

Imaginary Friend

Neil Russack

Abstract

Adopting the mode of fictional story-telling, the author relates a series of interlocking narratives that illustrate the importance of real and imagined companions, both human and animal, in the development of the imagination needed to advance internal and external object relations. In the core story, a young girl, trying to break what she perceives as a family curse, uses her brother as an accomplice in a ritual game involving a cloth frog that had been sewn for her by her grandmother. When later in life she describes to a depressed man how she and her brother created this symbolic healing game, he in turn shares her story with a male friend. The two men then project their own hopes for Jungian midlife anima development onto the woman's story in a sharing of fantasy between one another that helps to open up both of their psychological lives.

Keywords

Animal guides, imagination, ritual, object relations, anima development, shared fantasy, midlife, symbolic healing.

Imagination is essentially a rejection of the tyranny of forms, of anything fixed, a movement towards the heart which breaks through the crystallization of life and allows for growth.

(Attributed to Bachelard)

The role of imagination in relationships can involve both the imaginary other and the real other. This paper will explore what imaginal playmates mean in childhood, and how they develop in adult life. We are familiar with the life that children ascribe to transitional objects and even to children's imaginary relationships with imaginary beings. What I will show in this paper is how the imaginal playmate we associate with childhood can develop into an imaginal playmate in adults.

Von Franz, in her book *Puer Aeternus*, writes:

In early youth, lonely children tend to produce a double personality with whom they entertain themselves and play. This double is the coming-alive of the unconscious personality; due to loneliness. (von Franz, 1981, pp. 197, 198)

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She goes on to discuss the archetypal expression of this other as it has manifested in primitive societies, in which the human, when born, is split into two, one half entering this world and the other remaining in the spirit world: upon death, they reunite. Psychologically, this mirrors the split between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the personality (p. 199).

In the events used as illustration in this paper, a man developed an imaginal, but real, relationship with a woman. Because they did not become lovers, they were able to enter into an imaginal realm, just as children might when they play imaginary games together. For the man, the relationship came to embody an aspect of his undeveloped imagination, healing him of an early wound of isolation and loneliness.

Because there is a high emotional tension in projected relationships, it is difficult to hold a balance between allowing an exploration to occur, with the risk of literal enactment, and cutting it off altogether, thus losing its potential healing value. What I will show is how an adult can enter a profound union, a union that gives him an ecstatic connection to his own inner world. Between enactment and repression, there is a middle way. How we meet the other in this way, in or out of analysis, can be crucial.

I discovered this, vicariously, through my connection to a man named Nigel. He was my neighbor, and he and I took walks together after our dogs introduced us. Nigel's dog, Maggie, was a pretty but finicky Blue Heeler, an Australian cattle dog, and my dog, Moss, was an older, patient Border Collie, a sheep dog. The two dogs became familiars who opened a twilight world in which the two of us could talk openly and intimately.

Nigel was a professor, originally English, and had been close to a sister who was his psychic companion in childhood and who died just before he came to the U.S. to college. Even though he spoke lovingly of his wife and their eight-year-old daughter, he seemed lonely.

After Moss died we kept up our custom of walking and, as if the opening made in me by grief called forth an opening in him, he told me how he had become captivated by a beautiful, younger Polish woman, Sophie. When they met, she felt a sympathy with him and began immediately to tell him the story of her close childhood relationship to her brother. From that first moment of storytelling, he stood spellbound, like the wedding guest in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

Sophie's story began with her grandmother Ada. An uneducated woman, she was the daughter of a glove maker, a tyrant who gave no money to his wife. From age twelve, Ada would stay late in the factory making gloves so as to have money to give her mother. She married young and was happy with her husband, but life was hard through two world wars. She loved her grandchildren and got the idea to please them by transforming gloves into frogs. Being about the same size, the captive fingers of the glove filled with rice became the frog's wiggly limbs. The grandmother sewed the frogs at night and placed them on the sleeping children's pillows. The old woman, brought up in a strict, dutiful household, wove all her repressed feeling into these animals, and as a result they seemed magical. The grandchildren, delighted to discover these frogs in the morning, incorporated them into remarkable imaginative play; they ritually killed and res-

urrected them. They remind me of the magic toys that come to life at night in E.T.A. Hoffman's *Nutcracker Story* or Hans Christian Anderson's *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*.

