
CHAPTER 1

Imagine

Walter Elias was a dreamer. But when his dream created a nightmare he blamed himself.

Born to an Irish-Canadian father on December 5, 1901, in Chicago, Walter joined a family that eventually included three brothers and one sister.

The family soon moved to Marceline, Missouri where his father became an unsuccessful farmer. That life didn't suit Walter whose imagination often carried him to places others couldn't see. Bored in school, he frequently turned his attention from his studies to doodling.

The family later moved to Kansas City. While Walter enjoyed and appreciated nature, the big city afforded new opportunities. He often snuck out of the house at night to perform comedy skits at a local club. Longing for adventure, Walter worked for the Santa Fe Railway selling newspapers, popcorn, and sodas to passengers. In 1918 he tried to join the military, but was rejected as too young. Instead, at age 16, he went to France where he chauffeured Red Cross officials in the ambulance that he camouflaged.

Walter returned home to the States and pursued a less-than-exciting career in commercial art. He also developed a series of animated shorts—cartoons—for a local business. Although companies welcomed the creative concept, Walter went bankrupt.

At the encouragement of his brother Roy, Walter moved to California, where the two pooled their worldly wealth, \$450, and began again. Soon an order from a New York firm shoved their fledgling studio into the Hollywood spotlight.

In 1925, Walter married an employee, Lillian Bounds, and fathered two daughters. He also created a new character after his childhood hero, the whimsical Charlie Chaplain, a little guy just trying to make his way in the world.

Walter soon developed Technicolor® and held the patent for the process for two years during which time only Walter's company produced color animated shorts for the film industry.

In 1932 Walter won his first Academy Award. Five years later, while the country continued to struggle to survive the Great Depression, he and Roy and their growing stable of artists created the first-ever feature-length animated musical at an unheard of cost of almost \$1.5 million.

The film's enormous popularity gave the brothers the means to buy their parents a house. "Less than a month later [their mother] Flora died of asphyxiation caused by a faulty furnace in the new home. The terrible guilt of this haunted [Walter] for the rest of his life."¹

Nevertheless, the nightmare didn't strangle Walter's imagination. "In 1940, construction was completed on the Burbank Studio, and [the] staff swelled to more than 1,000 artists, animators, story men, and technicians."²

Walter's mind rarely rested and yet he always set aside time for his family. His daughter Diane said, "Daddy never missed a father's function no matter how I discounted it. I'd say, 'Oh, Daddy, you don't need to

come. It's just some stupid thing.' But he'd always be there, on time."³ For Walter, everything revolved around family, especially his dream.

He pursued that dream until it came true, almost 20 years later.

In 1955 Walter's kingdom opened to the public, and was almost immediately declared a dismal failure. Some said the enterprise would close within the first year. It didn't. Instead, it became home to the many characters born in Walter's imagination.

The gift of imagination believes what we can't see. And perhaps no one has ever been better at building a magical world from his imagination than Walter Elias Disney.

"I first saw the site for Disneyland back in 1953, In those days it was all flat land—no rivers, no mountains, no castles or rocket ships—just orange groves, and a few acres of walnut trees." Today his most beloved icon, Mickey Mouse, reigns over a magic kingdom that constantly changes. "Disneyland will never be completed. It will continue to grow as long as there is imagination left in the world."⁴

Indeed, Walt's imagination survived his death on December 15, 1966.

The year before, Walt "turned his attention toward the problem of improving the quality of urban life in America. He personally directed the design of an Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT)."⁵

"Disney directed the purchase of 43 square miles of virgin land—twice the size of Manhattan Island—in the center of the state of Florida. Here, he master planned a whole new 'Disney world' of entertainment to include a new amusement theme park, motel-hotel resort vacation center, and his Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow. After more than seven years of master planning and preparation, including 52 months of actual construction, the Walt Disney World Resort, including the Magic Kingdom Park, opened to the public as scheduled on October 1, 1971. EPCOT Center opened October 1, 1982."⁶

Walt Disney was a dreamer who still incites our imaginations so that we will believe in what we can't yet see. But once upon a time he blamed himself for something that wasn't his fault.

Guilt condemns us. Shame imprisons us. Guilt sentences us. Shame executes who we are.

We are imperfect. We know what we've done. We know what we deserve. Guilt testifies that we don't deserve what we get. Shame terrorizes us so we believe we'll get what we deserve.

Shame can steal our joy, kill our dreams, and destroy our future. It can lock us in a prison or a palace. Either way it strips us of our true identity, holds us captive, and separates us from those we love. Shame leads to anger, anger leads to revenge, and revenge leads to bondage.

We imprison ourselves. We allow our past to hold us captive. We need to forget so we can forgive.

Forgiving ourselves isn't easy, but it's necessary. Once we begin to understand that tragedy isn't something we can always prevent, we can begin to dream again.

Often times what we can't see holds the power to change our lives, if we believe. Caught up in the ordinary, we overlook the extraordinary. We get up, we go where we've always gone, and do what we've always done. The monotonous becomes mundane.

We need to stop working harder long enough to laugh and realize that others around us need to laugh, too. We need to take time to doodle or look at an orange grove and see what others can't envision.

What if we could see beyond yesterday's regrets? What if we could imagine a community where people love one another? What if we began to build a place where others could find happiness?

Once upon a time I had a dream. Then reality collided with my hopes and shattered the future I'd imagined. I had to make a choice.

Maybe an untimely death of a loved one or some other unexpected disaster dimmed your vision. Perhaps something you wished would

happen didn't. Perhaps you blame yourself for something that isn't your fault. Maybe your dream became a nightmare.

Regardless of the circumstances, sometimes our dreams don't come true in the way and time we imagine them. But it's never too late.

It's time to dream again. It's time to rekindle passion, restore hope, and rebuild dreams. It's time to help others see what they can imagine. It's time to peer around the curve of the future and peek over the horizon of tomorrow. Instead of thinking your dreams won't come true, imagine, *what if they do?*