

# imagine

There is a little story that one of our faculty members likes to tell. It's about a ten-year old girl in India who one day at school heard her teacher talk about the notion of the ecological footprint – a measure of how fast a given population consumes its share of the natural resources which sustain life on earth. A sobering lesson, one would expect, for a child her age. This girl, however, responded with a big smile: “But I have my hands!”

For most of us, the lesson of the ecological footprint implies the notion of sacrifice: It reminds us that we should limit the use of our cars, change our eating habits, avoid unnecessary air travel, turn down the heating in the winter – generally assume a suspicious attitude towards our own overindulgent and consumerist life styles. In short, most of us understand the footprint as an admonition to follow an ethics of self-restriction, if not self-denial.

Not so for this girl from India. She effortlessly made the leap of connecting the dots between the foot and the hand thus replacing self-restraint by self-empowerment. It was this leap of imagination which enabled her to believe in her own ability to effect change by using her 'handprint' in order to counteract the negative impact of her 'footprint'. Luckily, her teacher realized the beauty and the power of this statement and helped turn it into a call to action. By now the Global Handprint Network inspired by the intuition of this Indian girl has followers in 32 countries (<http://www.handprint.in>).



**“Imagine the world that’s possible and fearlessly pursue it,”** was one of the key takeaways of the 2017 Obama Foundation Summit that brought together hundreds of aspiring leaders from around the world to exchange ideas and explore creative solutions to common problems in our communities, locally and globally. Is this all that it takes, you might ask – to imagine? But don’t let yourself be deceived by a daydreamer’s or a Disney version of this notion. The ability to imagine the world that’s possible is a demanding exercise on at least two counts: Foremost, it requires a sound foundation of knowledge or else the world that you propose crumbles to dust. Second, it requires a certain suspension of disbelief. The biggest obstacle to changing the world for the better is to not start trying because the challenges seem unsurmountable and who, you may wonder, am I to make a difference? Unless we are willing to suspend disbelief that a different world is possible, the power of our imagination will wane and we will feel paralyzed.

Consider the following words by Wendy Brown, an eminent professor of political science at Berkeley, given at the graduation of her students last year:

“Asking yourself **‘what kind of world do I want to live in’** invites you to imagine utopias – in which there really is equal opportunity for all human beings to realize their dreams; in which there are no women abused, children trafficked, peoples colonized, species imperiled, mountain tops blown off and coastal waters drilled for dirty energy; no slums, homelessness, wars, refugees or climate change, no racialized and gendered orders of regard and treatment. But this question also invites you, in the ordinary thrum of life, to find the grace, and not only the grit, to greet every crossroad, and every surprise on the road, as an occasion to choose on behalf of the world you want live in.” (<http://utotherescue.blogspot.com/2018/05/what-kind-of-world-do-you-want-to-live.html>)

This quote illustrates that imagining the world that’s possible is an act of resistance against the state of affairs ‘as is’. However, imagination as a driving force of change has been depleted due to the combined impact of the Internet- and social media-induced numbing of the mind and a widespread political apathy especially among the younger population. **There is an urgent need to reclaim the capacity to envisage the pathway to a future in which we can escape the current political, social, economic, environmental predicaments. Without this capacity we will remain stuck on the road towards a system breakdown. “A different world is possible” – true, but only if and when we are bold enough to imagine it sharply, vividly and courageously.**

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