imagination about Community Futures
by Bliss Browne www.imaginechicago.org

All of us are called to be mothers, to bear and sustain hope in the world. In a time of cynicism and distrust, it takes all of us, women and men, rich and poor, to embrace a collective vocation of being dream bearers and dream keepers of community futures. What will enable us to open our minds, hearts and wills to see one another as unique creators, to trust one another and the 'freefall' of giving birth to something new? What will nurture our willingness to work together on behalf of a community future in which life flourishes for everyone? That is what the Imagine process (born with Imagine Chicago, and now alive on six continents in other 'Imagine' initiatives) has been committed to discovering and embodying as a way of life since 1992.

Imagine Chicago was founded to cultivate hope and civic engagement by inviting people into a conversation with the future, across boundaries of age, race and class, and then developing uncommon, practical and inspiring partnerships which act on behalf of the expanded common good. It has worked at every level of the change process: *understanding* the best of what is, *imagining* what can be, and *creating* what will be, harnessing imagination as a resource for personal, institutional and community change.

We have found so far that to give birth to *collective* dreams first requires shifting how we speak and see, where our attention is. Many people live, some by choice, in isolated communities, which has led to a loss of imagination and connection. We must risk moving to the edge of established comfort zones, encountering people different from us who challenge our worldviews and language and open our minds. The next move is to listen carefully, to 'walk a mile in someone else's shoes.' Hearing what others have lived, what it is possible to live, stretches our imagination about life. Sharing stories around meaningful questions (across divides of race and age and clan) offers a path to empathic seeing and listening which opens the heart. Listening and respecting what gives meaning and purpose to our lives, what calls us forward, transforms us, can begin to heal our divisions. Combining stories with arts-based processes frees imagination and opens up sources of inspiration. Deep change can emerge once we are able not only to digest necessary information, redesign structures, and reframe mindsets but attend to and align our actions with sources of collective inspiration and will, becoming faithful to one another and the future which is trying to emerge.

Once a collective dream comes to birth, it is a shared responsibility to protect and sustain its life in the world. Bearing hope into the world is only the beginning; creating the conditions for new life to flourish on a sustained basis is work that requires the time, resources and commitment of the whole human family. Every newborn needs love, food, water, shelter, and an opportunity to learn, in order to survive and thrive. Our community dreams (and mothers) require no less. The blessing is that in this deeply ordinary human work, we rediscover the commitment, purpose, mystery, and deep magic that aligns our lives and the whole system in a more life-giving direction. Listen and love. That brings hope alive.