I could see how Nigel was captivated by Sophie's story and, to my surprise, I found myself captivated too and making notes drawing on my own long habit of keeping clinical records. Nigel himself, trained as a scholar, kept a journal of the things she said. Much later, after the connection had more or less run its course, he shared his notes with me. By then my imagination had entered so fully into this vicarious relationship that, when I read Nigel's notes, it was as though I could hear Sophie speaking directly.

Sophie was six or seven when she and her brother began playing with legos. They made structures like airplanes and got the idea that these cloth frogs could drive the planes. "She, the frog, has to drive these things," Sophie explained. "Being mischievous, behind my grandmother's back we used to throw these newly made lego structures against the walls. We would build them to throw them. We could be quite destructive, as children sometimes are. I don't know how we decided to kill our frogs; I think it just happened. We built funerary vessels for the frogs out of legos of specially chosen primary colors, blues and greens. Each of us had our own unique vessel."

Sophie's grandmother transmuted gloves to frogs, the children transmuted frogs into something else. It was like an assembly line for the imagination. From these homespun animals, a frog ritual evolves. Her brother is in tune with the magical world and she, inspired by him, follows his lead. "Without him," Sophie tells Nigel, "I don't know that I would have developed."

She went on: "My brother would make my frog's funerary vessel and I his. We felt that the frog was meant to have this happen. It was her fate. To the accompaniment of the rock group 'The Doors,' we would stand at the top of the cellar stairs and one at a time hurl these funerary assemblages down the cellar steps to crash below. Seeing the flight of the coffin over the staircase, knowing they were going to their deaths, was terribly exciting. We would gather up our killed frogs and then, and only then, did they truly belong to us. They had to die before they could be ours. By killing them, we freed them up to become themselves. My brother and I worshipped our frogs and carried them around with us wherever we went."

Sophie recounted that "each frog went through one major funeral. It was an initiatory experience. Then she got to drive anything after that. She was a royal frog. My brother's frog was white and red and I was very jealous of his frog. It was very organic, very voluptuous, very fat. My frog was more tailored, more civilized. It had more shape to it. It was red and black, the color of the underworld, and reminds me now of that Greek story of Persephone eating the pomegranate. My brother's frog was more original, more primitive. What his frog looked like was not important to him. The frog didn't need to be an expression of him. He was not as identified with it as I was."

She continued: "The killing of the frogs freed their spirit, which meant that we, too, were freed from the family curse which was a lack of warmth. We needed to use our imagination and express our feelings. We had a deep commitment to one another and we would talk to one another through our animals. My animal would talk to his animal. This led, later on, to my doing puppetry for children."

Sophie explained that the funerary games were played in secret. She said: "We were afraid our grandmother would find out. When she did catch us; she would exclaim, 'What are you doing? You are destroying frogs and furniture,' and we would laugh and then she would laugh. Then we would pick them up with great excitement, put them with their back on our palm face up as if they were dead. We would carry them out of there, as if they had seen something on their journey down the stairs.

"My brother and I were very tight. We would throw our frogs at the same time. We would look into each other's eyes, like lovers, like we were going to die. It was like stepping into a third place between two people; it was a chemical reaction. It is always easier to die with someone else, to discover something known on the other side, that eternal thing. We looked for it in childhood. It was a most liberating event for children. It bonded my brother and I, knowing the trust of the dark elements of God.

