



The Spark of Imagination

The daughter of author Roald Dahl says imagination is not mere child’s play. Add an adult sense of pragmatism, and you can change the world.

By Ophelia Dahl as told to Elaine Lipworth Illustration by Hadley Hooper

AS A CHILD, I learned about imagination from my father. Every night he would tell us stories to help us with difficulties we were having at school. Dad had been to boarding school as a kid, and had felt helpless around such powerful adults. The idea that you can employ your imagination to take you out of difficult situations was important to him.

But the real power that I sensed in him sprang from his ability to connect his imagination to pragmatism. When things went wrong, he would never sit around and mope, or use his imagination just to escape. Rather, he used it to fix things, to find a way around the problem. He would invent a practical piece of equipment, a better mailbox, a better way to water the lawn.

The book of my dad’s that stands out most for me is *The BFG* (The Big Friendly Giant), which became a symbol for using imagination to change things in your life. But one of the best examples of how my father used his imagination wasn’t a book. It was when my brother Theo, at 6 months old, was in an accident. He was out with a nanny, a taxi hit the pram, and my brother was catapulted out and suffered

massive head injuries. After several operations to relieve pressure on his brain, doctors put in a shunt to redirect fluid. But it kept blocking, and my brother suffered a lot. It was agony for my parents. My father imagined that my brother’s life could be different. But he wasn’t just musing: He got together with an engineer and Theo’s neurosurgeon, and they devised a new shunt that worked differently—and better. It did the job, and the patent was given to Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children in London, where it went on to help others.

When I was 18, I went to Haiti for the first time. Before that, I hadn’t realised the depth of misery that existed in some places. I had enjoyed a nice childhood, and I could not just pop back to England and say, “Oh, I saw people living in shanty towns, starving and dying of diseases that are entirely treatable,” and forget about it. I felt compelled to do something.

Later, as I was helping to co-found Partners In Health (PIH), my dad gave me a lovely wad of cash—£2,000, in £20 notes—to take to Haiti. He didn’t say, “What are you going to do with the money? Give me a business plan.” He had faith that we would do something pragmatic with the money. We built a school with it.

Dad would say, “You need to be ‘sparky.’” I remember he used that term in *Danny, the Champion of the World*, to describe doing things in a way that isn’t drudge- and dread-filled. I also think it means to let your imagination spark you into practical action: Imagine the school, fund the school, build the school.

After spending time in a rural village in Haiti, I realized there were some places with no access to health care. We could envision things being different, but knew that to make that happen, we had to get started. So we began to build a clinic. I met a pregnant woman with cerebral malaria. She survived, her baby was born, and over the years we got to know him. That boy, Bobby Ferle, recently graduated from medical school and is working in one of the first residency programmes in Haiti we created after the 2010 earthquake. Part of imagining a better outcome is imagining—then finding or creating—the people who can help you get there.

PIH’s mission is to improve the lives of others and make sure health care is available in some of the hardest to reach places. One of the greatest lessons I’ve learned is to embrace complexity. It’s not just one piece that needs tending to; it’s imagining how the whole picture can change and building systems to get there—good roads, ambulance services, vaccines, education.

I was 26 when my dad died, and it’s taken me the past 25 years to really learn the secrets he imparted to me about the power of imagination when partnered with pragmatism. It’s like he gave me a time-release capsule; year after year, things remind me of how he found solutions to problems. I think he would be proud of my work.

I’ve learned a lot from my parents, especially—I hope—to be a sparky parent. That doesn’t mean I won’t let my son see me heavy-hearted about the conditions of the world, but I will encourage him to go out and roll his sleeves up. My son seems to have a good imagination so far, but I want him to understand that it isn’t just something to entertain himself with in dull moments. I want to help him connect his imagination to pragmatism, so he can find a way to improve the world. □

Ophelia Dahl is the daughter of Roald Dahl and actress Patricia Neal. Together with anthropologist and physician Dr Paul Farmer, she is the co-founder of the NGO Partners In Health. To learn more about and support Partners In Health, visit www.PIH.org.