The Fish-Lady and the Little Girl: A Case History Told From the Points of View of the Characters
Chapter 12 of:

INVISIBLE GUESTS
The Development of Imaginal Dialogues

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CHAPTER TWELVE

The Fish-Lady and the Little Girl: A Case History Told From the Points of View of the Characters

Within every[one] there is an inconsolable child.
—Andre Schwarz-Bart

In a conversation between Tolstoy and Gorky, Gorky reports that

[Tolstoy] rubbed his chest hard over the heart, raised his eyebrows, and then, remembering something, went on: "One autumn in Moscow in an alley near the Sukhariot Gate I once saw a drunken woman lying in the gutter. A stream of filthy water flowed from the yard of a house right under her neck and back. She lay in that cold liquid, muttering, shivering, wriggling her body in the wet, but she could not get up."

He shuddered, half closed his eyes, shook his head, and went on gently: "Let's sit down here... It's the most horrible and disgusting thing, a drunken woman. I wanted to help her get up, but I couldn't; I felt such a loathing; she was so slippery and slimy I felt that if I'd touched her, I could not have washed my hand clean for a month—horrible! And on the curb sat a bright, gray-eyed boy, the tears running down his cheeks: he was sobbing and repeating wearily and helplessly: 'Muum...mu-um-my...do get up.' She would move her arms, grunt, lift her head, and again—back went her neck into the filth."
He was silent, and then looking round, he repeated almost in a whisper: “Yes, yes, horrible! You’ve seen many drunken women? Many—my God! You, you must not write about that, you mustn’t.”

“Why?”

He looked straight into my eyes and smiling repeated: “Why?” Then thoughtfully and slowly he said: “I don’t know. It just slipped out...it’s a shame to write about filth. But yet why not write about it? Yes, it’s necessary to write all about everything, everything.” Tears came into his eyes. He wiped them away and smiling, he looked at his handkerchief, while the tears again ran down his wrinkles. “I am crying,” he said. “I am an old man. It cuts me to the heart when I remember something horrible.”

And very gently touching me with his elbow, he said, “You, too—you will have lived your life, and everything will remain exactly as it was, and then you, too, will cry worse than I, more ‘streamingly,’ as the peasant women say. And everything must be written about, everything; otherwise that bright little boy might be hurt, he might reproach us—it’s untrue, it’s not the whole truth,’ he will say. He’s strict for the truth.” (1920, 80-82)

Tolstoy suddenly sees through the gray eyes of “that bright little boy” and reverses his stance. At first he had automatically sought Gorky’s promise to ignore the drunken woman. Then through his streaming tears he becomes aware of the price of this ignorance—the little boy. With this insight, the boy begins to gain a voice which confronts Tolstoy. “It’s untrue, it’s not the whole truth.” Tolstoy ends up wanting to write the truth as the boy lives it.

It is just such a shift—from Tolstoy’s point of view to that of the character of the small boy—that distinguishes a psychotherapy which respects the autonomy and necessity of imaginal figures. In such a therapy one turns outside of the spontaneous and habitual ego responses to the characters in order to hear from them of their truths. The ego stance changes from ignoring to observing.

When thought is heard as dialogical the therapist’s task becomes one of helping to make explicit the various voices it contains. As well as attending to “history” and the “literal” events of daily life, therapist and patient try to discover the multiplicity of imaginal histories and events which the characters make reference to and act from. As a result of these tasks case history can no longer be narrated by the
therapist in an omniscient style, largely from an external point of view. Case history needs to reflect the psychic multiplicity uncovered in the therapy, allowing the characters to tell their stories from their own points of view.

Because in a case told from the characters' point of view the process of therapy recedes into the background, let me begin with some procedural details. In this kind of therapy the whole room is used as a place of enactment. There is freedom to move, to lie down on the floor, to enlist the therapist as a co-character, to scream or cry. This freedom is established to facilitate the unfolding of the characters.

The patient may speak about what has happened during the week, but there is often a move to who was involved imaginally—which characters—and how the event was seen from their different perspectives. In a way, one is asking “What is the dream of this event?” “What is the imaginal background?”

For instance if someone complains of depression, we need to know what the imaginal sense of the depression is and who, which character(s), suffer it. Is the scene of the depression a parched moonscape, an isolated bog of quicksand, or a bleak rooming house? Does one’s depression express itself as an abandoned child, an aging man, a struggling single mother taking care of everyone? Even when the person identifies at first with the depression (“It is just me who is depressed”), he can often give hints to the images beneath: “I feel so old;” “I feel like I never want to leave my bed, like an invalid;” “I draw the curtains shut, so it will be like night inside.” In some depressions, as in this case, the external picture may appear fine, “correct.” He may have a job, primary relationship, friends, perhaps children. But within moments the individual may be painfully aware of not really feeling alive. Daily life may be experienced as a sequence of prescribed motions that “should”—are calculated to—give pleasure and fulfillment but do not.37

In the case presented here38 of a woman in her late thirties, the depression was suffered by the character of a child.39 When the

37 Marion Milner (pseudonym Joanna Field) describes this kind of depression in A Life of One's Own (1981). See also Alice Miller's The Drama of the Gifted Child (1981).
38 Gratitude is extended to “Laura” who allowed two years of her psychotherapy and imaginal dialogues to be audiotaped, transcribed, and shared here.
39 For readers interested in pursuing the significance of the imaginal child, see Hillman (1973), Bachelard (1969), and Jung and Kerenyi (1949).
woman’s thoughts were listened to closely the small child’s voice could be heard.