"Finding out about the ritual didn't stop my grandmother from making animals for us. She made them for us throughout her life; the last one six months before she died. She always knew what they meant for us. She would stop everything when we would run to her crying, 'She's wounded, she's bleeding,' when the skin of the frog would break and rice would spill out, falling over us. There was a sense of urgency. We would become particularly excited when this happened. The frog might be dying. We knew on one level it was a game, but it seemed terribly real. We knew grandmother could repair it, we were helped by knowing she could heal. She would soothe us with her warm smile, yet she enjoyed the power as the only one we could turn to. She could give life back to the frogs. My mother on the other hand wouldn't respond. When Teddy, (my teddy bear), lost an ear and I would run to my mother crying, 'Teddy can't hear,' my mother wouldn't care. She wouldn't fix it and I was devastated.

"What we were really saying when we brought injured frogs to grandmother was 'Can you fix us, can you heal us?' Even now I see these frogs still there, still standing, not losing sustenance. It makes me feel like everything is o.k.

"Each time the frog underwent a death and rebirth, it became more special. It had survived. A frog hierarchy developed; the older ones had been through hell and back whereas the newer frogs were not as important because they didn't know anything.

"When Grandma said she had new thread that wouldn't show, we didn't want that. Each frog had a cosmic scar. If we kept her from that, she wouldn't come into her own. The frogs had to remain vulnerable, they had to be responsible for their actions. Every time we threw a frog down, we felt the fire. We were compelled to do this. It was the inevitable fate of the frog. We realized that she was on an immense journey. Now I think it had to do with coming to terms with the greater design of things.

"There was a feeling of urgency. Children have a feeling for that. The frog needed to die. Everything built up to that moment. It was a profound moment which I couldn't have done alone. I needed a partner on the journey to the underworld.

"I was a child who kept to herself and my brother opened me up. He would come into my room with fantastic ideas and new ways of seeing the world. He

would suggest games and show me his new inventions. He would bring in Pink Floyd records.”

Sophie and her brother remained close their whole life, but she married and went on to develop a career. He, on the other hand, became more and more withdrawn, and eventually killed himself.

Listening to Nigel retell Sophie’s story in the dark of the night, I could hear the trembling of Nigel’s voice and its reverberations in his limbs when he would stop or wave his arm. Often it was as though he were talking to himself or to some imaginary figure up ahead, rather than to me. I could feel a fever in Nigel’s thinking about Sophie, as if there were now two people inside him, he and she, spell-bound by her enchanted frog. Evoking the coffin in the story, he covets what he lost. In carefully writing down Sophie’s words, it was as if Nigel were recovering the imaginary play with his own sister; Sophie’s words became a secret code to fill the void. Hearing about the children’s violent and ecstatic emotions, as the frog transformed, affected me also and grew into an unexpected feeling of well-being. I thought of exotic things, of travels in India, when I witnessed the fervor with which relatives ran chanting under torchlight through the narrow streets of Varanasi, carrying the bodies of their loved ones to the burning ghats.

Walking many nights in the dark with Nigel, I was drawn into his and Sophie’s story, not just by the intense eros that bound them to each other, but by the power of the imagination itself. I began to see that Sophie represented something to me too. Observing the intensity of his desire for Sophie, and the sorrow that was its natural accompaniment, I began to understand a great many things about my own early life. I noticed the heaviness and seriousness that hung in the air about me. I saw that I too had learned how to do things not out of joy but duty.

In adult life, my spirit had been kindled by connections with animals, and these connections underlay my fascination with Sophie’s frog story. I knew from my studies that the frog is a symbol of rebirth. Its moist skin, retained from its loss of fish elements, was a way of staying close to the memory of the primary self and it lived around water its whole life. And I recalled the Frog Prince fairy-tale, of a little princess, who, by throwing a frog against the wall, transforms her instincts into human feeling. Why didn’t this knowledge satisfy me? Something still mysterious held me. I wanted to be with Sophie and her brother, throwing my frog down with theirs.

Hearing the story of Sophie through Nigel, I began to wonder how I could retroactively enter the world of the imagination and receive the nourishment it offered. C. G. Jung could play with stones in midlife to heal himself, and this worked because he had played with them as a child. I couldn’t just suddenly play with little frogs; there had to be another way of making up for the absence of childhood connection to the world of imagination. So vicariously, through Nigel, I, too, connected with Sophie, who even at this remove became a guide for me, a way to find my way back, as an adult in an adult way.

