

In The Belly of the Whale

with Randy Siegel



The Inner Map A Practical Guide to Life's In-Between Places

There's a moment in almost every significant life transition when we find ourselves in *the belly of the whale*, where the old life has ended but the new one hasn't yet begun. We're neither who we were, and not yet who we're becoming.

Don and I are discerning a major lifestyle move that would include returning to Atlanta, my childhood home. I haven't lived there in more than thirty years. Don has never lived there at all, much less in a big city. I can feel my stomach tighten just writing about it. One of the ways I'm trying to get my head — and heart and gut—around such a bold move is experimenting with visualization, a power tool of the imagination. Recently, I've come across two ideas, Embodied Imagination and World Mapping that I believe could be game changers. These two practices offer something that most transition tools don't: a way to both discern and inhabit a brighter future.

We tend to think of imagination as a kind of frivolous fiction — useful for artists and children, but not trustworthy for serious adult decisions. That kind of thinking can cost us more than we know.

Imagination Is Not Imaginary

Psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman puts it plainly: "*Imagination is not imaginary.*" Neuroscience agrees. When we vividly imagine running, our motor cortex fires in patterns almost identical to actual running. When we imagine biting into a lemon, we salivate. The brain doesn't distinguish between a richly imagined experience and a lived one.

Embodied Imagination

Embodied imagination is based upon the understanding that imagination is not a purely mental or cognitive event happening in the head. It's a whole-body process. When we imagine something sensorially, not just visually, our muscles, nervous system, breath, posture, and felt sense come alive. We're not just thinking — we're sensing, feeling, and knowing at once.

When we only think about the future, it stays abstract and provides little feedback. When we feel it in our head, body, heart, and soul, however, that future becomes neurologically real — real enough that our sensations can signal whether it's a good fit.

Embodied imagination helps us remap our neural pathways to accommodate the future. Pure rational planning doesn't work because it's not lived experience. Our body doesn't believe it, and our nervous system hasn't been persuaded. Embodied imagination bridges that gap by giving our nervous systems something to rehearse.

Tennis great Billie Jean King is an excellent example. She believed, "you have to see it to be it." She rehearsed specific match scenarios in her mind, pre-visualizing overcoming obstacles, and seeing herself making the perfect shot before she ever walked on court.

Enter World Mapping

Most visualization tools fall into one of two traps: they're either too abstract (affirmations, journaling) or too fixed (vision boards with specific images that may not survive contact with actual life). World mapping is, in essence, embodied imagination given a geography. As such, world mapping occupies a different space and is perhaps one of the most underused tools available to anyone navigating a major transition.

World mapping originated in ancient Mesopotamia around 600 B.C. The Mesopotamians created world maps not for navigation or travel, but to bridge the seen and unseen worlds. World maps offer the same benefit today. When author J.R.R. Tolkien drew maps of Middle-earth, or when a child sketches the layout of an imaginary kingdom, something cognitively and somatically significant happens: the imagination becomes *spatial*. We have to decide where things are in relation to each other. We have to give the inner world a geography, and once it has geography, it becomes navigable.

Many Indigenous traditions understand this. The imagination is not fantasy; it's a real terrain with its own landscape, and moving through it deliberately helps promote understanding and healing. Mapping, naming, and inhabiting creates orientation.

What makes world mapping suited to transition work is that it's spatial, open-ended, and relational. We're building a terrain, not a checklist. Most importantly, it externalizes the inner world. The emerging future stops living only inside us — where it can feel overwhelming or formless — and becomes something we can look at, relate to, and reshape.

How to World Map Your Future: A Practical Guide

The following suggestions are offered not as a rigid method but as an invitation. Take what resonates and leave what doesn't. Use your imagination and have fun. Instead of the computer, you may want to do this by hand on a giant sheet of paper. Use colored pens, pencil, and markers if you'd like. Some may even choose to draw rather than write. The goal is not to produce a beautiful map, but to allow the map making to do its magic within you. You don't have to know the whole route to begin mapping. You just have to be willing to begin.

