

Selma H. Fraiberg

THE MAGIC YEARS

UNDERSTANDING AND HANDLING THE PROBLEMS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

New York

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

IN NORMAL human development, dangers, real or imaginary, present themselves in various forms. If the ego did not acquire the means to deal with danger it would be reduced to chronic helplessness and panic. The instinctive reaction to danger is anxiety. In the beginning of life the infant behaves as if any unexpected event were a danger. We say he is "shocked" by a sudden loud noise or sudden exposure to strong light. Later, when his attachment to his mother increases, he reacts to her disappearance from sight with anxiety, something still close to a shock reaction. There are large numbers of such circumstances that produce anxiety in an infant. Yet if the infant continued to react to all such events with terror and helplessness, he could scarcely survive in our world.

But soon we discover that the number of such "dangers" diminishes. Ordinary repetition of these experiences helps the infant overcome the sense of danger, and the "shock" reaction diminishes to something that is often not much more than a slight startle, or surprise. Meanwhile another means is developing within him for meeting "danger." (I use quotes because these are dangers to him, though not to us as adults). He learns to *anticipate* "danger" and prepare for it. And he prepares for "danger" by means of *anxiety*! His mother leaves him at nap-time or bed-time. In an earlier stage of development the infant reacted to her leaving with some manifestation of anxiety, an anxiety of surprise or shock following her disappearance. Now, at this later stage he produces a kind of anxiety, crying, protesting, when he approaches his bed, or even his *room*. He anticipates the feared event and prepares for it by producing anxiety before the event takes place. This anticipatory anxiety is actually a help to him in managing the painful separation from his mother. We have some reason to believe that separation from his mother is less painful when he can anticipate it in this manner than it was in the earlier phase when each separation was like a surprise or shock. We think this is so because throughout all human development the effects of danger are less when the ego can prepare for it by producing anticipatory anxiety.

From this we immediately recognize that anxiety is not a pathological condition in itself but a necessary and normal physiological and mental preparation for danger. In fact, the *absence* of anticipatory anxiety may under certain circumstances invite neurosis! The man who succumbs to shock on the battlefield is a man, who, for one reason or another, has not developed the necessary anticipatory anxiety which would have prepared him for danger and averted a traumatic neurosis. Anxiety is necessary for the survival of the individual under certain circumstances. Failure to apprehend danger and to prepare for it may have disastrous results. We will find, further, that anxiety can serve the highest aims of man. The anxiety of performing artists before going on the stage may actually bring forth the highest abilities of the artist when the performance begins.

Anxiety serves social purposes. It is one of the motives in the acquisition of conscience. It is fear of disapproval from loved persons as well as the desire to be loved which brings about conscience in the child. It is fear of criticism from one's own conscience that brings about moral conduct. It was anxiety before danger of extinction which first bound human groups together for mutual security. We could go on endlessly with a catalogue of human inventions and human institutions to demonstrate how danger and the need to defend against danger provided the motive for the highest attainments of civilized man.

But we know that anxiety does not always serve useful ends for the individual or society. The inability to cope with danger may result in a sense of helplessness and inadequacy, in reactions of flight, in neurotic symptoms, or in anti-social behavior. Only in such cases can we speak of anxiety as pathological, but it would be more correct to say that the solution or attempted solution was a pathological one.

So we return to our aims in promoting the mental health of children. We need to understand the nature of the fears which appear in childhood and we need to examine the means by which children normally overcome the dangers, real and imaginary, which accompany each stage of development.

FIRST: A HUMAN PROTECTOR AGAINST DANGER.

Long before the child develops his inner resources for overcoming dangers he is dependent upon his parents to satisfy his needs, to relieve him of tension, to anticipate danger and to remove the source of a disturbance. This is the situation of the infant. To the infant and very young child the parents are very powerful beings, magical creatures who divine secret wishes, satisfy the deepest longings, and perform miraculous feats.

We cannot remember this time of life, and if we try to recapture the feelings of earliest childhood we can only find something analogous in fairy tales. The genies who are summoned in fairy tales and bring forth tables heaped with delicacies, the fairies who grant the most extravagant wishes, the magic beasts who transport a child to far-off lands, the companion lion who overcomes all enemies, the kings and queens who command power over life, give us imaginative reconstructions of the small child's world.

