

# When Imaginary Companions Are Sources of Wisdom

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**Imaginary companions can provide an avenue for self-expression, emotional release, and exploration — and, in some cases, they offer profound comfort and counsel.**

Childhood imaginary companions have been getting a new lease on life. Fresh understanding reveals that imaginary companions are quite common among children and most frequently represent a healthy expression of the child's imagination, but not all imaginary companions are created equal. Some are expressions of healthy fantasy play; others provide a means of "working through" issues; and still others may be a sign of pathology. In addition, credible descriptions of imaginary companions that are qualitatively distinct from these conventional accounts warrant a further look. These companions sometimes take the form of wise guides. The profound nature of the encounters with these companions suggests that we may need to expand our understanding of imaginary companions further still.

Following a brief review of contemporary literature, we will offer a note about imagination in general and then present several cases of companions as wise guides.

## Research Findings

A commonly used definition of imaginary companions articulated by Svendsen (1934, 988) is "an invisible character, named and referred to in conversations with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child but no apparent objective basis." The imaginary companion may be entirely invisible or may take the form of a stuffed animal or doll.



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Several studies have estimated the prevalence of imaginary companions between about 12% and 31% (Bonne et al. 1999; Harter and Chao 1992; Manosevitz, Prentice, and Wilson 1973; Schaefer 1969). However, other estimates are higher. For example, a recent investigation found that 65% of children up to the age of 7 had an imaginary companion at some point in their lives (Taylor et al. 2004). In part, the figures depend on whether one counts stuffed dolls and stuffed animals as imaginary companions (Taylor 1999).

It has been previously thought that imaginary companions are specific to the preschool years, or at least prior to the age of seven. However, some research suggests that imaginary companions may exist, at least to some extent, throughout childhood and even later (Pearson et al. 2001; Prinsen and Hellendron 1989). Other common beliefs about imaginary companions are being challenged as well. Although some research had found that imaginary companions are a bit more common among girls (Taylor 1999), other research questions this conclusion (e.g., Taylor et al. 2004).

Children with imaginary companions do not appear to differ from other children on many measures, including family structure, education level of mother, styles of play and patterns of interaction with friends, involvement in myth, and involvement in music and stories (Bouldin and Pratt, 1999). Nor do children with imaginary companions differ from others with in their ability to differentiate reality from fantasy (Taylor, Cartwright, and Carlson 1993). Young children do not appear to mistake their imaginary companions for real beings (Taylor 1999).

Some researchers have associated the presence of imaginary companions with high levels of intelligence and creativity, while others have related it to social isolation and pathology. Seiffge-Krenke (1997) described these as "the deficit hypothesis" and "the gifted hypothesis." The deficit hypothesis implies that "children or adolescents who have deficits in social skills are especially prone to constructing an imaginary companion," while the gifted hypothesis postulates that "especially bright and creative children may invent fictitious characters" (Adamo 2004, 277). It seems that imaginary companions do not all

serve the same function for every child: Not all companions are created equal.

The presence of an imaginative companion should not necessarily be considered a sign of emotional and psychological trouble. The invention of an imaginary companion is increasingly recognized as a normal part of childhood development (Taylor 1999). However, it appears common for young people with severe dissociative disorders to have imaginary companions as well. "Normal" children tend to have between one and three imaginary companions that are usually younger and smaller than the child or are close in age (Trujillo et al. 1996). They are often cute and toy-like with babyish names. Children with Dissociative Identity Disorder/Multiple Personality Disorder symptoms may have numerous characters that can have complex roles and responsibilities. The companions of these children may be of different ages and frequently have qualities of real people. These imaginary companions are often older, may be family members, and can be God-like or diabolical. Trujillo et al. (1996) also report that the companions of children with dissociative disorders are more likely to appear unbidden (having lives of their own and coming and going as they please). However, Taylor (1999) found that such independent agency of imaginary companions is also common among "normal" children. In addition, many accomplished fiction writers describe a sense of independent agency in the lives of their characters (Taylor, Hodges, and Kohanyi (2002/2003). That is, the writers perceive their characters as possessing an unfolding life of their own rather than being subject to the conscious direction of the author. In fact, the more accomplished writers (at least as judged by having been published) tended to more frequently ascribe independent agency to their characters. As we shall see, a sense of independent agency is described in the cases below.