Therapy usually commences with the presentation of the ego’s point of view about what is wrong and how it might be “fixed up.” Beginning active imagination and imaginal dialogues does not solve this dilemma, for one usually finds oneself taking the ego’s point of view toward the characters. For instance with the imaginal child this often means that the child’s demands are seen as “childish.” One is willing to speak to the child now if there is a guarantee that by doing so the child will grow up and cease to be a nuisance. The child’s feelings and wants are experienced as yet another burden to be navigated.

The woman, Laura, would initially be hopeful that the child would grow up. She would inquire about the child’s age with eagerness, feeling a sense of improvement if the child said she was ten rather than eight and a sense of defeat if all at once the child turned baby or repeated the same scene at the same age over and over again.

The naturalistic development of a child growing up is not coincident with imaginal development. The first step in imaginal development is for the child’s story to be heard more on its own terms, and less on the ego’s. Several things can help promote this process. At times when the habitual ego’s point of view and the child’s are radically opposed, and one can tell it is not letting the child be heard without rushing in with objections and negations, one can have the child talk directly to the therapist. The therapist acts like a novelist might. She wants to know what the world is like to that character. She is interested in how the child sees the ego point of view and other relevant characters. Therapist and patient try to be like Conrad’s narrators—persons in whom others feel compelled to confide. The characteristics of the narrator must, therefore, change as the confidant varies. In this case the child loved to talk in the session. When Laura talked the whole time, Little Laura was angry and would begin to ask for time for herself. A second helpful thing is to search out the personification(s) of the ego’s point of view. Once it too can be treated as a character, whose perspective is important but only partial, the person’s narrator can more freely arise. The narrator’s position is like that of the therapist. He or she has less of an investment in any particular character over another and is more interested in the unfolding of the drama
between the characters. The narrator is an observing presence who can reflect on and mediate between the other characters.

Let us try to begin our case from the characters' points of view. Our story begins therefore with a young girl, "Little Laura," who felt chronically abandoned by my patient. Her father had died when she was a child. Her mother had not cherished her aliveness. Then she found herself with my patient, whom Little Laura reported most often ignored her, tried to lock her out of important life decisions (whom to marry, whether to have children, what to do professionally). At times she said she had felt so pushed out of the body and threatened with extinction that she had gotten my patient into physical accidents, partly as revenge for being so excluded. She thinks another character is trying to kill her by pushing her out of the body.

The woman the imaginal child spoke of, Laura, arrives at the first session of therapy depressed. She begins to cry. She has recently had her third child. During the pregnancy she began to feel more and more alone. She is now housebound again and separated from full involvement with her work. She struggles with her oldest child, with whom she often feels colder and tighter than she would like. "What is this marriage?" This family? This house?" she wonders—where she feels so alone, so far from fulfilling her ambitions? Too many responsibilities, too little time, too many things she wants to do—a story familiar to many women in their thirties, torn and bloodied by conflicts among the things they love. Who are the forces in this battle? Who first complains that life is not livable as it is currently arranged? Little Laura. Laura feels the sadness of this child and hopes that by paying her some attention she can be made to grow up and cease being so disruptive.

But when Little Laura is allowed to speak she makes it clear that her goal is not to grow up but to be allowed to live and exist. At first she feels almost dead and acts extremely passively.

Something is draining off the juice and making me get smaller... Something is making me dizzy. I don't know

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40 The words of the characters, Laura, and the therapist are as originally spoken and recorded in the sessions.

41 Hillman (1973) speaks of the necessary relation between the abandoned imaginal child and marriage: "Because every home established, every nest, niche or habit offers the abandoned child a sanctuary, marriage unavoidably evokes the child" (367).
where my weight is. I don’t feel like myself anymore. Like someone’s trying to sabotage me. And I feel stiff. I feel like someone is trying to kill me, to stop me from mov-
ing. Everything is atrophying, nothing is going to be any good anymore.