We know that the infant and very small child need to feel that they can count on these powerful beings to relieve tension and alleviate fears. And we know that the child's later ability to tolerate tension and actively deal with anxiety situations will be determined in good part by the experiences of early years. During the period of infancy, of biological helplessness, we make very few demands upon the child and do everything possible to reduce tension and satisfy all needs. Gradually, as the child develops he acquires means of his own to deal with increasingly complex situations. The parent gradually relinquishes his function as insulator and protector. But we know that even the most independent children will need to call upon the protection of parents at times of unusual stress. And the child, even when he can do without the protecting parent in times of ordinary stress, still carries within him the image of the strong and powerful parent to reassure himself. "If a burglar came into our house my father would kill him dead." The protective function of the parent is so vital in early childhood that even children who are exposed to abnormal dangers may not develop acute anxiety if the parents are present. It is now well known that in war-time Britain the children who remained with their parents even during bombing attacks were able to tolerate anxiety better than the children who were separated from their parents and evacuated to protected zones.

But even the most loving and dedicated parents soon discover that in a child's world a good fairy is easily transformed into a witch, the friendly lion turns into a ferocious beast, the benevolent king becomes a monster and the paradise of early childhood is periodically invaded by dark and sinister creatures. These night creatures of the child's inner world are not so easily traced to real persons and real events in a

child's life. While we are enormously flattered to recognize ourselves in a child's fantasy we cannot help indignantly at the suggestion that we can also be represented as a witch, a bogey, or a monster. After all, we have never eaten or threatened to eat small boys and girls, we are not distillers of magic potions, we are not ferocious in anger, we do not order dreadful punishments for minor (or major) crimes. It is also true, to be fair about it, that we do not have magic wands, cannot be summoned from a bottle or a lamp to grant wishes, and do not wear a crown, but we are less inclined to argue about these distortions of parenthood.

How is it then that a beloved parent will be transformed, in the child's eyes, into a monster? If we look closely into the life of the small child we find that such transformations take place chiefly in those instances when we are compelled to interfere with the child's pleasure, when we interrupt a pleasurable activity or deny a wish, when we frustrate the child's wishes or appetites in some way. Then mother becomes the worstest, the baddest, the meanest mother in the world for the duration of a small child's rage. Now it is conceivable that if we never interfered with a child's pleasure seeking, granted all wishes, opposed nothing, we might never experience these negative reactions of the child, but the product of such child-rearing would not be a civilized child. We are required to interfere with the child's pleasure not only for practical reasons which are presented daily in the course of rearing a child -- health, safety, the requirements of the family -- but in order to bring about the evolution of a civilized man and woman. The child begins life as a pleasure seeking animal; his infantile personality is organized around his own appetites and his own body. In the course of his rearing the goal of exclusive pleasure seeking must be modified drastically, the fundamental urges must be subject to the dictates of conscience and society, must be capable of postponement and in some instances of renunciation completely.

So there are no ways in which a child can avoid anxiety. If we banished all the witches and ogres from his bed-time stories and policed his daily life for every conceivable source of danger, he would still succeed in constructing his own imaginary monsters out of the conflicts of his young life. We do not need to be alarmed about the presence of fears in the small child's life if the child has the means to overcome them.

THE EGO DEFENDS AGAINST DANGER.

VERY early in life we can observe how each child reacts and adapts to experience in ways which are *specific for him*. We suspect that these tendencies are partly innate, for even our observations of new-born infants in a nursery will show how each infant will react in a specific and individual way to a sudden sound, or any strong stimulus, or to a frustration, like withdrawal of the nipple. But these tendencies are also capable of a high degree of modification as the child develops, as they come under the influence of environment and the higher and more complex mental processes.

So we will find that not only does each child react to danger in ways which are specific for him, but he will *defend* against danger, protect himself, in ways which are specific for him. Every human being is equipped mentally, as well as physiologically for defense against danger, for handling his own anxiety. The parent who understands his own child and his tendencies supports the positive tendencies in his child for meeting danger and overcoming his fears.