Psychoanalysis traditionally speaks of imaginary companions in terms of incomplete ego development and providing the means through fantasy to cope with events, such as the birth of a child or the loss of a loved one (see Nagera 1969 for a summary). Companions may also provide the child opportunities to experiment with different roles or identifications, and to get in touch with parts of the personality that are not yet integrated fully into the self. The

writings of Assagioli (1976), Schwartz (1995), and others describe the psyche as a constellation of "parts" or "subpersonalities" rather than a singular ego. Companions in childhood may represent an externalized personification of an inner part or subpersonality. These may be integrated over time or may remain relatively distinct in the orchestra of self.

### Real Imagination

Before going further, a word about imagination in general may be useful for understanding the importance of the inner world. Imagination is understood as a kind of self-generated fantasy or idea. This is generally considered as something other or opposed to that which is real. It represents the mind's natural capacity for creative thought and visualization. Of course, this is a powerful capacity, but one that has not often been encouraged in contemporary schooling or recognized for its value in domains very far outside of the arts. Imagination has often been dismissed as a distraction from the educational enterprise ("Pay attention; you're daydreaming again.") in favor of more "rational" or "real" concerns.

However, imagination is also recognized as a powerful resource for invention, creativity, and much more. For example, Einstein's work was essentially conducted as imagination. His "thought experiments," for example, in which he imagined himself riding on a beam of light, provided the vehicle for his insight and discovery. He considered this so significant that he claimed "imagination is more important than knowledge" (Viereck 1929, 17). Similarly Jonas Salk, creator of the polio vaccine, described his "secret" to deep understanding as what he called Inverted Perspective in which he imagined what it would be like to be a bacterium or a virus (Salk 1983). The use of imagination in discovery is described across disciplines. As mentioned earlier, fiction writers often experience their characters with such intensity that they believe their characters to have independent wills.

From physics to fiction, it is important to appreciate the role of imagination, especially at a time where a modernist-rationalist milieu still dominates the educational and developmental landscapes and relegates non-rational experiences like imagination and intuition to secondary significance, immaturity, or

even a sign of pathology. As it did for Einstein, imagination builds a bridge between the known and the unknown; it enables us to ponder, play with, and generate new possibilities — to go beyond the information given, beyond the facts and the maps as they exist, in order to create new ways of seeing the world. Few human capacities may be more powerful for our evolution as a species.

The realm of imagination is also one of symbolic representation of a world that is very real, but not real in the same way as the computer on which this is written. Jung (1953, 5-8) helps clarify this point. Just because a realm lacks flesh and form that can be touched, this does not mean it is unreal. Instead, we might say it is "differently real." It is as real as our hope for humanity or the love for a child.

Eleanor Roosevelt provides one example of the reality of her childhood imagination. Eleanor had a very "gray" and "unhappy" childhood. Both her parents, who were largely unavailable to her to begin with, died before she was nine. She was withdrawn, hostile, and isolated, yet she kept a fantasy alive that provided the clue to her purpose. She wrote, "I carried on a day-to-day story, which was the most real thing in my life" (Roosevelt 1960, 18). Eleanor's story involved her imagining that she was the mistress of her father's large household and a companion in his travels. Hillman (1996, 22) offers this interpretation:

Their [her fantasies] caring and managerial content was purposeful preparation for the dutiful life she would later live. The fantasies were invented by her calling and were indeed more realistic in their orientation than her daily reality. Imagination acted as a teacher, giving instruction for the large ministering tasks of caring for the welfare of a complex family, of a crippled husband, of the state of New York as the Governor's wife, the United States as its first lady, and even of the United Nations. Her attending to "Father" was a preliminary praxis into which she could put her call, her huge devotion to the welfare of others.

