

# A Novelist Looks at Visualization

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## Our Own Little Worlds

We fiction writers spend a lot of time in our own little worlds. We create people who don't really exist. We give them names and faces, places to go, people to see, and things to do. Novelists don't create characters *ex nihilo* like God does; we assemble them from aspects of a number of people, producing little Frankensteins, if you will, composed of the parts of many.

They seem real. When my characters suffer (at my hands, of course), I cry. When my pretend couple falls in love (again at my hands), my own heart flutters. I kill off a favorite character, then grieve over him like I would a family member.

Fiction writers create streets, beaches, and forests in our minds for our beings to live in. We walk around in those environs, seeing, listening, smelling; we write what we "experience" in our imaginations. The inner world of a fiction writer is a strange and wonderful place.

Imaginations are God-given. Jesus told stories to inspire, amuse, and warn. The emotions evoked are real.

## The Lines Blur

But fictional people and places are only make-believe, and sometimes the lines blur. Any fiction writer will tell you as much. In my *Elijah Creek & The Armor of God* series, the character Robbie was based on a real teen by the same name. I spent much more time with the fictional Robbie than the real one. When I created a crisis in the character's life, I found myself feeling sympathy for the real Robbie.

And when I recently returned to a canyon I'd used as a setting in the story, I was surprised; the canyon was too long, cliffs and trails were out of place. I'd forgotten that in my mind's eye I'd made changes for the sake of the story. *That* memory had become more real than the *real* memory of the canyon. It was a little eerie.

Visualization is a useful and powerful tool. But stay in your own little world long enough, and reality begins to look strangely unfamiliar.

## Definition and History

*Visualization* simply means "forming a mental image." We use these imaginings for planning, rehearsing, daydreaming. However, visualization may also be misused as an occult tool to manipulate spiritual forces, a practice originating in ancient mystery religions.

The Egyptian god Thoth, it is said, taught that the world could be transformed through mental imagery (Dave Hunt, *The Seduction of Christianity*, p. 140). Its purpose is to allow the mind to produce thoughts/energies that incubate in the spiritual realm, then manifest in the physical realm.

Hindu yoga visualization seeks union with the All (Brahman).

Tibetan Buddhism's god-king, the Dalai Lama, states that using the mind's eye is part of his tantric (sex magic/black magic) practice toward enlightenment.

Reiki (spirit energy; that is, faith healing using spirit guides) and channeling also depend on visualization.

Ultimately, one's own psychospiritual power may control the divine, according to occult teachings.

That occultists are much better at this than Judeo-Christian believers tells us something of its source. In old-timey terms, this is conjuring: speaking something into existence or calling forth a being by one's own manipulative powers (ex: 1 Samuel 28:8).

## In the Church

In visualization as a spiritual practice, a Christian might be encouraged to imagine ascending to God’s throne, create Jesus’ presence for the “healing of memories,” or invoke divine light through chant.

In some healing or deliverance ministries, a person may be guided to visualize Jesus in the memory of a painful situation in order for Jesus to recreate the past. In one notable case, the Christian counselor urged a young woman to visualize her unwed parents having sex—with Jesus visibly present in the room—thereby sanctifying her own conception.

These sessions work on the same principle as fiction writing. One creates a scenario by mixing bits of reality (that is, past events from one’s life) with biblical truths and personal hopes, thereby creating a new reality.

And there’s the rub.

Is the new reality really real—or fiction?

The Scriptures don’t prescribe the techniques now being used in Christian communities to increase faith or bring about healing: measured breathing, chanting, visualizing what you wish to achieve, out-of-body experiences, calling on spirit guides, etc. In fact, “Visualization is as absent from Scripture as it has always been present in the occult” (Hunt, p. 140).

## Who Are You?

In the Christian classic *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster describes such a way to enter God’s presence: “In your imagination allow your spiritual body, shining with light, to rise out of your physical body. Look back so that you can see yourself . . . and reassure your body that you will return momentarily. . . . Go deeper and deeper into outer space until there is nothing except the warm presence of the eternal Creator. Rest in his presence. Listen quietly . . . [to] any instruction given” (p. 20).

Pretending to rise through the heavens and rest in the presence of God sounds truly beautiful. But back up and read the instructions more closely. If one is simply *imagining* that he leaves his body, why would he have to *reassure* the body that he will return? Isn’t he just *pretending* to be floating into outer space? If this really is God, when does the person leave his imaginary, self-created journey and enter the real heavens to approach God—whom the Bible says “lives in unapproachable light”? (1 Timothy 6:16).

These instructions we are to wait for—are they the real words of God? ideas created in our own minds? or spiritual mischief from a different source?

Is it possible to conjure Jesus? Foster says as much: “It can be more than an exercise of the imagination, it can be a genuine confrontation. Jesus Christ will actually come to you” (p. 26).

Could it be that in a dreamy, suggestible state and using ancient occult technologies, this “divine” encounter is of a more seductive and sinister nature?

As a novelist I can craft a pretend world and live in it for hours. I create fake people and put words in their mouths; I watch them having long conversations with each other. They seem very, very real to me. But if one of my characters should ever stop, turn, look at me, and say “Hello, Lena,” I’d be outta there like greased lightning. Because that would not be a fictional character.

That would be an entity.