This means that as the child develops into a more complex person we cannot rely upon prescriptions and generalizations for helping him adapt, or in helping him overcome fears. We need to examine those healthy adaptive tendencies already at work within his personality and cooperate with them if we are to achieve our aims. All of this gives support to the parent who listens to professional advice or the advice of friends and says, "But that wouldn't work with my Susie!" It can very well be that a method or an approach which works with one child will have no effect upon another, if the method is not geared to the personality needs of the second child.

But now let's put aside theoretical considerations for the moment. Let's just look at a few very young children and see what we mean by "adaptive mechanisms" or "defenses." and how we can put them to work for us in early childhood training and personality development.

"LAUGHING TIGER."

Let ME introduce you to Laughing Tiger. I first met him myself when my niece Jannie was about two years eight months old. One afternoon as I entered the door of her grandparents house, I found my niece just about to leave with her granduncle. Jan did not greet me; if anything, she looked a little annoyed at my entrance, like the actress who is interrupted during rehearsal by a clumsy stage-hand who blunders on stage. Still ignoring me, Jan pulled on white cotton gloves and clasped her patent purse in her hand in a fine imitation of a lady leaving for an afternoon engagement. Suddenly she turned and frowned at something behind her. "No!" she said firmly. "No, Laughing Tiger. You *cannot* come with us for an ice-cream cone. You stay right there. But Jannie can come with us. Come along Jannie!" And she stepped out the door with her uncle, swinging her purse grandly. I thought I saw a shabby and wistful beast slink across the hall and disappear in the shadows. When I composed myself I found the child's grandmother and said, "*Who* is Laughing Tiger?" "He is the latest one," said grandmother. We understood each other. There had been a steady influx of imaginary companions in this household and an even greater number in the child's own. There were chairs which were sacred to Jane and Tommy, places reserved at the table for rabbits, dogs, and bears, and the very substantial and real child who directed this menagerie often did not answer to her own name. I noticed now that the child's grand-mother looked a little distraught, and I realized with sympathy that she must have had Laughing Tiger under foot for most of the afternoon.

"Why *Laughing* Tiger," I asked.

"He doesn't roar. He never scares children. He doesn't bite. He just laughs."

"Why couldn't he go for an ice-cream cone?"

"He has to learn to mind. He can't have everything his own way. . . . Anyway that's the way it was explained to me."

At dinner that evening my niece did not take notice of me until I was about to sit down. "Watch out!" she cried. I rose quickly, suspecting a tack. "You were sitting on Laughing Tiger!" she said sternly. "I'm sorry. Now will you please ask him to get out of my chair." "You can go now, Laughing Tiger," said Jan. And this docile and obedient beast got up from the table and left the company without a murmur.

Laughing Tiger remained with us for several months. As far as I was ever able to tell he led a solemn and uneventful life, with hardly anything to laugh about. He never demonstrated the ferocity of his species and gave no cause for alarm during his residence. He endured all the civilizing teachings of his mistress without rebelling or having a nervous breakdown. He obeyed all commands even when they were silly and contrary to his own interests. He was an irreproachable guest at the dinner table and a

bulky but unobtrusive passenger in the family car. A few months after Jannie's third birthday he disappeared, and nobody missed him.

Now the time has come to ask, "Who *was* Laughing Tiger?" If we go way back to the beginning we find that Laughing Tiger was the direct descendant of the savage and ferocious beasts who disturb the sleep of small children. It is not a coincidence that Laughing Tiger sprang into existence at a time when Jannie was very much afraid of animals who could bite and might even eat up a little girl. Even the more harmless dogs of the neighborhood occasionally scared her. At such times she must have felt very small and helpless before the imagined danger. Now if you are very little and helpless before dangers, imaginary or real, there are not too many solutions handy, good solutions anyway. You could, for example, stay close to mother or daddy at all times and let them protect you. Some children do go through such clinging periods and are afraid to leave a parent's side. But that's not a good solution. Or you could avoid going outside because of the danger of an encounter with a wild beast, or you could avoid going to sleep in order not to encounter dream animals. Any of these solutions are poor solutions because they are based on avoidance, and the child is not using his own resources to deal with his imaginary dangers. (Instead he is increasing his dependency upon his parents.)

Now there is one place where you can meet a ferocious beast on your own terms and leave victorious. That place is the imagination. It is a matter of individual taste and preference whether the beast should be slain, maimed, banished or reformed, but no one needs to feel helpless in the presence of imaginary beasts when the imagination offers such solutions.