The suggestion is that her calling was represented and kept alive until the days that she might move into her roles as an adult. We might ask for how many other children does imagination serve as this

seedbed for identity, creativity, calling, and meaning of the most profound order.

### The Wisdom of Friends: Four Cases

A child's doll, in moments of absorbed play, becomes a baby treated with great care. A stuffed animal becomes a friend to cuddle and talk to in the midst of a tough day; an imaginary playmate allows us to try on various perspectives and roles; a childhood fantasy hints at our calling and provides an outlet for our creativity. In the face of an abusive childhood, perhaps the companions represent dissociated or fragmented parts that are trying to buffer and integrate a difficult life. But sometimes the imaginary companion may be something more than what we commonly recognize as imagination. At times, children and adults report an order of companions that appears qualitatively different from what we have described so far and is generally acknowledged in the literature. In our studies of childhood spiritual life (e.g., Hart 2003; Hart 2004a; Hart 2005) we have come across numerous accounts of what might be labeled guides, and even those that we might refer to as ghosts. This evidence pushes the edge of conventional psychological explanation, and while one may dismiss this as fantasy or interpretive naiveté, good science suggests that the qualitatively different nature of this material warrants further inspection.

In using case material and phenomenological description of private subjective experience, the validity of the material depends largely on the credibility and fidelity of the source — their ability to represent their inner experience with depth, clarity and accuracy. With this in mind, we have selected cases from individuals whom we have known personally over long periods of time (25, 10, 15, 6 years respectively) and who are emotionally balanced and psychologically mature. Where possible, we will emphasize the participants' own accounts of their experience and its distinction from more conventional imaginary companions, according to their own understanding of it. A pseudonym is used for each participant.

#### GiGi

Meg is a professional in her late 40s. She spontaneously offered this description one day when she learned of our research on the spiritual life of children.

Beginning around age five, I had a friend named GiGi. She would sit on the end of my bedpost in my bedroom. I remember her quite distinctly. She was like a spirit who watched over me much in the way that I watched over my dolls. I had no confusion that she was quite real; our interactions were very distinct from the kind of imaginary play that I had with toys and dolls. As a child I wondered where her name came from. It was so different from the names that I heard in my family and neighborhood. In sixth grade, I started taking French in school and it just clicked for me: I realized that my GiGi must have some French heritage. (Hart 2003, 36-37)

[Meg happens to have a talent for languages, especially French. Native speakers often remark that she speaks their particular dialect, whether from Montreal or Paris or some more remote region of France, with no trace of an accent.]

I didn't see her the way I saw my dolls, but I did see her in some inward way; I knew very clearly when she was there. We had this very special connection. A couple of years later, my life changed. I went through extremely difficult times — some abuse in my home — and I starting feeling just horrible about myself. During these dark days, GiGi would speak to me and comfort me. I never talked to my dolls for help or protection, but I knew I could talk and listen to GiGi and I'd feel better. She helped me to survive. Later in [Catholic] grammar school, we learned about patron saints, and I felt that my GiGi was kind of like this (Hart 2003, 36-37).

Meg found a way to open to her friend GiGi.

We had a small tile floor in a bathroom. It had those inch-square tiles with a pattern of black and white, but with other colors too, almost like a mosaic. I would be in the bathroom at times, and I would just fall into the pattern. I don't know exactly how to describe this, but I would begin to see 3-D layers of things superimposed on one another. I would be sitting there and she would be on my shoulder. As I focused on the floor, it was like going into a trance. During that

time and in those superimposed layers, I would understand things — things about the world and my life; I just “got it” intuitively. It felt like it came from some deep place within me.

