



Re-imagine
There's a Heaven,
It's Difficult but Try

By Steve McAlpine

I'm really looking forward to the release of the movie, *Yesterday*, a story about a struggling musician, Jack Malik in the UK who, after a bicycle accident following a planetary wide electricity blackout in which all the world's lights go out, wakes up to discover that no one has heard of The Beatles.

Never heard of "Yesterday". Couldn't sing and sway with a "nah, nah, nah" of "Hey Jude". Wouldn't even conceive of an octopus living in a garden by the sea, never mind that particular mollusc owning the aforementioned plot of greenery. And as for yellow submarines? They're all steely black or grey in this world.

The names John, Paul, George, and Ringo roll off nobodies' tongues. Except his. Except this struggling musician who was about to give it all away because, although he's good, no one's backing him.

His last gig is a no-show—from the audience.

"If it hasn't happened by now, it'll take a miracle," Jack laments to his schoolteacher friend, who, unbeknownst to him, is in love with him.

"Miracles happen," she insists, ever the true believer. And with that, we are set on the path of a classic magical mystery tour of a movie.

The very next day, the miracle starts after the disaster of the night before. A real resurrection moment indeed. Jack wakes up in hospital after his accident in the same world, but with one important difference. No Beatles.

It's a slow burn discovery. He strums and sings the song of the movie title to some friends, a lament to his now dead dreams of being a musician himself, and they are astonished. Shook, even! This girl who loves him, but whom he merely considers a friend and whose hand he would probably never hold, is breathless upon his performance.

Which is nothing compared to Jack's astonishment as his friends insist they have never heard of The Beatles, never mind the song. A frantic Google search at home, during an appropriately timed thunderstorm confirms it all. In the world he has woken up in, the Fab Four don't exist. It's all Coldplay's "Fix You"—a spine-shuddering thought indeed.

All that exists is Jack's knowledge of The Beatles. His and his alone.

And it sets him on the way to be a global superstar. Just think! A classic song-book of three hundred absolute bangers (well most of them anyway), and you, and you alone in the world, know the tunes, the lyrics, the way to play them.

The results are instant. And huge. Jack blows up. He sets to 'writing' these classics and then delivering them in record time, with record results. Fame rushes at him. It's Beatlemania all over again, except for the fact that for everyone else on the planet it's for the first time.

Jack gets signed up by a global recording company, feted around the world, scribbles down and performs my all-time favourite Beatles song, "Something", on the set of a show that looks exactly like the kind of show James Corden would host, with James Corden hosting it, and history is (re)made.

Now I've got to say that I am super excited about seeing this movie. It's a brilliant concept and I love The Beatles, always have. And my daughter, at 18, listens to The Beatles and George Harrison's later music, on high rotation on vinyl on a retro record player.

It's as if we're trying to tap into something that we know about but have never experienced ourselves. A memory of a reality lived through stories we've heard. My mum is the Boomer generation who loved The Beatles (her maiden name was McCartney after all!), while I am an X-Gen brought up on The Cure and Nirvana.

But for me there's something magical about The Beatles that has stuck in our collective subconscious. And every time my daughter takes out *The White Album* (okay, okay I know it's actually just called *The Beatles*), and places down that needle, it takes her somewhere she loves but hasn't experienced.

Which has set me to thinking. I wrote a piece earlier on my blog about how the world would be if one day we woke up and only we had heard of Jesus. No one else. Just me. Or just you. Apart from the world being dark, cruel, and cold, what would it be like?

How would we go about spreading the good news of our Saviour? What stories would we tell? What parts of church history would we leave out? Where would we start? Would it spread like wildfire like it did the first time? Would we make the same mistakes through history, like we did the first time?

I enjoyed that delicious and crazy idea for a while. But it was reading the myriad responses to the movie's sneak-peak trailer from music magazines and websites that got me thinking deeper about it.

Many of the music journalists were discussing the likelihood or otherwise of The Beatles songs having the same response today if they were first written and performed by someone else. Would they stand the test of time?