As we speak more to her she gives her own history, which borrows some events from Laura’s life but puts different emphasis on them. For her the death of her father and her best friend are the most im-
portant events. The ego point of view thought that these events had been mourned enough, and would ask, “Will I always keep crying over this my whole life?”—fearful that she would become “stuck” on it. The little girl returns to her grief over this abandonment again and again. She feels that the father enjoyed and supported her liveliness, let her play spontaneously and was pleased by her inventiveness. When the little girl begins to feel more alive, she experiences at the same moment the deep sadness over the father’s absence. If one sided with the ego’s point of view, on this mourning—that it was possibly pathological—and did not give it space, one would be denying the child her liveliness. And so she cried and cried. The habitual ego point of view is mirrored in the character of the Manager or the Organizer. This organizing one finds crying about the dead father acceptable only if one cries and then never cries again. She feels “embarrassed over being attached to these dead people. It is indecent. “

The second part of the little girl’s life that most preoccupied her was how she was never consulted about the major life decisions Laura had made: What job to take and how to do it, whom to marry, whether to have children, and if so how many. As our speaking with her seemed to bring her more to life, her depression took the form of anger. She felt the only way to survive was for Laura to leave her family behind. The child in a session speaks to me about Laura:

*Little Laura:* I just don’t think it is fair to let her win like this. It’s just the same thing every time she gets to talk. And she talks about love, and intimacy and everything and then she wins, because those things are always al-
lowed to win. Last time she went to a therapist she won. He said she should get closer to her husband and be more intimate with friends. She may say she doesn’t want me to die, but she won’t do anything. No one likes me anyway. There’s no use talking. I don’t want more time. I don’t
want to deal with it. I don’t want to keep making all those compromises. I want to get out. This is the last straw. There is nothing left for me. I know I’m going to give in. I’ll take what you give me, Laura, and try to make something with it.

Here Little Laura cries for a long time and then says,

But it doesn’t feel like I can do it. It doesn’t feel like there is anything left. It feels like a fiction that I ever did anything. You can’t keep doing nothing and expect that the thing will survive. If you don’t do the work for years and years you’re not that anymore. It’s ridiculous.

When finally given a chance to speak she would rail against the conventions she assumed had blotted her out: marriage and motherhood.

_Therapist:_ So you feel betrayed by the compromises.
_Little Laura:_ Sure.
_Therapist:_ As though they were done just to appease you rather than having your interests in mind?
_Little Laura:_ Yes. They were done because I would insist on them sometimes. But when it comes to making a big decision about whether or not to have a baby, then I don’t get to talk. She’s [Laura] too strong. It’s only if there are little decisions afterwards then I get to vote. So that when we were pregnant I could go take classes—well three weekends away doing a workshop. It really was a farce. I’m allowed to feel productive for a little tiny piece of time. It’s not enough time, it’s not enough to keep something going. It’s just enough to keep the edge off. So I don’t feel completely empty and dead, but I’m no fool. I get taken in by it and I feel a little better. I’ll think I want to go away for a few days to work, but it is foolish. It is nothing real. I don’t know what I want. What I’m saying is I want to quit. I don’t want to have this family. It’s just pissing me off that she can win by saying, “This feels good,” or “I love somebody, “or you know, it’s like that’s the only thing that is important. It wins without explanation. I have to explain everything. If I want to do something I have to explain why it is important, it has to be part of a big plan. It’s not enough for me to just want to live in another place or go someplace because I want to do it. I have to have a reason. It has to be part of a career plan, and she [Laura] doesn’t have to have a reason. I don’t
know who it is we are explaining it to. But it is like there is somebody deciding who’s right.

**Therapist:** Like a judge.

**Little Laura:** Yes, somebody who decides how the time is spent, whether it is more important to get the mold out of the refrigerator or get ready to do some work. I just don’t think it is fair that she gets to win all the time.

For a long time Laura assumed that the child stood for her work, that the child wanted to leave the household to do intensive work. It was true that Little Laura was interested in some of the work, but she was not reducible to it. Equating the child with creative work was a way of justifying time spent with Little Laura to the Organizer. At times the child herself would use this rationalization. At other times, she was able to ask for attention without having to promise to produce things in return.

The third important thing to Little Laura was reliving her babyhood with her mother. The child as a baby does not want to move forward in space. She holds her breath and has a hard time talking. She says to her mother: “Are you going to stay? Will you lie down with me for a little while?”

**Little Laura to Mother:** I want you to lie down with me, against my back. Put your arm around me...

**Therapist to Little Laura:** What does your mommy say or do?

**Little Laura to Therapist:** Oh, just that she wants to get on to the next thing.

**Little Laura to Mother:** I want you to lie down next to me, and go to sleep...just close your eyes. I don’t want you to look at me, I don’t want you to think of me. Just lie down now and go to sleep. Don’t think about anything. Nothing. You stay there...don’t go... You stay there and don’t go. I want it to be all dark. I want to lie there in the dark, and just be a shape. You wait. You can dream...but no thinking. OK? It’s like we could be floating...like in a boat. You used to do it, you used to... Why not? But you did. I want you to be there right against my back. Like there is some kind of weight on my spine. I don’t want you to be lying there and thinking about when you have to go.