I just knew that in order to stay safe, I needed to keep GiGi a secret. She started fading when I was about ten years old, when there was much more imposition of morality. I picked up what was okay to believe and what was not. It became unsafe to have this relationship, and so I started burying this. (Hart 2003, 37)

The original meaning of the word *genius* meant guardian spirit, and the ancients believed that everyone had at least one. Over time the notion of a genius has changed from everyone *having a genius*, to extraordinary poets in the Middle Ages, for example, as *having genius*, to the 20th century where an unusually talented individual might *be a genius*. The notion of self has become more self-contained. Perhaps there is some value and phenomenological accuracy in rehabilitating the original idea of genius.

Rather than getting caught up in an interpretive/explanatory conundrum about how ultimately “real” GiGi is or whether she represents a “higher self,” a spiritual guide, or a fantasy creation, we can maintain an ontological neutrality, as William James (1950) suggested, and determine the legitimacy and value of these experiences based on the quality of the phenomenon, the information provided, and the impact this has on one’s life. How we name them is not as important as the quality of their impact. In these and scores of cases, we have found a qualitative difference from conventional accounts. For some children imaginary companions provide a profound source wisdom, comfort and guidance. This may shed new light on children’s innate capacities for wisdom.

### Sanka

Jamie is a 20-year-old student on full scholarship at a premier university; I [T.H.] have known her since she was 11 years old. She is an extremely balanced and psychologically healthy individual with no history of mental illness. She offers a particularly cogent explanation of the difference of a guide-type experience and a more conventional imaginary companion.

The difference in the felt experience was that in the case of the imaginary friends there was a sense that I was leading it, creating the adventure or whatever was happening. It was akin to daydreaming. It didn’t require any specific amount of focus or shifting focus. It’s like the difference between talking and listening. Talking is similar to having an imaginary friend. In listening you’re focusing your attention or tuning in and receiving what they have to say.

Notice the similarity to Meg’s description of falling into a kind of trance and being the receiver of information. Note also that the trance-like phenomenon has been described in dissociative disorders.

Jamie goes on to describe her friends:

I had three boys who were my imaginary friends from about 5 to 8 years old. I directed our play. I never named them; they all followed my lead for the most part, or would end up doing so. I had a strong feeling of being a male as a young child. One day near the beginning of 3rd grade I finally accepted my life as a girl; I never played/imagined the imaginary boys after that time. They may have disappeared earlier than that; however, I don’t remember exactly. In any case, retrospectively, it seems clear that I was identifying with these boys as a boy myself. In some way I think I was working through my issues on that front, providing the acceptance as a boy in my imaginary world that I didn’t have in my life. We faced many struggles together. One setting for our play was a large mansion with lots of secret passageways where there lived a mean headmistress. The storyline involved overcoming challenges/obstacles. These friends disappeared really when I seemed to accept that I was a girl and would remain one.

On the other hand, from the age of approximately 8 on, I had a spirit guide in the form of a wolf who I communicated with on a regular basis. The quality of experience was entirely different. I *listened*. I connected with this being, who was unfailingly a positive presence. I met her originally at an Indian mound during a very brief ceremony. When I asked her name, She/he introduced herself to me as something like

Sanka (years later I learned Shunka in Hopi means wolf). Through the years I came to realize that she presented herself to me as a wolf, because that was a powerful symbol for me at the time. When I communicated to her, I shifted my focus, and though I was in a dialogue with her, I did not lead the experience. We did not go on adventures together; we talked, or she simply was present. She did offer me courage sometimes, for me to know she was always there. Occasionally she would caress me or I her, and I always felt a wave of love and happiness at these times. Sometimes I would invite her to, but I still was never in control of the experience. They were usually fleeting and a sign of friendship. Since then I've come to feel that Sanka is a personification of an inner/deep/higher aspect of myself/spirit/soul. I have expanded to include her in my daily life. Sometimes I still connect in with that aspect of myself, but her wisdom is close, it requires just a shift in focus. She doesn't appear in wolf form any longer, though the power from the symbol is still there. To access that part of myself I still have to listen.

