

Creativity and Story in Imaginal Space

— planting and tending a virtual scrapbook

The Sea of Faith Conference, 11 September 2026



I didn't ever meet Don Cupitt personally though did once almost literally bump into him on a wooden footbridge over the River Cherwell in Oxford.

He was going one way and I was going in the opposite direction, but both of us were headed, as we thought and intended, for the same destination. As things turned out, Don was going in the right direction, not for the first time, and it was I — not for the last time — who was erring and straying like a lost sheep.

We both, though, ended up in the same lecture theatre, I to sit in the audience and Don to give a major lecture at a conference convened by the Sea of Faith Network.

This talk in September 2026 is a tribute to Don, and to the abiding influence of the community dedicated to his memory, the Sea of Faith Network. It is a great honour to be with you, and to share thoughts with you on creativity, curiosity and celebration.

Re-reading some of Don's books in preparation for today, I noted the preface which Alison Webster wrote for the second edition of *Taking Leave of God*. When she had read the first edition, she said, it was like falling in love. The experience, she continued, was 'both exhilarating and life changing, rivalling that of falling in love with another human being. Nearly.'

I too, these last few weeks, have met so much, so much, that was endearing. To give a single example. In the opening paragraph of one of his most seminal books of the 1990s, *The Religion of Being*, Don wrote 'I often find my own ideas are to me just as objectionable and hard to understand as other people find them.'

I still remember one of the things Don Cupitt said in that lecture in Oxford some 40 years ago, and I shall close this talk by citing it. At around that time, by the way, he was writing his book entitled *The Revelation of Being* (SCM Press, 1998) the one that had more references to Heidegger, whom he referred to as 'the great German philosopher' and whom he mentioned by name in that book more than to any other philosopher.

Rather irrelevantly (well, actually, very irrelevantly) I recall that students of philosophy at my university some decades earlier used to refer routinely and disrespectfully to this

great German existentialist thinker as Martin Friedegger, not Heidegger. It is not at all irrelevant or disrespectful here this morning, however, to recall that a key concept in Heidegger/Friedegger's thinking was *Sein zum Tode*, Being to Death. The concept of Being to Death is relevant to what the sub-title of this talk refers to as a virtual scrapbook – 'planting and tending a virtual scrapbook'.

Like most scrapbooks this one is a sort of archive or memoir, or a patchwork quilt of someone's life-story, or a jumble of images, stitched somewhat haphazardly together.

Specifically, the scrapbook in question began to take shape about three years ago in the midst of what a friend and colleague of mine calls the mortsort process. Yes, You heard correctly, mortsort.

Mortsort



Mortsort, a syllable and a verb, conjoined, to constitute a new word, a new neologism.

Mort, as in *mortal*, *mortality*, *mortuary*, *mortician*, *postmortem*.

Sort, as in *tidy up*, *put in order*, *arrange*, *settle*, *declutter*, *downsize*, *unblock*, *take care of*, *get rid of*, *guard*, *tend*, *look after*, *nurse*, *keep*.

If and when a mortsort is successfully completed, there's simply your will and your testament, your letter or memo of wishes, your car keys and house keys, birth and marriage certificates, passport, bank manager and insurance policy details, reservation of a spot in a graveyard or cemetery somewhere, and a note of what you hope the vicar won't say, imply or assume at your funeral.

The end-users and beneficiaries of a mortsort, as thus evoked and summarised, are directly or indirectly your nearest and dearest, and various solicitors, executors, trustees, funeral directors, waste-disposal companies, charity shops, gravediggers, people like that.

But in another understanding of the term, namely in the Heidegger/Friedegger understanding of the term, the end-users are people like philosophers, theologians, mystics, poets and playwrights, dancers and composers, storytellers, former bishops and various recovering evangelicals, bereavement counsellors and palliative care specialists in hospitals or hospices ... people like that ... maybe, people like those who attend conferences convened by the Sea of Faith Network?