It is tempting to understand this scene between a mother who does not want to just be with her child, who is driven to organize and
do things, and a child who can hardly breathe or talk in her presence, as a metaphor for Laura’s experienced relation to her actual mother. We could say that this essentially uninterested mother made the father’s support all the more missed and longed for. That may well be so. However, it is also true that Laura has most often taken this role of abandoning busy mother to the imaginal child. She may promise to spend some time with the child, but this can be easily avoided by claiming to have lists of things to do or by merely not being present to the child during the appointed time. Abandonment by mother and the death of the father was not something solely in the past, but a daily situation for the child.

So far we have presented Little Laura in her abandonment, depression, despair and anger. But as the motif of the divine child in mythology and literature shows, these are accompanied by some sort of magic and wonder (see Jung and Kerényi, 1949).

Laura as Narrator did struggle to find time to spend with Little Laura. And as she became more successful at this—which meant being the go-between for Little Laura and the Organizer, the child and the woman who longed for the security of her family—the magic emerged. There began a process where Little Laura, who had been forced out of the body, began to take a part of it. When the child was given space in Laura’s body, the body loosened, relaxed. At times, it felt as though the body and her energy were becoming huge, like a gigantic balloon, taking up the whole room. At other times the child was experienced as a region of the body, or as a round hole in the solar plexus that allowed direct entrance to the world. Little Laura was now open in spirit, loved to play, to imagine. She did not yell at Laura’s children, but jostled and joked them into obedience. She ended up not always disliking the domestic scene and seeing it as her downfall, because as Laura allowed Little Laura to be present in her intimacy with her family, depression was lightened, and the time she spent with her family became more enjoyable, more pleasurable. Little Laura’s demand that Laura leave her family had been very strong in the beginning. As Jung warned in his autobiography (1961, 187), it is extremely important not to literalize at first what a character asks for. Little Laura wanted life, and once this was more assured, she talked more lovingly of Laura’s husband and children.
Unfortunately Little Laura was very vulnerable, and Laura’s relation to her was tenuous to begin with. The Organizer was much more developed, and would squeeze the child out, taking over not only decision-making, but the body as well. Just as the actual mother had sent Little Laura back to the classroom after informing her of her father’s death, so the Organizer left no time for feelings. It would take a while for the Narrator to realize that the body was tight and dead, Little Laura depressed and angry and the status quo strengthened. It was not enough to be on the side of Little Laura. In order to make room in her life for the spontaneity, creativity, and liveliness of the child, the Narrator needed to know inside and out the forces, the characters, who opposed the child. The characterization of each one was deepened as the others became more articulated.

At first we might see the Manager-Organizer as a dictatorial woman, immersed in a mania of doing, of endless details. She is tense and somewhat shallow, working like an automaton without a deep sense of meaningful priorities or heartfelt commitments. We might side too much with the little girl’s anger against her. But just as we did not want to assume the absolute correctness of the ego’s view of Little Laura, we do not want to accept as impartial the child’s view of the Organizer. We want to move into the Organizer’s autobiography and point of view.

One day Little Laura had been relentlessly demanding that Laura leave her home.

_Little Laura to Laura_: You got to let me up. And I’m really going to give it to you and you’re really going to have to do what I want. And that’s going to mean that you really have to leave this time. You know there is no compromise. You are getting too old. This is too important.

The Organizer who wanted the home felt torn apart.

_Organizer to Therapist_: I feel like everything will be torn into tiny little shreds, and that I won’t be able to hold onto anything. It will all be in shambles. I just see this mess, this big mess. I feel like she is going to burst through me.

There are little tiny pieces of paper and things are kind of floating, like there is no gravity. And things being shredded and fragmented. But as though the people were in pieces too.
At one point when Little Laura was criticizing the Organizer, the latter said that she had to make her body stiff, because “otherwise I feel like I’m floating away and drowning.” As the Organizer’s vulnerability appeared, the Narrator could better protect her, and Little Laura, feeling more space, grew less bitter. Their warring would only recur when Laura had been out of touch with the child.

The Organizer also misses the father but is too afraid of these feelings to acknowledge them. She’s afraid that her sadness and longing are intolerable. And so she sets about accomplishing things on lists, trying to keep up a pace that would not allow for feelings. As Laura spent more time with Little Laura, the Organizer appeared more reassured that the feelings would not overwhelm her, or destroy her home.

This awareness initiated a new phase in their relationship—one in which the Organizer did not stand in opposition to Little Laura and later to the Fish-Lady, but tried to aid them. And also, where the later characters of the Fish-Lady and the Narrator became more aware of the Organizer’s values and fears. The other side of the Organizer’s trying to accomplish things was her desire to be safe and protected. The Narrator says of her, “She is afraid of being hurt, afraid of doing things that will hurt her back, afraid that she won’t get enough to eat. She will always make sure she eats something before she goes out of the house. She is meticulous about seeing that the children get enough to eat. If she is tired, she wants to go to bed.”

Instead of experiencing the Manager or Organizer as a dictator, she begins to be seen as someone who tries her best but who needs help in order to make correct decisions. Her qualities of organization and planning begin to be admired.