Begin with your body. Before you pick up a pen, pause, and breathe slowly. Place one hand on your chest and one on your belly. Ask yourself: what am I feeling and where in my body am I feeling it? Get specific. Notice tightness, openness, weight, temperature. Let that felt sense be your starting point. You are mapping from the inside out.

List categories. Determine various categories of your imagined future. For my world map, I used community, spiritual life, mission-service, creative expression, health, leisure and learning.

Add features: For each category, add features. Features are a breakdown of elements that might compose a category. For example, in the category “Health” I wrote:

- Continue my practice of stretching, walking, and weightlifting online with “Fit After 50.”
- Make use of gym at our new home.
- Hire an additional trainer once a week.
- Identify new medical services.
- Find a good massage therapist.

My list continued. After adding features for each category, I realized that I was lucky: much of my daily routine was portable since we are already dividing our time between two places. That will make the move to Atlanta much easier.

Stay open. It’s important to remember to hold the features and outcomes lightly. One way to do this is a benevolent request. A benevolent request is a powerful way to surrender control and invite exactly what you need—or something even better. Here’s the mantra I placed at the end of every list of features: *“I request the most benevolent outcome, and I ask that this or something even better be manifested for the highest good of all concerned. Thank you.”* Whether or not this language resonates, the practice of releasing attachment to specific outcomes is important to the process.

Check in with your body. Once you’ve added features and the benevolent request to each category, pause and bring your attention to your body. What does this category now feel like? Does your chest open or tighten when you imagine it? Does your breath deepen or shorten? Is the sensation pleasant, or is it stressful? The body is a truth-detector: imagined futures that feel hollow or constricted are telling you something your mind hasn’t caught up to yet.

In almost every category, I felt some apprehension—a tightness in my chest. In some categories, especially mission-service, I also felt excitement about all the possibilities for expansion.

Check in with your heart. This may take a bit more discernment. What is your desire, underneath all desires? Or what is the feeling state you most long for each category? What I long for the most under category “Community” is feeling a deep sense of belonging. In “Spiritual Life,” it’s to feel grounded, centered, and connected.

Identify participants and your future self. Now comes perhaps the most powerful step, and one that is most often ignored. A map without inhabitants is just a diagram. Not only do you want to ask who is with you in this imagined future, but even more importantly who you are? Not just what you do, but how you move, what you value, how you hold yourself, and what lights you up. See yourself as someone you are growing into, not just someone you are imagining.

As I visualized my future self, what stood out the most was the feeling of living my life with purpose and on purpose. I felt a true sense I was making a valuable contribution to my community and the world. That felt great!

Of course, my world map focuses on a specific event—a move to Atlanta. But whatever transition you’re experiencing, the same process should serve you equally well.

Most visualization focuses on desired outcomes. World mapping also invites us to pay attention to the transition itself. Transitions require more than visualization; they require hard work.

Determine action points. What are some action steps you’ll need to take to manifest your desired future. Write them down for each category. Our transition to Atlanta is probably two years away. One of the insights I had after completing this step was that if Don and I plan to visit Atlanta at least three to four times a year before we move, we’ll grow more at home in the city, and with city life.

About Randy Siegel

Randy Siegel is a threshold for transformation—guiding individuals from who they were to who they’re becoming. Through times of transition, Randy blends spirituality, psychology, creative expression, and personal branding to support deep personal transformation and meaningful growth. He creates a safe space where people can reconnect with their truth, embody their full expression, and move forward with clarity, power, and alignment.

For more than 30 years, as a coach, mentor, and teacher, Randy has helped thousands of men and women “stand in their power and become the full expression of all they are.” He is the author of multiple books, including *In Search of The One* and *Change Begins Here*, and his artwork—often described as “postcards from the psyche”—has been widely exhibited in Asheville, North Carolina and Saint Simons Island, Georgia.

Today, Randy leads workshops, writes, creates art, and is a companion, guide, and mentor for those navigating life’s most meaningful transitions. For more information, visit InTheBellyOfTheWhale.com.

