

Imagine It  
By Elizabeth Gilbert

Why do we keep doing things that bring us short-term pleasure, but long-term pain? (Or, worse, bring us no pleasure at all — but just suffering.) When you ask someone why they are staying in a relationship with somebody who is constantly lying to them, cheating on them, withholding love from them, not respecting them, always demeaning them, never coming through for them, endlessly hurting them — the person will often say: "Because I can't imagine my life without him."

You seriously can't even IMAGINE your life without him? Or her?

What we have right there, is a terrible failure of imagination.

The human imagination is literally a limitless canvas, and you can't even summon up a picture of a future for yourself that might be better than this cycle of endless pain? Same thing when you say that you can't imagine your life without cigarettes. Or that you can't imagine how you could ever go through a day without needing a drink. Or that you can't imagine how you could ever leave that degrading job and find something better. Or that you can't imagine not spending Christmas with your family, even though you always leave the event in tears and shame, because they are toxic, cruel people, who never miss a chance to eviscerate you. Or that you can't imagine exploring new pathways to divinity, even though the religion you were raised with has become a mind-prison. Or that you can't imagine ever getting out of debt. Or that you can't imagine giving yourself permission to explore your creativity, or your sexuality. Or that you can't imagine ever leaving your town to go live somewhere else.

Why are you keeping your imagination on such a short leash, when all it wants to do is soar and explore? Why can you not imagine something better for your life? Why can you not imagine that the universe — in all its infinite possibilities — might not have something else in store for you besides more misery, stagnation, and suffering? Why can you not imagine that perhaps you were not made to white-knuckle your way through life, but perhaps to actually enjoy it?

You have to be able to imagine something good for yourself before you can have it. You must create within your imagination an idea of what your life could look like, in a better way — or else you can't change anything for the better, or seek anything good for yourself.

I had to imagine myself capable of speaking Italian before I started — as an adult — to study that new language. I had to imagine myself walking down the streets of New York City, before I dared to move there from my small town. I had to imagine myself getting every single job I ever sought out, before I would be able to summon the courage to show up for the interview. (I didn't get those jobs all the time, of course — more on this later! — but I could imagine getting them.)

I had to imagine that I could write books, before I had the courage to begin writing them. I didn't know how to write books. But I could imagine myself doing it...and so, soon, I WAS doing it.

I had to imagine that there could be a better life for me on the other side of my unhappy marriage, before I could leave that marriage. I had to imagine that I was capable of becoming a more honest and trustworthy human being, before I could seek a pathway to personal honor.

I had to imagine — even in the darkest pit of my depression — that someday I would not be a depressed person anymore. I didn't know how I was going to get through my depression, because it was a nightmare, but if I had not been able to imagine myself as healthy and happy, I never would have been able to seek out professional help, and yoga, and prayer, and even medication — and all the things that saved me. In other words, if I could not imagine myself ever being anything but depressed — why would I have bothered to seek change and healing?

Imagination is not a promise. Nothing is ever promised to us. Sometimes I've imagined good things for my life, and then was unable to achieve them. I have imagined friendships that I hoped would last forever, and then watched those friendships die. I have imagined getting jobs that I didn't get, or finding love that I didn't find.

So just because you can imagine it, doesn't mean you're going to get it. But that's OK — you still have to imagine good things! Because I never got anything good out of my life without imagining it first. So I refuse to ever keep my imagination tethered on a short leash, even when things are going wrong.

This is the heart and soul of optimism, and optimism is the beginning of all possibility.

These days, I can imagine all kinds of things for my future.

I can imagine myself living to over 100 years old, so it's worth it for me to take care of my health now. (If you can only imagine that you are doomed to die young — maybe because people in your family always die young — then why would you bother to take care of yourself in the first place?)

I can imagine myself finding creative ways to keep on enjoying and honoring my life, even when the people I love have died — so I don't need to live in fear and panic about who might be taken away from me someday. I can just love those people with all my heart now — while we are all still here — and I can imagine that God will someday show me how to live without them, if I am forced to...because I've seen other people do that, so I know that it is humanly possible.

I can imagine myself starting to study Greek or watercoloring when I'm 80, so I don't have to worry that my days of learning are over. I can imagine myself making new friends when I'm 95.

I can imagine myself growing braver as I get older, and more wise — and that's why I go out of my way now to study courage and wisdom, in order to learn how to be braver and more wise. (Because if you don't imagine that you can learn these things, why would you even bother trying?)

I can imagine that I can trust myself to never again settle for a life of pain or stagnation, and therefore I can relax about my future, rather than fretting over it.

I can imagine that this world is becoming a better place, not a worse one...and I can imagine myself being part of that. (Seriously: I can.)

You have no idea the limitlessness of my imagination.

But you also might have no idea about the limitlessness of YOUR imagination.

Perhaps you have just not been using your imagination widely enough.

Perhaps it is time to let that thing off the leash.

Start imagining bigger and better things for yourself, OK?

Ask yourself how you would finish this sentence: "I could never imagine myself..."

Now REALLY examine that statement, to see if you are not just suffering from a terrible failure of imagination.

Thank you for your courage