The reader may wonder how I could so easily enter into Nigel’s and Sophie’s world. The easy answer is that it’s my job to be affected by people, to let their worlds touch me so that I can accompany them. And there was something else here as well. You have to remember, it was night, and even though we walked with our

dogs in our neighborhood, it felt as if we were on another planet. An intimacy developed between us, different from that between a doctor and his patient. I could feel myself entering his psyche and was reminded of Joseph Conrad's story *The Secret Sharer*, in which a ship captain alone on watch in the dead of night in the South Seas picks up a half-dead man out of the water. The captain feels a strange empathy for the man. Conrad (1942) writes, "A mysterious communication was already established between us two—in the face of that silent, darkened tropical sea" (p. 273), and after hearing the swimmer's story of murdering a shipmate on another ship and then escaping, the captain decides to hide him in his own cabin. As they begin to live secretly together in the small room, the captain realizes:

He was not a bit like me, really; yet, as we stood leaning over my bed-place, whispering side by side, with our dark heads together and our backs to the door, anybody bold enough to open it stealthily would have been treated the uncanny sight of a double captain busy talking in whispers with his other self. (Conrad, 1942, p. 276)

The story ends when the secret sharer leaves the ship to swim for a nearby island, "a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny" (p. 292).

Walking with Nigel, I got an inkling of what it might feel like to strike out on my own, to live from my imagination, to have a life uniquely my own.

The frog is on its journey too. She lets things happen to her. She surrenders to the ultimate change, death, and in the process, she is altered. Because she comes back from the dead she becomes a catalyst for transformation and thereby helps us to build a new internal structure. She becomes a psychic architect that opens us to the imaginal and teaches us to assimilate our imaginative experiences by making them our own. Sophie and her brother lost something of their individual selves by merging, and gained it back when both children wound up with their own frogs. Sophie told Nigel that the weight of the frog, which she would put on her chest at night to comfort her, made these changes real.

The frog helped Sophie and Nigel and, eventually, vicariously, me, to objectify and stay rooted in the imaginary realm, as irrational as it was and as irrationally as it came about. It seemed strange to rely on an imaginary frog jumping about inside me. How could I fall under the enchantment of a woman's frog?

The British psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, in his book *The Shadow of the Object, Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*, would conceive of Sophie's frog as being a transformational object that refers to the child's mother, the first transformational object. He finds that adults, in an attempt to reexperience this transformative process, search for an object with intense longing and a wish to fuse, "the object being identified with such powerful metamorphoses of being, . . . [with] the uncanny quality, the sense of being reminded of something never cognitively apprehended but existentially known" (Bollas, 1987, p. 17). Bollas speaks of Moby Dick, saying that "Ahab feels compelled to seek the whale, even though he feels alienated from the source of his own internal compulsion. . . . There is something impersonal and ruthless about the search for the whale, and indeed for all objects nominated as transformational; . . . The experience is neither social nor moral, . . .

as the object is sought out only as deliverer of an experience" (pp. 27, 29). This describes Nigel's increasing desire for Sophie and my increasing fascination for their story.

Edward Edinger (1995) refers to the white whale as a symbol of transformation that Ahab fails to understand. For a Jungian, the unknowable thing that we are always in search of in our life is found in symbols and objects. What interests me in the comparison is that the search for the transformational object is just as powerful for both schools.

As Nigel and Sophie began spending more time together, he grew alarmed and felt his life was out of control. She gave herself emotionally to him, in a way he thought not possible, not even as he remembered being with his sister. He began living in two worlds, one, the normal outer world of teaching and family, and this inner world of traveling with Sophie. He was at a turning point similar to one in the Conrad story, when the captain begins to talk to his first mate in whispers as if he is talking to his secret sharer and realizes that he can no longer keep his double secret.