Anyway, an incidental consequence of your mortsort process, you can't help hoping, is that no skeleton or smoking gun is left behind in a cupboard or chest of drawers or filing cabinet somewhere, or in some attic or shed, or in a computer or phone, or amongst tweets and likes on Twitter or Facebook. There are few – or, ideally, no embarrassing or compromising reminders or traces in old diaries and journals of your own fat, fallible, foolish relentless ego, or egos.

Your *raison d'être*, if there ever was one, or a bit of one, by any chance.

It is with this latter understanding of mortsort — the Heidegger/Friedegger understanding — this talk now proceeds. It is structured according to words or phrases in its title, Creativity, Story and Imaginal Space.

Creativity

I wonder whether most members of this network already know, and already cherish, the sonnet that John Donne once wrote for the feast of The Annunciation. Since about the year 650 in the current era, the feast is celebrated throughout Christendom each year on the 25 March, which is exactly 39 weeks, or nine calendar months, before 25 December.

Addressing Mary the mother-to-be of Jesus in about 1610, Donne writes: 'yea, thou art now thy Maker's maker'. In case any reader or listener is puzzled by this, Donne then explains the same general point in a slightly different way, though not at all any more helpfully: '[thou art now] thy Father's mother'.

What was Donne's point? I take it he was suggesting that all creativity involves a two-way process, mutuality, interaction — the creator and the creation, the poet and the poem, the painter and the painting, the carver and the carving, the founder and the foundation, the knower and the known, the weaver and the web or network. Even, the god and the cosmos.

The subject and the object, but you can never determine with total clarity which of these two comes first, or where, or when.

If you're a poet you have to use paradox to try to capture this, as Donne did. There's an 'abundance of connectivity', to cite a phrase attributed to Thích Nhất Hạnh — you have to make statements that are meaningless and mendacious, lest by staying silent (*ne tacetur*) you tell the greater lie.

About one hundred and sixty years after John Donne died (namely in about 1798) another English poet (namely William Wordsworth) recalled some days he had spent walking near Tintern Abbey in the Wye Valley. I am a lover, he said, of the mountains and the woods and the meadows, and of all that we behold from this green earth:

...all the mighty world
of eye and ear, both what they half-create,
and what perceive; well pleased to recognise
in nature and the language of the sense,
the anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
the guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
of all my moral being.

'All the mighty world of eye and ear, both what they half-create, and what perceive.'
There's abundant connectiveness between human senses on the one hand ('the mighty world of eye and ear') and the similarly mighty world which the senses behold.

And here's another poet, William Blake (1767-1827), weaving us brazenly back to the contexts and concerns of this Sea of Faith conference with some bits and pieces of graffiti:

*A Poet a Painter a Musician an Architect —
the Man Or Woman who is not one of these is not
a Christian.*

And Blake scribbled in the same breath:

*'You must leave Fathers & Mothers & Houses
& Lands if they stand in the way of Art'.*

The context in which Blake made these challenging remarks was an engraving by himself which featured the torture, pain, desolation and failing struggle of one Laocoon, and of his two sons, poisoned inside and squashed outside by venomous serpents, despatched by a resentful and vengeful god after the siege and destruction of Troy



The original sculpture of the suffering of Laocöon was made somewhere in Greece around the time that Jesus of Nazareth lived elsewhere. It was then lost for about 1500 years until it somehow made its way to Rome, and then 200 years later came to the attention of thinkers and philosophers associated with the *Aufklärung*, the Enlightenment, in Germany. It was simultaneously considered to be both beautiful and profoundly horrifying and disgusting. Johann Goethe said of it that 'a true work of art, like a work of nature, never ceases to open boundlessly before the mind. We examine — we are impressed with it ... but it can never be all comprehended, still less can its essence, its value, be expressed in words'.

About 150 years after Blake's death, the storyteller and philosopher Iris Murdoch gave much thought to how a work of art could be simultaneously horrible and beautiful. An artist, she suggested, 'looks without sin on a sinful world' — an artist gazes on and attends to despair and desolation but without their own fat, relentless ego rushing to judgement. This was how the still sad music humanity, in Wordsworth's words, could be and become 'the anchor of my purest thoughts' at or in the 'soul of all my moral being'.