Both Meg and Jamie report a distinct difference between the "made up" friends and their special guides. Jamie characterizes the difference as "listening" and not leading.

Great sages and mystics have recognized the possibility for receiving deep guidance. Abraham, Moses, Mohammed, and Mary all claimed to tap a deep source of wisdom. So, too, did Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, George Washington Carver. Socrates called his inner voice *Daimon*, which means "divine." In first-century China, individuals, called the *wu*, received guidance from inner voices (Klimo 1987). Medieval Jewish rabbis conversed with disincarnate teachers known as the Maggidim (Gordon 1949; Liester 1996). Christian mystics attributed their inner guidance to the Holy Ghost, deceased saints, and angels.

This source is also sometimes described as arising from within the individual. As a source of wise guidance and insight, Aurobindo (Ghose 1987), the Indian sage, called this the "inner teacher." Meister Eckhart (1958), the thirteenth-century Dominican priest, referred to the "inner man." Ralph Waldo Em-

erson (1979) spoke of the "oversoul." Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli (1976) wrote about various dimensions of the "higher self," "transpersonal self," and the "universal self."

Note how Jamie described her experience with Sanka as originating as a distinct other and later came to think of it as an aspect of her "higher self." We have seen this same transition among others, although not always.

### Laura and Adam

Many imaginary companions are animals like Jamie's. Traditional representations ranging from Hindu gods to Native American totems use animals to depict spiritual qualities and capacities. They often are described as providing a link between the material and spiritual worlds. Jungian thought may conceive of these as archetypes: primary and shared patterns of our human consciousness. In most accounts of animal guides, you do not choose the animal; instead it pays you a visit.

Adam, a beloved dog, had just died and Laura, 7, was having a very difficult time getting over the loss (Hart 2003, 29). She had really loved Adam and she didn't know how to deal with losing him. According to her mother,

Over many days Laura was crying a lot about him and I just didn't seem able to comfort her very well. We were driving in the car and Laura was talking a lot. I was tired, and I asked her to please just lie down and rest for a few minutes. Thankfully she did, and after about twenty minutes she sat up and said, "Mom, something wonderful happened! I left my body and went to talk with Adam. He told me that my being so upset about him dying was making it harder for him and if I really wanted to help him, I should send him love and light. So I did and it feels better." Laura and then added, "Adam said the reason he came to see me is that when somebody else close to me dies, I'll know what to do."

A few weeks later, Laura's aunt gave birth to a baby with an unexpected terminal illness. It was a very difficult situation for everyone. Laura insisted on visiting the baby in the hospital. Her mother said,

I wasn't sure about this. Normally, given Laura's emotionally charged personality, I would have expected her to fall apart, to be really hysterical, and I didn't think this was what the family needed. But Laura was adamant about going and I finally agreed. We went to the hospital, and in the middle of all this grief, Laura insisted on holding the dying baby. She was unbelievably calm and clear; she was not upset or crying, but was working hard to help this dying baby by sending him love and light. She helped all of us by demonstrating what we could do.

At the end of the nineteenth century, American psychologist and philosopher William James (1950) likened consciousness to a flowing stream. While we are often caught up in our own little eddies, children sometimes seem to be able to tap the currents in the depths of this stream, just as Laura did.

In each of these cases, it appears that a shift in the individual's state of consciousness is required in order to access these depths. Meg became absorbed in the tiles on the bathroom floor; Jamie emphasized "listening" and a "shifting focus"; Laura found her friend as she rested silently in the back of the car. Such shifts in states of consciousness are extremely well documented in meditative or contemplative practices, and they are described as essential for expanding perception, quieting the mind, and accessing insight. (For a summary see Murphy, Donovan and Taylor 1997.) The natural contemplative and absorptive capacities of children are at odds with the hurried pace, the constant electronic stimulation, and the demand for highly rational-linguistic thought in contemporary culture. These cases suggest the value in intentionally inviting the contemplative space in children or, alternatively, providing the kind of "free-range" play, lack of electronic stimulation, and rest time that may invite opportunities for spontaneous shifts in consciousness that seem to bring such profound insight (Hart 2004b).