On the whole, many of the songs were still considered classics, but the world is very different to what it was in the 1960s, the music world even more so. The consensus was that, while the movie is a great idea, imagining our current world as a world in which The Beatles music dominated the charts the way they did back then is a bridge too far. Too much has changed! Culturally, socially, and artistically for it to happen like it did the first time around is impossible.

But here's the question. What if it wasn't happening the first time around? What if it was the second time around? What if the world had not heard of The Beatles, but had merely forgotten them? What if it wasn't a case of imagining The Beatles and their brilliance, but of *re-imagining* them?

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sehnsucht way. Why? Because we were built for transcendence and
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What if the collective consciousness was still there, but was suppressed and pushed down by the ensuing years; by the cynicism of the 1970s; by the epidemics (and discos) of the 1980s; by the nihilism of the 1990s; by the irony of the 2000s; by the despair of the 2010s?

I think the better movie—and who am I to say that to legends such as director Danny Boyle and screenwriter Richard Curtis—would be about a world that has forgotten the romantic beauty and wild excitement of Beatlemania; a world that has the longing for a past, but has allowed it to slip its mind. A world in which Jack does not so much invent The Beatles, as invite people to rediscover them, and in the process rediscover that joy and purpose and excitement that made it so special in the first place.

All the grunt work has been done by The Beatles, Jack's noble task is merely to reignite the now smoldering fuel. I think it's beyond the scope of the movie, but it's a tasty thought. (Danny Boyle and Richard Curtis, if you're reading this, speak to my agent.)

Let's move it from pop culture to something higher up the cultural totem. CS Lewis, the great Christian apologist whose works seem more prescient than ever, was fascinated by the idea of longing for something that we have not experienced, yet feel we should have. He utilized the German word '*sehnsucht*' to describe it. Not a pretty word, but a wonderful concept: the intense, bittersweet longing for what always seems to be out of our grasp.

Lewis called it "*the inconsolable longing in the heart for we know not what*". And even if you don't understand German, you'll certainly get what Lewis is talking about. In fact it's that very longing for something that drove Lewis himself to a theistic view of the world and then, ultimately, to bowing his knee to Christ.

For Lewis, much of his later writing was driven by trying to get himself—and his audience—closer and closer to that longing, and he was convinced that it was placed there by God in order to drive us beyond our mere mortal imaginings, towards re-imagining that crucial thing we had lost in our fallen state.

Lewis experienced *sehnsucht* upon finding a copy of George MacDonald's book *Phantastes* on a railway station bookstall, and he claims, "What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptize . . . my imagination."

Convert. Baptise. Big words. Big ideas. And where does he locate this? In his imagination. This stoic atheist academic was not re-intellectualised into the Kingdom of God, but *re-imagined* into it.

In the same vein, what if Jack's role in *Yesterday* is not to make a name for himself, but to remake a name for a brilliant group of musicians who people have had an inconsolable longing for again, but, until Jack's appearance, have been unable to articulate it?

What if Jack's role is to help them re-imagine and rediscover? What if his quest starts with him imagining himself being famous, before switching to him helping people to re-imagine The Beatles being famous, and thereby discovering a longing that was always there, both for himself and others?

ITEC 2019 is entitled *Re-imagining Practice*. I will be calling my keynote address *Practice Re-imagining*. Why? Because as the people of God, as Christian educators living in a secular frame that is slowly, but surely covering over the Fab Three (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), our task is to help students re-imagine a world where such ideas are possible. Where such ideas shape all that we are and all that we do.

In his huge tome, *A Secular Age*, Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, describes what he calls "the social imaginary"; those ideas and concepts that are deemed plausible in the public square, and that shape us at deep subconscious levels in matters of practice and value. Needless to say the Christian framework in the West is no longer the primary social imaginary. Transcendence—the old view of it at least in which a world of gods and spirits animated our world—is no longer a public fact, but relegated to a private opinion.