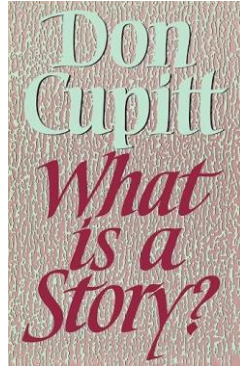
Art, writes Murdoch: 'illuminates accident and contingency and the general muddle of life, the limitations of time and the discursive intellect, so as to enable us to survey complex or horrible things which would otherwise appal us ... It is an image of virtue. Its condensed, clarified, presentation enables us to look without sin upon a sinful world. It renders innocent and transforms into truthful vision our baser energies connected with power, curiosity, envy and sex.'

Blake also once scribbled, as many or most members of the Sea of Faith Network know well:

Thou art a man
God is no more
Thy own humanity
Learn to adore

It was of course the humanity of creativity that Blake and Murdoch challenged us to adore, not the humanness symbolised by venomous and strangling sea serpents.

Story



What is a story? What stories ultimately satisfy is life's hunger for itself, wrote Don Cupitt once. He continued: '[Life's] desire to exist, its desire to be turned on, its desire to be given form and made able to flow. We consume stories most eagerly in infancy and then again in our adolescence at just the times, that is, when our appetite is at its strongest. We want to join the game, and stories form and equip us to do so.'

'We consume stories most eagerly in infancy': well, here are two stories about stories in and around infancy:



What about a story? said Christopher Robin. 'What about a story?', I said. 'Could you very sweetly tell Winnie-the-Pooh one? 'I suppose I could,' I said. 'What sort of stories does he like?' 'About himself. Because he's that sort of bear.' 'Oh, I see.' 'So could you very sweetly?' 'I'll try,' I said. So I tried.

And here's another scrap of story similarly featuring a parent with an infant child at bedtime:



'Daddy?' – 'What?' – 'Are magic spells real?' This was a new phase, just this last month, a reality phase. When he told her spiders eat bugs she turned to her mother and asked, 'Do they really?' and when Clare told her God was in the sky and all around them, she turned to her father with a sly yet insistent smile, 'Is He really? 'They'real in stories,' Jack answered curtly. She had made him miss a beat in the narrative.

— John Updike, *Pigeon Feathers*, 1962.

Imaginal Space

The word 'imaginal' has crept into the English language only quite recently and it is still used, if it is ever used at all, in a range of different contexts, and therefore with a range of nuances and implications, and baggage entanglements. Three such contexts are (a) metaphysics and spirituality (b) psychology and (c) national and international politics. One observer of the term has said they like that it's rather strange and mystifying for it's 'a roomy enough notion ... to inform a way of knowing at this stage of history that feels relatively ecumenical, at a time where human survival may be at stake'.

In the field of psychology the concept of imaginal has been particularly influential in the work of Carl Gustav Jung and his many followers. In the field of politics and critical theory it features in studies of the role of images, imagination and mythology in relation to [sexism](#) and coloniality, and racisms such as [eurocentrism](#), [islamophobia](#), ethnonationalism and antisemitism. With regard metaphysics and spirituality, a key figure has been Henri Corbin (1903-1978), a scholar whose life's work was in relation to Islamic mysticism in Iran and central Asia.



In Islam, as in the other Abrahamic traditions there is a commonsense distinction between heaven and earth, eternal and temporal, spiritual and material, sacred and secular, human and divine, empirical and transcendental, natural and supernatural. Particularly in lineages associated with Persia and Iran, there has been attention to the space where these various separate domains, divine and human, and so forth, intermingle, rather as when two separate oceans meet each other. Corbin named this space of intermingling the *mundus imaginalis*, translated into English as *imaginal space* or *imaginal realm*. The distinctive feature of the space is the presence and agency of images, co-created by the fusion of opposites.