## Divine or Deception

We’ve examined how novelists regularly live in their own little worlds, creating beings that seem to take on lives of their own. It’s all in good fun. Since ancient times, however, occultists and mystics have engaged in similar

visualizations, but to manipulate spiritual forces. Christians are adopting these techniques for their own use. What a heady experience for the spiritually naïve: making manifest a real spiritual being—even Jesus himself. Nowhere in the Old or New Testaments do we have such a directive.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis addresses the diabolical pitfall of substituting an image of the Lord for the real Lord. The master demon Screwtape encourages his apprentice to delude a praying human by keeping him focused on the being he has created in his mind, not on the Lord who created *him* (p. 34–35).

## Words in His Mouth

Another pitfall of visualization is best understood in the context of a common exercise we all do: mental rehearsing. Pretend you’ve had an argument with a coworker. You fume, you pace the living room, imagining what you’ll say to win the next argument. You picture your adversary spewing something rather silly. You shoot back a brilliant retort. He mutters a weak reply. You nail him with your rapier logic.

Nice scenario, and a useful tool for getting your thoughts in order. Except that those fictional conversations never work the way we imagine, do they? Because as many ways as we may rehearse a conversation, we can never accurately predict what the other person will say. A real conversation is contingent on the other person speaking *his* mind, not ours.

Here is the dangerous presumption of visualization: If we can’t predict how a fellow human being will respond to us, how much less can we presume to put words in the mouth of the Almighty?

## Conjuring Jesus

Anyone can envision a deity whom he can control. This is the form and function of idolatry.

Christian guided imagery leaves us with a boatload of unsettling questions: Can one *fictionally* leave his body and *really* encounter the living God? Is there a new kind of prayer technique that will take you to Heaven and back at will? If a conjured “Jesus” will change our pasts and heal memories, why bother with forgiving folks of sinning against us? Why not just rewrite the event out of existence?

In *Walking on Water*, Madeleine L’Engle reflects on that otherworldly feeling familiar to every novelist: “When I am writing, on the other side of silence, and am interrupted, there is an incredible shock as I am shoved . . . out of the real world and into what seems, at least for the first few moments, a less real world. . . . The same thing is true in prayer, in meditation. For the disciplines of the creative process and Christian contemplation are almost identical.”

No. They’re not. There are critical differences: In visualizing, the author creates a world of his own making. In prayer he meets God in the real flesh-and-spirit world. In visualization *I* call the shots. In the real world *he* does.

Visualization is a mental tool of the imagination. A writer uses it to make up stories. Occultists use it to manipulate dark forces. Prayer and contemplation—within biblical parameters—is talking with and thinking deeply about the invisible God. Big difference.

## Better than Prayer?

When Jesus gave the model prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), he provided no techniques for astral journeys, no mystic formulas. We simply call his name, and the Creator of the universe hears us from Heaven. Not only that—his Holy Spirit is already in us. And we have permission to pray in the very name of Jesus, our Mediator. God’s whole three-person self is involved in our little conversations with him. Wow.

Our bold approach to the throne of Heaven requires no secret technique lost from the church, no magical mystery tour. God is always with the believer. The indwelling is real. Wherever we are, he is. Really.

Here's prayer: I talk and he listens. What an awesome way to commune with the Lord of the universe—achingly, beautifully, simply profound. Even a child can do it.

## I Rule?

Admittedly, creating a fictional world in which I call the shots is a heady experience. I create; I destroy. And as a novelist/theologian, I *could* visualize a Jesus who'd tell me what I *sincerely think* he'd want me to know. Piece of cake. Here's the hitch: *that* "Jesus" would be a Frankenstein Savior sewn together from bits of Scripture and my own self-centered desires, not my Lord.

If Calvin Miller is correct when he said "We cannot commune with a Savior whose form and shape elude us" (*The Table of Inwardness*, p. 93; quoted in Hunt, p. 161), then what of Old Testament worshippers who never saw Yahweh and were forbidden to make images of him?

Idols are made from wood and metal, but also from wishful thinking.

## The Word Speaks

Yes, the Lord spoke in visions and dreams to Noah, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Paul, John . . . He spoke—and still speaks—to whom he wills for his purpose and in his time.

And yes, visualization is a great tool for writing fiction, for getting our thoughts in order, for calming emotions. (Imagine you're on a beach. The sky is blue; the sand is white. Feel the warm breeze . . . aah . . .) But this trend of visualizing spirit beings, gods, ascended masters, and other saviors has been a staple of occultism worldwide for ages, and is growing in our culture. Satan mimics authentic prophetic visions. Imagine millions of Christians drifting into worlds of their own making, talking to fictional gods, awaiting further instructions, and then acting on those doctrines. Sounds like a recipe for the great delusion Jesus predicted in Matthew 24.

Take care, believers. When some of Israel's prophets drifted into occultism, God issued warnings:

"The Lord said to [Jeremiah], 'The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds'" (Jeremiah 14:14).

"This what the Lord Almighty says: 'Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord'" (Jeremiah 23:16).

God said to Ezekiel: "Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: 'Hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing! . . . They say, "The Lord declares," when the Lord has not sent them; yet they expect their words to be fulfilled'" (Ezekiel 13:2, 3, 6).

"If someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough" (2 Corinthians 11:4).

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