_Laura to Therapist:_ I really need to keep up the dialogue with Little Laura. If I don’t do it I feel like the Organizer always misinterprets things. She can’t quite get it. It is always a little wrong in the direction of trying to make sense out of every single thing.

It’s almost like the Organizer doesn’t have any sense of her own...just like a computer. So if I don’t put in enough of the right information she gets it wrong and tries to make things orderly

I’m afraid of her. I misinterpret too what she is doing. She’ll set up an order of doing things and I’ll say “Oh, OK we have to do this and that,” instead of realizing that
she is just doing the best she can with what input there is. Every time I’m quiet about it and say “OK this is what we have to do” then it doesn’t occur to her to ask me. And that’s the problem, I wait to be asked. “Is this OK? How are you feeling? Are you still there?” And sometimes she just forgets to do that. She wants everything to be under control.

Little Laura also had initially felt sabotaged and drained, but was able through Laura’s and the Narrator’s attention to her to have periods of vitality where she gives freely back to the Narrator. She makes a joke, gives some advice and reassures. In one session the Narrator was anxiously inquiring how the child was: “Does she feel cheated or miserable?”

*Little Laura to Narrator:* I don’t know why you expect me to be miserable. You seem to want me to feel bad. I feel fine. No, I don’t feel miserable. You spent a long time talking to me this morning, and you’ve been talking to me every day. [Here there is a change. Little Laura for the first time responded to attention. She doesn’t feel depressed or cheated despite the habitual ego’s still thinking of her as weak.]

We’re doing a lot of the work, I think. You’re trying to find out where I am in your body, what helps me move around and go down deeper. That’s all quite fun for me. I think you get all cramped up when you do the other work. [Here there is a beginning of reflection back to the Narrator.] You probably need some exercise or something to help you feel more released. As soon as you arrive in the morning you start working. You could take ten minutes and dance you know. Or fool around and you don’t do it. Maybe I’m a little relieved not to have you pay so much attention to me. I feel like I’m getting stronger. This is a good relationship here. Here you’ve got a project to work on, and I can kind of work on my own and feel stronger and more solid without any danger that I’m going to miss anything. Later you’ll spend more time with me.

Decision-making has gradually undergone a radical change. Whereas initially Little Laura was too weak to speak up, now the multiplicity is acknowledged by child, Narrator, and Manager. When a decision is to be made, one of them says “Hold it—a conference” and after each side has its say, some sort of compromise is worked out.
Little Laura is not just “in” an imagination, she has an imagination and loves to fantasize spontaneously. She did not want to be constrained to being in Laura’s workroom or my therapy room. When asked where she would like to be or where she was, Little Laura had no difficulty describing the imaginal scene surrounding her.

Little Laura to Laura and Therapist: I’m imagining Chris [Laura’s son] and I are going sledding. It’s a fairly big hill with lots of little hills. The snow is pretty deep. As we walk along he keeps falling down. He’s singing. And then we pretend we are opera singers. [She sings aloud.] We sing back and forth to each other. Then we get up to the top of the hill. And then he gets scared of going down, and he says he doesn’t think he can go down. But he is kind of enjoying being scared. Then I lay down on the sled and he gets on top of me. When we go down the hill it is very quiet, and late afternoon. There is a bump and he shrieks and yells, and grabs on to me like he is going to fall off. When we get to the bottom there is an open field. He says, “Let’s do it again, Let’s do it again.” I say, “Wait a minute I want to sit here for awhile.” I have a battle with myself as to whether I want to really walk all the way back. Then it seems like the playing is over. He’s a little tired. He keeps stopping to look at things as we walk home. Instead of walking back, we decided to walk through the woods.

As Little Laura gained in aliveness, assertiveness, and spontaneity, an interesting shift occurred. Laura went to the aquarium one day and realized that the “inner person who always wants to move is identified with a fish, where the tail moves as much as the rest of the body, the whole spine. That’s the sort of motion she always wants to do. So sometimes now it feels like I’ve got a fish trapped inside of a cage, and the cage gets rigid sometimes and doesn’t let the fish move at all.” At first the Fish-Person alternated between being a Fish-Child and a Fish-Lady. Then there was a clear differentiation between the Fish-Lady and Little Laura. The Fish-Lady increased demands for movement and imagining. She was not concerned with the loss of her father any more—that was left to Little Laura. Little Laura wanted to move too, to jump and wriggle, but not in as sexual a way as the Fish-Lady did.
I purposely describe this development as a differentiation and not a split. From a psychoanalytic theoretical point of view this addition of another character would seem like a regression, since a goal is to integrate the voices into one. I, however, am approaching characters from a dramatic point of view. In drama, a single character can become more and more complex, but it cannot include in itself the full range of possible characters without losing the distinctiveness of each unique point of view. As the spontaneity and vitality of the child grew it was more aptly expressed as fishiness than as childishness. This did not mean that the child had grown up in some naturalistic fashion. Little Laura became more childlike and eventually became differentiated into two separate children.