Companions of the word *image* in an English thesaurus remind us that near synonyms include likeness, similarity, metaphor, symbol, sign, sacrament, representation, model, cartoon. Sketch and archetype, and also story, narrative, myth, fable and parable.

All images entail the use of art — not only visual art, such as painting and sculpture, but also music, poetry and story.

Really? Can a piece of music be said to be an image? Can non-representational art or sculpture? Can a story? Well, yes, indeed.

Michael Tippett, to cite a single but knowing witness with regard to music said:

'My true function ... is to continue an age-old tradition, fundamental to our civilisation, which goes back into pre-history and will go forward into the unknown future. This tradition is **to create images from the depths of the imagination and give them form** (emphasis added!)... For it is only through images that the inner world communicates at all. Images of the past, shapes of the future. Images of vigour for a decadent period, images of calm for one too violent. Images of reconciliation for worlds torn by division. And in an age of mediocrity and shattered dreams, images of abounding, generous, exuberant beauty.'

Yes, all musicians — like all artists — are in the business of 'creating images from the depths of the imagination ... images of reconciliation and connectedness, images of abounding, generous, exuberant beauty'.

For Tippett, as for many others, the origin of such images is interaction with 'the inner world' (or, in Wordsworth's phrase, 'the soul of all my moral being'), not a supposed heavenly world of religion, heaven and metaphysics.

And non-representative painting and sculpture, can that be an image?



The painter of this is present, it so happens, at this conference. The painting was one of a series entitled *Transfiguration* and at an exhibition at the Oxfordshire Museum two years ago, and the series was accompanied by a set of quotations. One of these was from an eminent specialist on climate change and climate justice. 'I used to think,' they said, 'the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy. To deal with those issues we need a spiritual and cultural transformation — and we scientists do not know how to do that.'

Well, artists and other makers of 'images of reconciliation and connectedness, images of abounding, generous, exuberant beauty' do have ideas of how to do that!

By the way, the word image and its associated word imaginal strike a poignant chord in the minds and hearts, and in the souls, of people in this Sea of Faith gathering who remember of [souls and spirits, of people in this Sea of Faith gathering who remember of a newspaper headline on 17 October 1963:](#)

OUR IMAGE OF GOD MUST GO

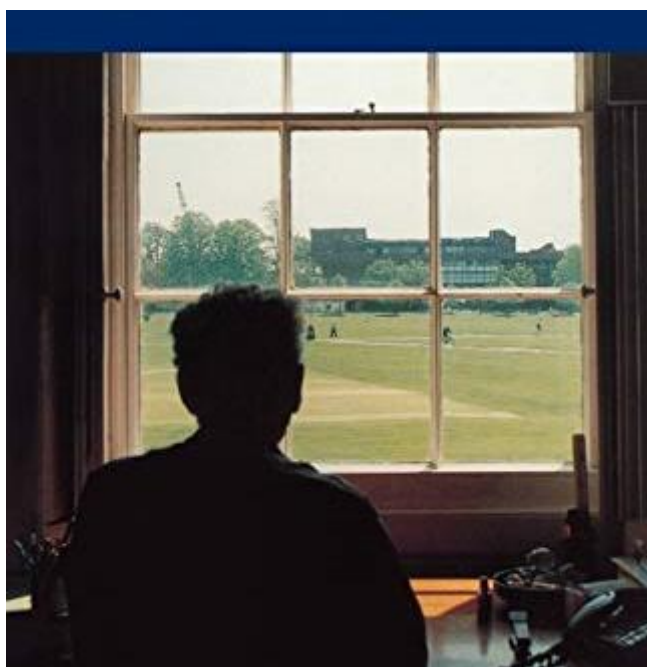


In his talk at the Sea of Faith Network conference that I attended about 40 years ago, Don Cupitt said that one of his customs was to watch clouds moving and changing in the sky, engaged in a never ceasing flow and flux of images. He would simply watch and gaze at the sky, he said, lost in contemplation and meditation. In two books he was writing at that time, influenced by his deep reading of the works of 'the great German philosopher Martin Heidegger', he said that being ('*Sein*') consists of experiences that are 'short-lived, watery, once-only, volatile, ephemeral, shadowy, trembling, emotional, briefly-glimpsed'.

