You can imagine. Let me help you.

By Laura Kelly Fanucci
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As newly bereaved parents, we hear this all the time.

I can't imagine what you're going through. I can't imagine what you're feeling. I can't imagine what this is like. I can't imagine.

I understand this sentiment completely. People want to be respectful of the terrible loss we have experienced. They don't want to assume that they know how it feels. They want to tell us that they see the depth of our pain and they respect the tragedy we have experienced.

But as a writer who relies on imagination daily, I want to tell them—and you—that there is an important clarification to be made here: you *can* imagine how we are feeling. **What you mean is that you can *only* imagine.** (And that you may not *want* to imagine.)

The difference between these statements matters deeply.

The gift of imagination is one of the most powerful tools we have in our relationships. It is a fundamental part of what makes us human. Our minds can move from the present here and now (with its limited sensory inputs) and from the past that we have known (with its limited personal experience or acquired knowledge) into an unknown elsewhere.

This imagined potentiality can be realistic or fantastical; it is unbounded by what we can grasp by our senses or draw from our past. It is the laboratory of creativity and the fertile ground of dreams.

It is also the birthplace of empathy. Because if you want to imagine what it is like to lose a child? You can.

All you have to do is let your mind wander down that path, the very path you fear most. And when you reach the place of horror and terror, and every cell in your body screams out to recoil and run away and forget that this place could ever exist, ask yourself to stay there just one moment longer.

Now pretend that you have to wake up in this dreaded place every day. You have to go through the daily motions of your life while still in this place. You have to interact normally with other people while still in this place. You have to readjust every plan for your future while still in this place.

If you shudder or shake your head or say to yourself, "I just can't," then you have done it right. You have imagined. You have joined us in this place.

I am not saying you should undergo such exercises for self-defeating purposes, purely to make yourself feel wretched or hopeless about the staggering burdens of existence. Imagination can be a dangerous tool, too. We have to care for our own mental health. If we imagined ourselves fully into every single tragedy we hear and every awful news story we read, we would be incapacitated. None of us would get out of bed in the morning.

But when you say (and we have all said this; yours truly included), *I can't imagine*, you are not telling the full truth of your capacity.

We can indeed imagine. What we mean is that we don't want to imagine.

And I sympathize with this honest fact. There are plenty of things I don't want to imagine. Imagination can lead us to dark and lonely places. It pulls us from the comfort of what we know and what we have constructed to keep ourselves safe. It asks us to wonder about how we would face hardships that we never want to enter into our lives. It forces us to remember that life could shatter in an instant and we could be forever scarred.

But imagination also strengthens our love for people in different places from our own lives. It deepens our gratitude for the good we have been given. It expands our sense of our own capacities and what we believe we could handle. It creates space for possibilities of how we could enter into what we have not yet experienced. And it opens our eyes to a fuller view of how God is working in our world.

Imagination makes us human. It lets us love each other.

> And how can we even begin to understand the grief of parents who have lost a child? (Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 254)

This is how you begin. You can try to imagine. Even though imagination cannot heal another's wounds or allow you to enter fully into their suffering, it invites you to empathize.

You do not have to wrap your arms around the fullness of what someone is living through to be able to sit with them and love them well. You can say that you can only imagine; you can be honest that it's hard to imagine; you can even admit to yourself that you don't want to imagine.

But if you want to reach out to anyone in pain or confusion or difficulty, the best way to begin is by sitting with them, listening to their story, and imagining yourself into their shoes.

Because then you will be able to speak from your imagination, which has now been stretched. And then you will be able to reach out from your heart, which has now been humbled. And then you will be able to stay by their side. Because your whole self—body, mind, and heart—will be stronger.

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