### Peggy

Peggy is a professional in her 50s. At age 5, home was a farm in rural Louisiana about thirty miles from

the nearest town. In an accident on the farm she received third-degree burns over two-thirds of her body, second degree over most of the rest. Only her face and feet were spared (Hart 2003, 55-57).

Following the accident it took an hour to get Peggy to the nearest hospital. She said, "I could see everyone panicked around me. But I was totally calm; I didn't feel any pain. When we got to the hospital, I was asking questions about the equipment around me: 'What does that do?' 'What's that for?'" Later, Peggy understood that the staff had been making plans for her to be airlifted to a better-equipped hospital in Galveston, but her doctor had said not to bother; Peggy was so badly injured that she would not make it through the night.

I remember them putting on orange gauze, and the next thing I remember I was repeating that the "light was too bright." I was squinting and the light was so brilliant that it hurt my eyes. I looked up and saw these silhouettes over me, but it wasn't the nurses or doctors. They were larger and their voices were different. They were reassuring me, "You're going to be OK." And they started telling me about animals in the winter who hibernate, like taking a long sleep. And they said to think of this as sleep, as hibernation. "We'll take care of you while you're sleeping," the voices said.

The longer I was there, the softer the light got. It became like a pinkish glow, like you see at sunset sometimes. There is no way my words can capture what it was like. It was wonderful; I felt so engulfed with love, in complete acceptance. I knew that nothing is separate about you and me. Nothing about you is judged. You're completely known and you know everything; words aren't spoken — every thought is known instantly. There's no right or wrong, it's just part of your existence. There's a reason why you're experiencing this and everything.

Peggy went into cardiac arrest, and after several minutes the hospital staff told her father that she was gone. With nothing left to lose, the doctor tried a procedure that he had only recently read about. To everyone's shock, it worked: her heart started again.

Peggy came out of a month-long coma on April 19, her sixth birthday. She would have 38 surgeries and would spend the next four years, except for an occasional weekend furlough, in the hospital. She had to grow her own skin, as there was no alternative at the time. Every time she made a wish during those years it was always the same: "God, please just let me grow skin."

I got to the point where I could leave at will. The bright light would return, then soften to that pinkish glow. On the other side, colors were deeper, smells more intense, and people would always be there to greet me. Before the fire, I loved to climb a mimosa tree near our house. Many times when I crossed to the other side, I would find myself at the base of a huge mimosa tree that was full of children. They would ask me to climb with them and call me to go higher. The higher up I went, the brighter the light became. I would sit on branches and talk with them. I still know them intimately; it feels like they're part of me.

At other times I would be surrounded, like a circle of friends holding hands around me. It felt like complete love. I still see them.

I know they're always with me. I always have a special one with me. He was the first one I saw. Sometimes he would be there with his arms open and just envelop me with love. Sometimes it would be hours and he wouldn't say a word. He would just love me. I would come away much stronger. The charge he would give me might last three days, and people would say I looked different or had a glow. My family would notice and say things like "Your face looks different" or "You're glowing."

Peggy's accounts have kinship with other near death accounts (e.g., Ring 1985). As she mentioned, fifty years later she still experiences this companion.

Each of these accounts provided a profound sense of love and comfort; each provided insight and wisdom that seemed beyond the child's capacity; each

offered a bigger view or expanded perspective on the particular situation; and each entered through a shift in consciousness or awareness. All of these experiences were explained as powerfully formative for the person's worldview. For Jamie and Peggy, these "friends" are in some form still available.