Do I, can I, recognise this list as a summary of *Patience and Passion, an archival scrapbook*? It began with a mortsort process and continued with growing awareness of *Sein zum Tode*, and it has provoked thoughts this morning about creativity, story and imaginal space.

Yes, does Cupitt's list summarise my life-story, and summarise his?

Do members of the Sea of Faith Network recognise the list as a summary of *their* life-stories?



This lecture now ends with that list being repeated. But before the repetition there are two sentences of introduction by Don Cupitt himself, and after it two sentences by him of reflection and conclusion:

"We are giving up the last traces of belief in life after death, and therewith giving up also the old and foolish fear of death. You feel and I feel an increasingly strong religious love for everything **short-lived, watery, once-only, volatile, ephemeral, shadowy, trembling, emotional and briefly-glimpsed.**

"The more bloody Plato scorns it, the more I love it. What's most fleeting is what most reveals being: the revelation of Being as love depends on, and is intimately linked with, religious acceptance of one's own transience."

Notes and References

- 1 Don Cupitt, 22 May 1934—18 January 2024. There is substantial information about the Sea of Faith Network, and about this conference at <https://sofn.uk/>.
- 2 The term *Mortsort* was coined by my friend and co-worker Angela Gluck.
- 3 John Donne, died 1631, aged about 60.
- 4 'Upon The Laocoon', in *Essays on Art* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe translated by Samuel Gray Ward 1862 and recorded at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPL1Lpjhiw>, last accessed 27.8.26.
- 5 'A Poet, a Painter, a Musician' ... these quotations from William Blake are quoted by John Carey in *What Good Are The Arts*, Faber and Faber 2005, page 136.
- 6 'Fat and relentless ego': Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, page 52
- 7 'Without sin in a sinful world': *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Iris Murdoch, Chatto and Windus 1992, page 8.
- 8 Michael Tippett (1905-1998), *Moving into Aquarius*, Paladin 1964, page 156.
- 9 'Transfiguration': the artist is Jenifer Wates. There are further images by her at <https://www.facebook.com/Oxonmuseum/posts/jenifer-wates-is-in-the-brew-house-finishing-the-installation-of-her-exhibition-/3876986722412443/>

- 10 'The Abundance is the Connectedness' by Sue Lyle, 11 August 2026, at <https://rootsandcommons.substack.com/p/the-abundance-is-the-connectedness>, last accessed 27.8.26.
- 11 Don Cupitt, *What is a Story?*, 1991, quoted in *Inside Stories – wisdom and hope for changing worlds* by Angela Wood and Robin Richardson, Trentham Books, 1992.
- 12 *Winnie-the-Pooh* by A A Milne, 1926, the foreword. The parent here was Alan Alexander Milne (1982-1956) and the small child was Christopher Robin Milne (1920-1996).
- 13 *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* by John Updike (1932-2009), Penguin Books 1965, page 52.
- 14 OUR IMAGE OF GOD MUST GO: *The Observer*, 17 October 1963, fuller information at 'Did you hear the one about the Observer, the Bishop and God?' by Jeremy Carrette, University of Kent, March 2023, <https://research.kent.ac.uk/anglican-history-theology/did-you-hear-the-one-about-the-observer-the-bishop-and-god/>
- 15 For discussions of the terms *imaginal space* and *imaginal realm*, see:
 - *Introducing the Imaginal* by Cynthia Bourgeault, 13 November 2018, <https://www.cynthiabourgeault.org/blog-old/2018/11/13/introducing-the-imaginal>
 - *The Metacrisis is a Spiritual Injunction* by Jonathan Rowson, 24 March 2026, <https://perspecteeva.substack.com/p/the-metacrisis-is-a-spiritual-injunction>
- 16 Don Cupitt, *The Revelation of Being*, SCM Press 1998, page 18.