As mentioned, the Fish-Lady demanded that Laura’s life should include her even more.

Fish-Lady to Laura: I don’t understand. You figure all this stuff out and then you get into this trap where you can’t feel good and you can’t move around, and you think that every tiny concession you make to me is a big deal. I don’t see why it is such a big deal. You feel as though what I want is unnatural or like there is something wrong about it, it’s not something you’ll let yourself go after. It seems to me like it ought to be like eating or sleeping. You treat it like it were a chocolate soda. Something real special that you can only do when there’s a lot of time. I mean even if you don’t have time to eat, you can have a snack, throw something in your mouth. I mean I guess that’s what you’ve been doing the last couple of days.

The Fish-Lady voices her complaints against the Organizer to Laura and the Therapist:

Like she—the Organizer—has the ability to decide what she wants and then she goes and does it. I don’t have that ability quite. It’s as though I don’t have any legs. So I can only say what I need and then I have to get someone else to set me up to do it. And I feel like I ought to be growing legs but I don’t know that I can do it any faster.

And the Organizer answers back:

Well, I guess really that I don’t like water, I don’t like to get wet, or to be suspended, to be in a state where I don’t have structure. I don’t like not knowing what comes next. Like you got out on the porch to make a snow angel and
you didn’t know what to do next. That makes me uncomfortable. You’re crawling around on the floor doing exercises and that makes you feel good, but I don’t know what that leads to… I wish that you didn’t need all that kind of thing. I wish that we could just go to work somewhere and go get a job, and have that separate from home. That way home and work would be separate. At night the job would be finished. This way I feel like you resent everything that I do, you resent every kind of job that I have to do. And I resent all of the demands you make. I feel like I have to give in to you or else you’ll get really mad. I would like things to be more cut and dry. A list of things to do and then do them. And when I’m done with what I’m supposed to do then I could feel alright about it.

Laura to Therapist: She’s [the Organizer] saying she’d rather not have a body, but I think it is also not having any feelings. She holds her breath.

But the scenes of the first phase are still mainly there—namely, that there is a willingness on the Organizer’s part to help out, if she knows what to do. Laura asks the Organizer:

Laura: How do you feel if this stuff goes into my body and the Fish-Person gets bigger? And specifically if she gets a tail?
Organizer: That would be great, because then I would know what to do.
Laura: It’s like the tail would be the thing that steers you.
Organizer: You see I’ve been going around and planning things. You know. But I don’t know where you want to go. I do it with the eyes. But if you just got down to your tail then you could steer it.

Laura to Therapist: It was the first time she has been nice to this other one or even made a joke or anything. And then the next week I was feeling very high after some work. I said to the Fish-Person, “What would you eat under these circumstances?” The Fish-Person said: “Caviar and sushimi” [laughter], and that was her first joke.

Just as Little Laura had at first spoken only to Laura and had then practiced being present during our sessions, then with her family and then outside the home, so too the Fish-Lady began to want to go outside the confines of the work room and the therapy room. She says to me:
Fish-Lady: I always like it if I get a chance to try something outside my room. Sometimes I try in the supermarket for a little bit.

But she fears that other people won't accept her:

Fish-Lady: When I am with others, I can feel like I am drowning. Like I'm breathing in water like a fish and all of a sudden someone says, “My God, you're breathing water.”

Still, she continues:

Fish-Lady: I don't like the feeling of developing all this energy and then being all enclosed and alone. There is no way for it to travel. The image is that I need some kind of a corridor or a space or a direction. That I can see where it is going, so it is not just...so it can unfold into something else. I feel partly like I don't have any eyes yet. We've been working on my tail and back. But I can't see. Therapist: How could Laura help you with that? Fish-Lady: Maybe one thing I would like to do is go places and look at things I've never seen before. I get into a panic about what to do with the energy. I get to the edge of the room and there is nowhere to go. I need to see that there is something outside the boundary that I can go to. I get in a panic that there is nothing out there. So when the energy gets high I stop. I don't want to get sort of out and feel like I'm on a cliff [cries] and nowhere to go. Therapist: So Laura needs to bring in some things from outside or to take you out so there are some things to have dialogues with, to pull your energy in a certain direction. Fish-Lady: Yes. I don't like that feeling, where I feel like I'm alone [Fish-Lady cries].

It becomes clear to Laura how to bring forth the Fish-Lady:

Laura to Therapist: I've been doing fine as long as what I am doing is to get the fishy side to be bigger, feel good, relax and it seems more and more that it is a lot of question of tension in the body. That once I relax certain muscles she just comes out. She's much more susceptible to that. I'll just start breathing or working on my spine and little by little I'll feel filled up. Often I'm only filled up to here and then I'll have to work on my neck, so she
comes also into my head. She is more alive and playful. I
have spent a lot of time slowly trying to do that...
It feels like what I’ve been doing is working on the
body so she can be more present, like taking the lid off
the bottle so the genie can come out. And now it is like
that feeling that the genie gets too big for the bottle, needs
more room than the bottle.

