

Invisible Companions

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Online Sunday, January 24, 2021

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: “We Are,” “The Lone, Wild Bird,” #126, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.”

Piano Music: “Inside Out,” main theme by Michael Giacchino, “Pure Imagination,” by Leslie Bricusse & Anthony Newly. Song: “Long Ago,” guitar/vocal by Paula Joy Welter, composer.

Reading for All Ages: *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, by Crockett Johnson (1955)

Sermon by Roger Jones

“We are lived by powers we pretend to understand.” So said the late English writer W. H. Auden. *We are lived by powers we pretend to understand*. Our imagination is a way to bring those powers forward from within us, give shape to them, and embody a relationship with them.

Relationships can enable us to grow in our capacity for love and care. This is true even if the relationships are invisible. This is the conclusion of the book *Invisible Companions*, by J. Bradley Wigger.¹ Wigger is a seminary professor who studies the spiritual development of children and adults. With respect, care, and curiosity, his book describes the experiences of children who have relationships with imaginary friends. He and his research team interviewed many children and their parents in the U.S. and abroad, across a variety of continents, cultures, and religions. From their study and from earlier ones by other scholars, they report that ¼ to ½ of all children have had friends that most other people could not see.

Imaginary friendships begin as early as age two. Depending on the culture where the children live, the specific things they enjoy doing or talking about with their companions will vary. But in general, the experience is that of a creative, caring and enjoyable connection—the friends are imaginary, but the relationships are strong and real. And the purpose of relationship is to enlarge our experience of life and enlarge our capacity for love and care.

Last week I heard from a number of you about your own experiences or those of your children. One member of our church whose daughter is now in her twenties recounted this to me: “When my little girl was 4, she had an imaginary friend named ‘Mr. Nobody’ she would ask to set a place at our dinner table, take walks with us, even buckle up like she had to for car rides.” The mom said: “I always accommodated Mr. Nobody's joining us while we spent our day together.”

Some kids have one invisible friend; some have several. Sometimes a pair of siblings will share an imaginary friend. Wigger introduces us to one family in which a younger boy created a friend and named him Baby Bear. He introduced him to his older brother, who then joined in the friendship. When an interviewer asked the two brothers to draw Baby Bear, their sketches didn't match. Otherwise, the two spoke in similar ways about the personality of this friend. Once the family went camping, and their friend came too. Using twigs, the brothers made Baby Bear a little campsite of his own. It was a tiny replica of the family campsite. They built a visible shelter for an invisible friend.

Sometimes an imaginary situation gets worrisome or threatening to a child, but Wigger says that kids often remind themselves that it's only imaginary. A kid might say: "There's no monster in there; it's pretend!" Or they can use their imagination to provide a solution, like: "[I'll be okay.] My magic glove will protect me." In the storybook *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (by Crockett Johnson), the child imagines a tall mountain, draws it with a purple crayon, and climbs up. But the next page is blank. Without a back side to the mountain, Harold falls, tumbling into the open white space on the page. What does Harold do? He draws a hot-air balloon, holds on to it, and glides to the ground safely.

Generally, a child knows their invisible friend is imaginary, but the friendship matters. Along the same lines, a child is aware that they are giving a doll or stuffed animal its personality, but the personality they give to it is important. Such is the power of our imagination. Wigger interviewed a girl named Nicole, just about three years old. They sat in a preschool classroom which, he writes, was "unoccupied except for us and a couple of invisible friends." He brought a sheet of colorful stickers for Nicole. When she told him the names of the others in the room, he said, "Oh, would they like stickers too?" "Nicole looked up at [him], stared into [his] eyes for a moment and then declared, 'They're pretend!'" Wigger says: "Though she knew the difference between pretend friends and real ones, she seemed to be startled when I seemed *not* to." Then she said, "But I'll take some stickers for my parents." (43)

When you share an imaginary world with others, it can be a time of bonding and love. When I was a child, we lived two blocks away from an elderly great aunt's house. She was my mother's aunt. I spent a lot of time at Aunt Edith's little house. Aunt Edith was known in the family as the *least* humorous and *least* playful among her five siblings. Yet she played a game of imagination with me. In her kitchen was a curio cabinet of miniature pots and pans, china plates, bowls, coffee cups and saucers. I would pretend to cook a meal for her and serve it on those tiny settings. "Come to dinner," I'd call. She'd sit down; I'd tell her what I'd made for her, and she'd gobble down the invisible meal with approving sounds: "Um, yum yum yum. Thank you!"

As a little kid, it would have been impossible for me to make a *real* dinner for her. Yet there was an urge in me to create and give something to her, to show my love. As she joined with me in pretending, she recognized my urge to be generous. By her thanks and praise, she returned the love.