We also want to note that there are still other orders of what we could generally call imaginary companions that also warrant consideration. For example, credible accounts of alleged disincarnate beings that are not so wise or comforting are reported in healthy, non-abused children that defy easy dismissal as pure fantasy. As just one example, a mother reports:

When my youngest son was about two, we were visiting the home of relatives. He could see the garage window from the bedroom where he was supposed to be napping. Pointing out the window, he started to cry and said he couldn't sleep because he was afraid of the "sad old man in the garage." Nobody was in the garage at the time. What he had no way of knowing — although we discovered this later — was that an old man had killed himself in that garage several years before. (Hart 2003, 12-13)

Children describe encounters with beings who seem quite lost or even predatory, with faeries who seem benign, with tricksters who want to play, with other beings and worlds that seem quite real, and with great and comforting beings who show them love and provide profound insight. The notion of a multi-dimensional world is ancient and enduring, and while psychology must remain appropriately cautious, credible evidence may warrant revision of our maps of consciousness and human experience.

There is not space here to consider these other kinds of experiences further (see Hart 2003). However, we suggest a precautionary idea that just because "someone" does not have a body, it does not mean that he or she is trustworthy, has good information, or is smarter than we are. In this multidimensional realm, discernment and judgment are as essential as they are in other areas of life, as when walking on a city street. In discerning the nature and value of the encounter, we might ask whether this companion brings self-aggrandizement or service?

Does it harm or heal? Does it fuel the ego or the soul? Does its message feel "right" in your body, in your heart, in your mind? Does it provide distraction and distortion, or clarity? Does it offer shame and judgment, or love and connection? Does it cause you to feel like you need a shower or like you have just taken one?

In a practical sense, the challenge is to develop discernment through considering what the offering is and what we do with it. In working with imaginary or related companions it may not matter whether this is a fantasy creation, a ghost, a divine being, or a delusional compensation. We might approach it in the same way by holding the questions: "What is the offering or message from this companion? What does it want?" It is not necessary to determine some ultimate reality in order to find value in the messages and meanings underneath.

### Conclusion

Imaginary companions can provide an avenue for self-expression, communication, emotional release, and developmental exploration. Playing with an imaginary companion provides a child with a method of processing interesting or significant events or people, reducing anxiety, and dealing with life's difficulties. Imaginary companions may be markers of a natural developmental struggle, healthy expressions of a creative mind, or, for some, markers of dissociation. In some instances, they may also serve as a source of comfort and counsel and perhaps an indicator of multidimensional perception.

In considering the inner world of children and youth, evidence of significantly distinct sources of insight and love provide a remarkable and, in some cases, enduring source of guidance that has been largely missed in the literature on imaginary companions.

Whether it is named as one's genius or guardian spirit, or as an angelic being, higher self, or inner teacher — the name is insignificant in comparison to the quality of the encounter and its impact on one's life. In each of our four cases, the companions provided a profound source of comfort and counsel which appear to go beyond conventional descriptions of imaginary companions. As such, they provide evidence that the inner world of childhood is

even richer and more profound than we may have conceded.

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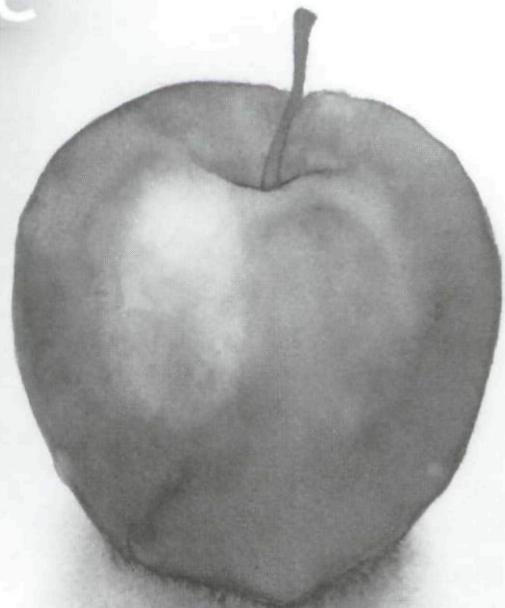
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