Indeed the Fish-lady says, “I feel like my job is to get the body working
again.” She begins to make clear her priorities of being in a clear
state, of “really feeling here.”

Fish-Lady: I don’t feel like anything has happened until
we’ve gotten into a certain state... Just saying, “Well how
about if we work for an hour?” isn’t enough. It could be
that I just wander around the room or something.

The Fish-Lady pushes to clarify who becomes out of focus and sleepy
during work times. It was often Little Laura who wanted her Daddy.

At times the clear “state” would occur outside the context of
work and in the world.

*Laura to Therapist:* I felt much more grounded in Wash-
ington than I usually feel. I felt like I was finding some-
thing out. It was just a feeling of being much more where-
ever I was all the time, like right in a place. Its that sort
of feeling you have when details just sort of leap out at
you, and you really just see where you are. It wasn’t hap-
pening all of the time. There are times when I am in the
mood and everything seems beautiful or like a painting.
It wasn’t like that. More of a feeling of weight, of feeling
right there... I didn’t feel like I had to run around all the
time. I felt more than I ever do that I had some idea of
what I wanted next all the time. Without having to wait
for it...there weren’t any in-between things going on. This
time it was much more like breathing and eating. Then on
the drive to Philadelphia, it was really an interesting feeling,
sort of the same thing, but I was driving. It is almost like
a texture, more than a feeling or a thought. I think it is
like there is less distance between myself and the world, I
have come out of myself more. The road felt closer. It
felt like the car was lower down on the road. That I didn’t
have to go at a particular tempo, and if there was a jam at
a toll booth, I didn’t care, which is very unusual for me. I
had the feeling that—I thought about what we had talked
about, about the quality of being abandoned. And at some
point I said to myself on this drive, "I am my own father.
I am going to take myself on this drive the way he would
take me on this drive." And that's all. So I was doing for
myself what I can do for my son.

What were some of the changes these imaginal dialogues encour-
aged? The presence of the imaginal child changed her relations with
both her husband and her children, adding a certain playfulness and
flexibility to daily events. Work, family and the wiggling movement
of the fish did not seem necessarily antithetical anymore. Her work
was re-grounded from a carrying out of what the Organizer thought
she "should" do (a more superego, driven approach), to a waiting and
nurturing of inspiration from Little Laura and the Fish Lady. Laura
felt less torn apart by the conflicting points of view, though it was
clear she needed to work to retain an awareness of the multiplicity of
voices who shaped her inner life in order to maintain her energy and
working relationships amongst the characters.

The depression which had opened the door to this drama gave
way to emotional energy and bodily aliveness, as the voices were al-
lowed to express themselves. Laura learned that more important than
the results of her actions was to achieve a way of living daily life
with the openness, vitality, and vibrancy so characteristic of the Fish-
Lady. Before one becomes aware of the characters within thought
and action, one often successively identifies with them, unconsciously
becoming one and then another. For instance one spends the morning
moving as the Organizer—frantically, breathlessly bringing to view
other tasks to be done before the one at hand is completed. Then one
lapses into the depression of Little Laura in the afternoon—that one
who cannot yet feel her body, who is sensitive to abandonment. Once
these identifications can be seen one can both begin to be aware of
when the identifications are shifting and begin to interact with the
particular characters rather than just being subject to them. One
becomes aware that none of the voices can tell the whole truth, though
each has an important story to relate. Dialogue with the characters
can gradually supplant immersion in them. These shifts bring about
the change from literal to psychological and metaphorical modes of
understanding.

When one is identified with a character, let us say the abandoned
child, reality ceases to be multifaceted. Reality becomes the child's
THE FISH-LADY AND THE LITTLE GIRL

reality, with all its instances and proofs of rejections, its moments of subjugation. When the narrating ego is taught to watch for identification and to dialogue with (or at least listen to) the characters’ monologues, then “reality” can be seen from different points of view. From the perspective which sees thought as essentially dramatic therapy does not on all occasions aim at increasing identification and unification, but often at increasing differentiation and interaction. This experiencing of the self—as a collection of voices, organized through dialogue, observed by a narrating ego with a keen sense of metaphor—has its own stability, spontaneity, strength, flexibility, reliability, and continuity. It is a self which grows to tolerate conflict, ambiguity, and subtlety; a self which practices its empathy, humor, understanding and compassion on those within as well as those without.

Most often we see the imaginal from the ego’s point of view. In the dialogues between Little Laura, the Fish-Lady and Laura, we caught occasional glimpses of how the characters saw the imaginal and how their points of view differed from that of the habitual ego.\(^2\) For instance,

*Little Laura to Therapist:* I’m the one that was there before all of these people started talking... I don’t have all of those voices; it is the older one who has all of these. And I can help her if she just asks me what to do, because she can’t tell sometimes. She gets a little afraid that there are too many. And even though she knows that it isn’t crazy, it’s like it sounds like something that could be crazy... She needs to remember that it just goes on in her head, and that really she has this very solid body. She lives in a place and she has these nice people whom she lives with and they love her. And those things, like those voices, are versions of things, but not one of them is everything.