Several years later, when I was a teenager, Aunt Edith was in decline with what I now look back on as dementia, depression and anxiety. I think her medications made it worse. So did her adult daughter, who owned the house and lived with her. Prone to screaming, the daughter was resentful that she had to take care of her mother. She was also controlling. Sadly, Aunt Edith sat in her living room chair most of the day. Even with her walker and someone at her side, she was fearful about moving around the house. As a teenager, I sat with Aunt Edith many hours while her daughter ran errands or went out for a break. One afternoon I was there, Edith said: "Hey, Rog, go with me into the kitchen so I can do the lunch dishes." I was floored by this request. She hadn't done any chores for months! But suddenly she imagined that it was possible, and she wanted to. There was no way I was going to tell her no. I got her walker, helped her up, and we shuffled to the kitchen. At the sink I stood beside her as she washed a few dishes and I dried them. We shuffled back and she sat down, satisfied. So far as I know, she didn't mention our adventure to anyone. I didn't either.

A member of Bradley Wigger's research team interviewed a girl named Jennifer along with her mom. When he inquired about her invisible friends, he used the term "pretend." Little Jennifer didn't answer. She ignored him. *Wrong word*, her mom explained. They *were* invisible, of course, but calling her friends *pretend* was to diminish their importance in Jennifer's life. For this reason, the book uses the term *invisible friend* or *invisible companion*, rather than imaginary. (74)

One of our church members told me that when she was three years old, she had an invisible friend who was a little dog named Cora. They didn't have a real dog, but she had Cora. Once the family took a vacation and stayed in a motel. She left Cora outside the room, but when it began to rain, she worried about Cora and couldn't get to sleep. Seeing her distress, her father went out in the rain. He picked up the invisible dog, carried her in, and then used a towel to dry her off. The little girl settled into a peaceful night's sleep. Was she reassured because her imaginary friend was there with her, or reassured because of her dad's gesture of respect and care for what she cared about? Perhaps both.

Bradley Wigger describes this use of our imagination as an "as-if" experience. While we may have some doubt about whether our invisible companions (or somebody else's) are truly there, we conduct ourselves *as if* they are. And in doing so, what matters is the quality of relationship that we experience. To use our very human gift of imagination means to ask: "What if?"... "How about?"... "Can we try?" And then it means to speak "As if" it's possible.

In many cultures around the world, deceased ancestors are venerated, celebrated, and sought for guidance and assistance to the living. The book *Invisible Companions* also explores the relationships that some people experience with departed loved ones and ancestors.

Claudio Carvalhaes is a Brazilian American artist and professor. Shortly after he came to the US for graduate studies, his father passed away back home in Brazil. In the wake of that unexpected loss, Carvalhaes "began a daily practice" of talking with his father. He would go to a coffee shop, buy two cups of coffee--"one for himself and one for his father"--and sit for a long time "having an imaginary conversation with his invisible" father across the table. He published their imaginary talks in a book, including poems, reflections, prayers and songs that came out of the talks. It's entitled *Hi, Dad*. (194) When he married his wife and adopted her three children, Carvalhaes wrote a letter to his dad: "Stay with me," he wrote, "stand with me and help me become what you did so well: be a wonderful father." (205) In the grace of our imagination, as Wigger says, "the *as-if* ultimately serves relationship, friendship, love." (205) It doesn't matter if the invisible companion is really there; the relationship is.

As Carvalhaes recounts about his father, relationships don't end when another person's life ends. One of our members told me the story of her late father's decline from heart trouble and vascular dementia. During some episodes, he would become agitated and report that his mother had been calling him on the phone, even though she had passed away decades earlier. She was telling him "that he had not visited home enough and he was due to go." Hours later he could answer questions about a call, but the next day when his daughter mentioned it, he waved her off as if she was being foolish. A few weeks before he passed away, a hospice chaplain came to visit them. She told the chaplain: "He's been getting calls from his mother telling him to come home." Her father was shocked to hear this. He interjected: "But she's been dead for years!" His daughter said: "Yes, I know that. But that doesn't mean you're not talking to her and

she's not talking to you, telling you to come home.” She said: “I like the idea that one day, someone might call me home, someone I loved.”

In reflecting on this experience, she said to me: “It has reminded me to be open minded for my children and my elders in the same ways, without diminishing my respect” for another’s experience.

When we act *as if* unseen companions do exist, we imagine a relationship which does exist. And the purpose of relationship is to enlarge our experience of life and enlarge our capacity for love and care.

Whether it’s a loved one, an ancestor, an imaginary friend, a flesh and blood friend, or a community of people to whom we belong, what’s important is relationship. Relationships can move us beyond ourselves. There is much we do not understand in this life; and we are moved by powers we cannot always explain. Therefore, let us live into the future with curiosity. Let us live in the grace of our imagination. Let us live together, live *as if* respect and care are possible/ for everyone. Amen.

ⁱ J. Bradley Wigger. *Invisible Companions: Encounters with Imaginary Friends, God, Ancestors and Angels*. Stanford, 2019: Stanford University Press.