In listening to Nigel's tale, I could see that part of Sophie was identified with Aphrodite, constellating the erotic wherever she went. He told me: "Sophie suggested a walk to a nearby beach. She was wearing an azure blue kerchief to match her aquamarine eyes, and an orange top. She looked like a young girl going on a picnic with her boyfriend. Excited to be near the water, she drew a magic circle around us in the sand. Then she told a dream in which blocks of color descended on her as a way of enticing her to come down to earth and remembered a magic circle her brother had placed them in to comfort her when she was frightened as a child."

At dusk, on the way back, Nigel said, the howls of coyotes encircled them, echoing off the surrounding hills, giving them a sense that they were still in an imaginary space. "What are coyotes symbols of?" Nigel asked me. At midlife, I told him, he was entering that liminal zone, characterized by that trickster-creator god Coyote.

The imaginal realm was coming to life the way it does for children who believe in the reality of the imagination. As a ten-year-old boy in a formidable household, Jung carved a manikin to relieve his loneliness and put him in a pencil box to stay in so it wouldn't be lonely either. The creation of this figure became part of a secret life that he remembered only later in life. For the child, imagination is real. Grown-ups call it the imagination, but for children it is reality.

On the beach, when a strange child comes upon a group of children, the new child will stand for awhile watching the other children, and then suddenly, without any formal introduction, she simply enters the game by adding something to the sandcastle and the other children, without missing a beat, accept the child. It is a sacred space and all who enter it automatically have a place. Nigel was that stranger child outside the magic circle and Sophie gave him a way to get in. And I, listening to his tale, found a way in too.

I began to see that the imagination wasn't just imagination to inform us about our life, but a dimension unto itself, a reality on its own.

In the film *Matter of Heart*, M. L. von Franz speaks of meeting Jung:

I met him when I was eighteen. . . . He told that story which you can read in the *Memories* about this girl who was on the moon and had to fight a demon, and the black demon got her. And he pretended, or he told it in a way as if she really had been on the moon and it happened. And I was rationalistically trained from school so I said indignantly, "But she imagined to be on the moon, or she dreamt it, but she wasn't on the moon." And he looked at me earnestly and said, "Yes, she was on the moon." I still remember looking over the lake and thinking, "Either this man is crazy, or I am too stupid to understand what he means." And then it suddenly dawned on me, "He means that what happens psychically is the real reality, and this other moon, this stony desert which goes around the earth, that's illusion, or that's only pseudo-reality." And that hit me tremendously deeply. When I crawled, rather drunk into bed because he gave us a lot of Burgundy that evening, I thought, "It will take you ten years to digest what you experienced today." (Whitney, 1985, p. 3)

To Jung, the imagination and its expression in children through the creation of imaginary friends was the healthy expression of the inner reality of the child. Studies have since indicated that imaginary friends are not always compensation for loneliness, but can be healthy companions to a child's growing imaginative life. Marjorie Taylor, a developmental psychologist, states in her book *Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them* that

an imaginary playmate isn't any kind of trauma-marker. It's just the opposite: it's a sign that the child is now confident enough to begin to understand how to organize her experience into stories. The significant thing about imaginary friends is that the kids know they're fictional. . . . [They are] just pretend. (Gopnick, 2002, p. 81)

Children with imaginary friends or personified objects often include them with the family at the dinner table. One day Sophie sat her frog in front of a third plate at lunch with Nigel. By living so openly in this imaginal space herself, and by instantly connecting with people on that psychic level, she evoked a longing in anyone who has lost their connection to their sacred inner world.

While Sophie's imaginary playmate was a frog, the term is also useful for describing what Sophie herself meant to Nigel. I could have used Bollas's "transformational object" or even Jung's "anima."¹ Yet, because much of Sophie's and Nigel's time together was spent in imaginary play, I think imaginary playmate best describes what went on.