Jan chose reform as her approach to the problem of ferocious animals. No one could suspect the terrible ancestry of Laughing Tiger once he set eyes on this bashful and cowardly beast. All of the dangerous attributes of tigers underwent a transformation in this new creation. Teeth? This tiger doesn't bare his teeth in a savage snarl; he laughs (hollowly, we think). Scare children? *He* is the one who is scared. Wild and uncontrolled? One word from his mistress and this hulk shrinks into his corner. Ferocious appetite? Well, if he exhibits good manners, he *may* have an ice-cream cone.

Now we suspect a parallel development here. The transformation of a tiger into an obedient and quiescent beast is probably a caricature of the civilizing process which the little girl is undergoing. The rewards and deprivations, the absurd demands which are made upon Laughing Tiger make as little sense to us as we -- view this comedy as the whims and wishes of the grown-up world make to a little girl. So we suspect that the reformed tiger is also a caricature of a little girl, and the original attributes of a tiger, its uncontrolled, impulsive and ferocious qualities represent those tendencies within the child which are undergoing a transformation. We notice, too, that Laughing Tiger's mistress is more severe and demanding than the persons who have undertaken the civilizing of the little girl Jan, and we confirm the psychological truth that the most zealous crusaders against vice are the reformed criminals; the strength of the original impulse *is* given over to the opposing wish.

But let's get back to imagination and its solutions for childhood problems. Jan's imaginary tiger gives her a kind of control over a danger which earlier had left her helpless and anxious. The little boy who stalks tigers and bears with his home-made Tommy-gun and his own sound effects, is coming to terms with the Tiger problem in his own way. (I have the impression that little boys are inclined to take direct action on the tiger problem, while the work of reforming tigers is left to the other sex which has long demonstrated its taste and talent for this approach.) Another very satisfactory approach to the tiger problem is to become a tiger. A very large

number of small children have worked their way out of the most devilish encounters, outnumbered by ferocious animals on all sides, by disguising themselves as tigers and by out-roaring and out-threatening the enemy, causing consternation, disintegration and flight in his ranks.

Under ordinary circumstances, these practical experiences with invisible tigers, fought on home territory under the dining table, in the clothes closet, behind the couch, have a very good effect upon the mental health of children. Laughing Tiger was a very important factor in the eventual dissolution of Jan's animal fears. When he first made his appearance there was a noticeable improvement in this area. When he finally disappeared (and he was not replaced by any other animal), the fear of animals had largely subsided and it was evident that Ian no longer needed him. If we watch closely, we will see how the imaginary companions and enemies fade away at about the same time that the fear dissolves, which means that the child who has overcome his tigers in his play has learned to master his fear.

This is the general pattern in normal development. But now let's examine those conditions under which the fear does not disappear. As long as the danger is a fantasied danger, as long as the angry tiger keeps his place -- in the zoo behind bars, in pretend games behind the couch -- he can be dealt with as an imaginary tiger in imaginary games. Now, although it is most unlikely that a small boy or girl will ever encounter a real tiger under his bed, if he feels that someone whom he loves is a "dangerous" person and if he has some cause to fear this person, he will have much more difficulty in dealing with his fear, for this fear is at least partly real. The child who has cause to fear the real anger of a parent, especially in the extreme cases where a child has known rage, physical attack or violent threats from a parent--such a child cannot overcome his fears through imaginative play because his fears are real. In extreme cases, and especially in the case of delinquents, a world view is formed on the basis of these early real and unmastered dangers, a view in which the world is populated with clangerous persons against whom the child must constantly defend himself.

But these are extreme cases. They only serve to illustrate that whenever reality reinforces a child's fantasied dangers, the child will have more difficulty in overcoming them. This is why, on principle, we avoid any methods of handling a child which could reinforce his fantasies of danger. So, while parents may not regard a spanking as a physical attack or an assault on a child's body, the child may regard it as such and experience it as a confirmation of his fears that grown-ups under certain circumstances can really hurt you. And sometimes, unavoidably, circumstances may confirm a child's internal fears. A tonsillectomy may be medically indicated. It can be disturbing to a small child because his fears of losing a part of his body are given some justification in this experience where something is removed from him. We cannot always avoid the situation in which a child's fears are confirmed in some way in reality but where it is within our control, as in the realm of everyday parent-child relationships and methods of handling, we try not to behave in such a way that a child need feel a real danger.