Yet here's the rub. Our world still longs for transcendence; still aches for it in a *sehnsucht* way. Why? Because we were built for transcendence and our hearts are restless until they find their transcendence in Thee. But failing Thee, most people will settle for all sorts of projects to do the transcendence thing for them.

And the most transcendent project of all? The Me Project. Whether it's career, sexual identity, transitioning in gender, character, or relationship status, the Me Project is our new way of grasping at the transcendence we gave away when we stopped imagining God and started imagining ourselves alone in this universe.

The results are pretty grim. Sure they look sparkly on the outside, but the cracks are starting to appear in our pressured culture; a culture in which the old religious language of saints and sinners, is transferred onto people and groups. Our people, our groups, are the saints, *other* people, *other* groups, are the sinners.

It's not so much a loss of transcendence in the social imaginary, but a replacement of one transcendence for

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another. Meanwhile utopian ideals abound in a world in which we are purged of the 'other'; of the Left or the Right; of the Progressive or the Conservative; of the West or the Rest. And that purging took terrible toll in Christchurch just recently.

But imagine. In fact, re-imagine, a world where God's magnificence swamped us again. Where someone somewhere sang a song about yesterday and it caught a spark. And imagine if after that spark caught, we raced home and figured out ways to build upon it, to add fuel to this wonderful warming fire that excited people and stirred their re-imaginings for the songs that we were created to sing, but which have been swamped by so many lesser tunes? Not for our glory, but for God's.

It's deeply ironic that John Lennon wrote and performed a song called "Imagine", which calls us to imagine something that actually does not, cannot, and will not, exist in God's economy. His desires are not misplaced; he wants peace and love and an end of killing. He's singing a song for sure, but it's lesser in so many ways.

Lennon longs for something better for the world; it's a *sehnsucht* moment. But for the man who observed that The Beatles were more famous among young people than Jesus Christ, he must have known that something bigger than even themselves had to fill the hole left in the culture once they'd left the scene.

It's instructive that when I googled "Imagine" to get the lyrics, it was an Ariana Grande song of the same name that came up. All that tells me is that in the collective social imaginary of the Internet's algorithms, Lennon's utopian idea is slipping down the charts of our collective consciousness, replaced by the new social imaginary of deep individual desire. Grande's song goes like this:

*Step up the two of us, nobody knows us
Get in the car like, "Skrrt"
Stayin' up all night, order me pad thai
Then we gon' sleep 'til noon
Me with no makeup, you in the bathtub
Bubbles and bubbly, ooh
This is a pleasure, feel like we never
Act this regular*

*Click, click, click and post
Drip-drip-dripped in gold
Quick, quick, quick, let's go
Kiss me and take off your clothes*

*Imagine a world like that
Imagine a world like that
We go like up 'til I'm 'sleep on your chest
Love how my face fits so good in your neck
Why can't you imagine a world like that?
Imagine a world*

*Knew you were perfect after the first kiss
Took a deep breath like, "Ooh"
Feels like forever, baby, I never
Thought that it would be you
Tell me your secrets, all of the creepy shit
That's how . . .*

If that's all we've got to imagine, if that's all that it takes, then perhaps it's time to practice re-imagining before it's too late. Time to work as educators building that into our own lives first, then the lives of our students after that. Time to work on helping them rediscover the longing that the West has, but can no longer articulate.

Re-imagine there's a Heaven, it's difficult but try. But the more you do re-imagine it, the less difficult it will be, and the more easily you will shape your life around what cannot be seen, rather than what merely can be.

Re-imagine above us more than sky. Put aside your own earthbound Me Project and its pretence at transcendence, and allow yourself, like CS Lewis, to have your imagination reconverted and re-baptised into the gospel story.

Re-imagine all the people living life in peace in a Heaven that comes to Earth. Re-imagine it on that miraculous day when all the lights come on and The Beatles are upstaged by the King, and all the pain, sorrow, and tears feel like a bad dream from yesterday.

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