Marjorie Taylor (1999) says, "Most adults enjoy some sort of fantasy consumption, whether movies or novels, but the more interesting comparison with childhood imaginary companions centers on adult production of fantasy material" (p. 146). And she goes on to give a myriad of examples, from Jimmy Stewart's portrayal of Elmer Dowd's befriending a white rabbit to C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* nov-

els. I wonder if one definition of love might be our making an adult companion into an imaginary playmate or being able to move in and out of these dimensions. When Chagall paints himself and his wife, Bella, flying over rooftops, we enter with them into the mystical world of psychic union which might underlie every healthy relationship.

The tension in Nigel's and Sophie's relationship reached a fever pitch when Nigel came to think that Sophie was sleeping with an acquaintance of his. Driven crazy with desire, he asked Sophie to sleep with him. She told him tactfully that she wasn't attracted to him, that physical intimacy was not what the relationship meant for her.

Gradually, Nigel realized that not having an actual fusion with Sophie was fortunate for him. He had to rearrange his mind, to discover a connection with her that was both imaginative and very real. In Winnicott's terms, Nigel was able to sustain the destruction of the subjective object of his desire (Winnicott, 1991). He moved "from relation to me-objects with which we merge . . . to objects that assert themselves as not-me" (Ulanov, 2001, p. 102). Surviving such a loss opens up the imagination and creative living from the true self. Winnicott observes the numinous in the child transforming in time, and Jung is explaining the numinous in the eternal infinite.

By being simultaneously available and not, Sophie forced Nigel to internalize what she carried for him and therefore to find his healing. Acting out such a relationship doesn't seem to further the imagination. An example of this can be seen in the relationship between Christiana Morgan and Harry Murray. In the love relationship between Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé, she realized that Rilke was so contained in the relationship with her that he stopped writing. So, much to his dismay, she ended it, although she may have had her own self-interested reasons too.

As Nigel's and Sophie's relationship began winding down, I too would find myself listening in a half-interested way. I stopped taking notes. In the heat of Nigel's passion for Sophie, he wanted to merge with her or drop her altogether because the relationship seemed to threaten the very foundations of his life. Whenever he confided in me that he felt he should end it, he became even more caught up with her when next he saw her. But gradually he began to accept the relationship as part of his life. He saw that he could remain married with his child and still take walks with Sophie as if she were his sister. He was reconnecting to the part of himself that had fallen off when his sister died. Through Sophie, his world was united again. That mystical union, that innocence, had mended the fabric of time. His sadness had lifted, and even his dog Maggie seemed more relaxed and was friendlier to me. I could almost pet her without her withdrawing or curling her lip.

Looking back, Nigel couldn't quite understand why Sophie had stirred up so much emotional turmoil for him, why he had felt at times as if his life were being torn apart. He acknowledged that if she changed her mind about sleeping with him, he still would, but that he didn't need to, and that he was actually relieved to have his life back. He would see her now every so often and sometimes she would call him on the telephone. As for Nigel and me, we still walk together, only not so frequently. Knowing that I still miss my dog, Nigel volunteered that I was welcome to walk Maggie on my own.

I never did walk Maggie, but rather I began walking my own dog, now long dead. I talked to him as I used to when he was alive. Walking my imaginary animal each night, I was beginning to find my own way, as was Nigel in telling Sophie's story, waving his arms half-mad with desire. The dog, up ahead, was leading me into the future which I couldn't see in the dark of the night, where I didn't have to see. I knew there were things I wanted to write about, but I could wait, the way I wait for other events, the way I am waiting to see what death, in its time, will bring. I didn't have to worry about my life ahead of time. And my life wasn't heavy or serious; rather, I would find myself laughing, spontaneously, about nothing at all.

As Coleridge (1985, p. 236) said, "Through Imagination, Man discovers the world as it was meant to be."

Notes

1). I understand that Lacan speaks of the "imaginary" as a developmental stage in infancy. I am not using the term in that sense but, rather, in the way that Charles Stewart points to a child's "imaginary companion" as a stage in the development of the symbolic life of the child that accompanies, and is an impetus to, ego development (Stewart, 2001) .

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