There are other conditions, too, under which childhood fears may not be overcome through the ordinary means at a child's disposal. Now it is one thing to *pretend* that you are a powerful being who can tame tigers and lions or scare them into submission, to *pretend* that the clothes closet is a jungle with wild beasts lurking within, to turn the nursery into a theater for the performance of this drama, and quite

another thing to carry this drama within you, to make it part of your personality and to turn the world into a theater for the performance of this drama. Yet this can happen, too, and we need to take a look at this kind of development.

The child who tries to overcome his fear of tigers by becoming a tiger in his *play* is employing a perfectly healthy approach to the tiger problem. A child who stalks his parlor tigers with home-made weapons is conducting an honorable fight against his imaginary fears. But there are some children whose fears are so intense and so real to them that the sense of danger permeates all aspects of living, and the defense against danger becomes part of their personality equipment -- and then we may have difficulties. Many problems of later childhood which we lump together under the heading "behavior disorder" can only be understood as elaborate defenses against imagined danger. The child who indiscriminately attacks other children in his neighborhood or in school feels impelled to attack by a fantasy in which he is in danger of attack and must attack first in self-defense. He will use the slightest gesture or harmlessly derogatory phrase used by another child to signify a hostile intention on the part of that child, and he will attack as if he were in great danger. He is so certain of the danger that if we talk to him about his attack afterward he will insist, with conviction, that the other guy was going to beat him up and he *had* to do it.

But what is this? This is not very far removed from the fantasy of our nursery tiger hunter who sees ferocious beasts in the clothes closet and under the couch and who must attack with his trusty Tommy-gun before the beast attacks him. But there is this important difference. Our nursery hunter keeps his tigers in their place. They don't roam the streets and imperil good citizens. They aren't real. Almost any two and a half year old will admit, if pressed, that there isn't really a tiger under the couch. And he very sensibly deals with his imaginary tigers by means of the imagination. It's a pretend fight with a pretend tiger. But our older child who attacks other children because of his fantasied fear of attack, has let his tigers get out of the parlor, so to speak. They have invaded his real world. They will cause much trouble there and they can't be brought under control as nicely as the parlor tigers can. When these "tough guys," the aggressive and belligerent youngsters, reveal themselves in clinical treatment we find the most fantastic fears as the motive force behind their behavior. When our therapy relieves them of these fears the aggressive behavior subsides.

In the light of all this we can see that the imaginative play of children serves mental health by keeping the boundaries between fantasy and reality. If the rules of the game are adhered to, if the imaginary beasts are kept in their place and brought under control in the parlor, there is less likelihood that they will invade the real world.

There is great misunderstanding today about the place of fantasy in the small child's life. Imaginary companions have fallen into ill repute among many educators and parents. Jan's "Laughing Tiger" would be hastily exiled in many households. The notion has got around that imaginary companions are evidence of "insecurity," "withdrawal" and a latent neurosis. The imaginary companion is supposed to be a poor substitute for real companions and it is felt that the unfortunate child who possesses them should be strongly encouraged to abandon them in favor of real friends. Now, of course, if a child of any age abandons the real world and cannot form human ties if a child is unable to establish meaningful relationships with persons and prefers his imaginary people we have some cause for concern. But we must not confuse the neurotic uses of imagination with the healthy and the child who employs his imagination and the people of his imagination to solve his problems is a child who is working for his own mental health. He can maintain his human ties and his good contact with reality while he maintains his imaginary world. Moreover, it can be demonstrated that the child's contact with the real world is *strengthened* by his periodic excursions into fantasy. It becomes easier to tolerate the frustrations of the

real world and to accede to the demands of reality if one can restore himself at intervals in a world where the deepest wishes can achieve imaginary gratification. But play is only one of the means by which the child attempts to overcome his fears. The child discovers, at a very early age that his intelligence and his ability to acquire knowledge will also help him combat his fears. This brings us to another story and the illustration of another approach to the universal problems and fears of early childhood.