They are not everything and even if they fight with each other, she has to remember that the real part in the world is very ordinary and solid. She gets so that she feels she has to believe them, whichever one is talking and then she goes nuts, because the other one starts talking and she feels she has to do what that one wants. And then she thinks that they can’t possibly live together if they want

\(^2\) For additional commentary about how we treat voices—confining them to “inner space,” failing to hear them, and inundating them with our psychologisms—see Hillman (1977).
both of those things. It’s because she’s pushing them to say the most extreme thing they can think of. It’s not what they ordinarily ask. Once she comes out of there and plays a game with her daughter or talks to her husband or works, then she has fun, isn’t forcing anything and it doesn’t seem complicated. And I know that she wants to do that. I just think that sometimes she ought to ask me or something. I think it is easier when you let them all talk in their own voices. What drives you crazy is when you try to interpret everything. Interpret one of them to the other one, without really hearing exactly that one. Well, sometimes it’s weird. Like the fat lady who talked last week was different from her saying “part of me wants to stay home, part of me wants to leave and work, part of me wants…” The fat lady didn’t sound like part of her. It sounded like a completely different person. So that when she gets that way, it’s not as crazy, it doesn’t feel like she is demanding anything.

Therapist: If she can let herself be separate?
Little Laura: Even though it feels when you say it more strange, it really does make it less crazy.

Little Laura describes the imaginal as a group of voices each with its own version of things, no single one to be taken as truth in and of itself. Little Laura argues that the voices, although in Laura’s head, are not just “part” of her. They need to speak in their own voices as separate people. From her perspective, craziness is interpreting the voices as part of oneself, denying them their autonomy. At the same time she does not belittle the day-world reality of body, family, and friends, but reminds Laura of them.

A year after this Laura had just emerged from a fight between the Fish-Lady and the Organizer. She said, “It’s a relief to experience these things as separate. And…it seemed less confusing than when I would say I am arguing with myself, and it wasn’t that differentiated. On the other hand, they seem stronger.” So here differentiation does not serve a defensive function, diffusing affect, but results in clarifying the psychic scene and actually intensifying emotion.

When there is a lot of fighting and Little Laura feels like no one is paying her any attention, she says “I just begin to feel like I’m imaginary.” For her the habitual ego, the Organizer, makes the real imaginary by ignoring it and devaluing it.
As the child is allowed to become real we find, as Jung did, that the child is both “all that is abandoned and exposed and at the same time divinely powerful; the insignificant, dubious beginning and the triumphant end. The ‘eternal child’ in mind is an indescribable experience, an incongruity, a handicap, and a divine prerogative” (1968c, § 300). This child, like others before her—Eros, Apollo, Proteus—found its Fish, in its own way and its own time. Development did not mean “growing up,” but establishing conversations within which Little Laura, Fish-Lady, and the Organizer could be real and tell their own stories, their own truths.

As we have seen, the prevailing developmental theories assign imaginal dialogues to childhood. As Hillman points out, it is no wonder that therapy so often goes back to childhood,

...for that is where our society and we each have placed imagination. Therapy has to be concerned with the childish part of us (not for empirical developmental reasons) but in order to recreate and exercise the imagination. (1973, 168)

The drowning child caught in the undertow of a dream, an adult's piece of “childish” behavior that will not be extinguished, and a small child’s voice that asks for Mommy in a moment of fantasy are often our entrances into imaginal dialogues. The child within us is accustomed to speaking out to animals and puppets, to those who have died and those who are absent, to those invisible guests who grace our table of thought. May we listen for their voices!

Psychotherapy may continue to help reflect and perpetuate the sociocultural bias against imaginal dialogues by continuing to mislabel experiences of the imaginal, assigning many of them a pathological status, discouraging the reporting (and perhaps the conscious experiencing) of thoughts’ many conversations. It can continue to see psychic multiplicity solely as the product of schizoid operations, “hearing voices” as nothing but an aberrant mode of mind. But we will continue to dream. We will continue to fantasize. We will continue to speak to ourselves and others in the privacy of our thought. We will continue to take on others’ voices and intonations, and we will continue at times to act and speak in ways that surprise us—as though for the moment we have given over our place to another.
We will continue to dream, and the dream will show us that beneath our cultural organization of self and conceptions about thinking, thought spreads itself out before us as imaginal scenes filled with characters and situations which are not always mere representations of what has already been experienced.

Psychotherapy need not always go from the dream's characters to thought and its associations, but can also move from thought to its scenes and characters—so thinly disguised are they, so ready to speak. The dramatic form employed by some psychotherapies is not a form or a technique applied to thought and feeling, nor is it an appropriate form simply because it reflects our dialogical relation to others in the world. Drama arises from and expresses the structure of thought itself, with its multiplicity of figures and viewpoints, and its lifelong conversations.