

The Invisible Child

Some Thoughts on Being Seen and Heard

by Jutta von Buchholtz

“I want you to help me quit my job,” she said barely managing to hold back her tears. “I have no voice there ... I’m invisible.” Tears now flowed freely down her face. Mrs. A. was an attractive woman in her fifties, married with two children. She had held the same job in a large corporation for about fifteen years. She was a conscientious and hard worker who often took home work in the evenings and over the weekends. During departmental conferences her input was rarely solicited and usually disregarded, although at times a manager would offer her ideas as if they had sprung from his own head.

Over the years many of my, primarily but not exclusively female clients have shared the deep hurt their invisibility caused them. Not to be seen or heard negates our very existence and the feeling of worthlessness and damage to self-esteem make cherishing oneself very difficult. What is there that could be cherished, is the question of those darkest hours. Imagine being seated at an abundant banquet, platters heaped with mouth-watering dishes consistently passing you by, your eyes search hungrily while your belly stays empty! Soon you ask yourself: “What’s wrong with me?” You have lost track of yourself. You feel deeply isolated and lonely. You actually become the emptiness, the lacuna, the void.

During my training as analyst I took stories of several such clients to my mentor Sonja Marjasch for supervision.

“Do you know of Tove Jansson?” she asked.

I didn’t.

“She writes children’s books, she is Finnish,” she went on.

“In her *Tales from Moominvalley* there is a story of ‘The Invisible Child.’ Your clients remind me of this child”

I bought the little book.

It’s one in a series about the Moomin, funny looking little creatures that make you think of small, friendly, harmless hippos. Moominmamma is at the center of the family, highly moral but broad-minded. Moominpappa is a storyteller, a wanderer and dreamer and very loyal to his family and friends. Their son, Moomintroll, is as gullible as he is enthusiastic. Little My is the family’s small, disrespectful, yet extremely positive friend and there is Too-ticky with much common sense. The valley is peopled with many more characters but these five figure in the story I want to explore with you.

And here is the story of the invisible child:

One evening Too-ticky brought an invisible child to the Moomins. A relative had taken the child in although she resented having to do so. She showed her feelings about this in a horrid way to the child, whose name was Ninny. “If people are frightened very often,” Too-icky explained, “they sometimes

become invisible.” It wasn’t that that horrid lady yelled or was openly angry, which would be understandable, but rather she was the icily ironic kind. Moomintroll wanted to know what ironic meant and Too-ticky explained it this way: “Imagine that you slip on a rotten mushroom and sit down on the basket of newly picked ones. The natural thing for your mother would be to be angry. But no, she isn’t. Instead she says, very coldly: “I understand that’s your idea of a graceful dance, but I’d thank you not to do it in people’s food.” And so the child, Ninny, started to become pale and fuzzy around the edges until finally nothing could be seen of her. The horrid lady gave her away to Too-ticky because she wasn’t going to take care of relatives she couldn’t even see! Ninny did not talk either, but the lady had hung a small silver bell around her scrawny neck so that one could hear where she was. And now Ninny was to stay with the Moomins, who were to make her visible again. Of course, they had no idea how to do this. They decided not to consult a doctor because Moominmamma believed that shy Ninny might want to be invisible for a while longer. Ninny was treated like everyone else in the family. When it was time to go to bed, Moominmamma suggested that she should just jingle her little bell if she needed anything at all during the night. That night Moominmamma looked for Granny’s book on household remedies, and found among them what to do if people are getting difficult to see.

The next morning Ninny showed up and she had paws! Yet, as soon as Moomintroll mentioned the horrid lady, the paws faded away again. Later that day Ninny accidentally broke a glass jar, but Moominmamma’s matter of fact understanding resulted in a big change; not only did the paws reappear, but so did two spindly legs and the hem of a brown dress. That evening Moominmamma happily sewed a dress from her pink scarf, and from the leftovers she fashioned a pink bow. She put both on the chair by the bedside of the sleeping child. The next morning the pink dress and bow, two spindly legs and a pair of paws floated down the steps and Ninny piped: “Thank you all ever so much,” which embarrassed them all. Moominpappa remarked that the more they saw of her the more they liked what they saw and the happier they were.

In the course of the next days it became obvious that Ninny did not know how to play, she also could not get angry, and she never laughed at all. She followed Moominmamma everywhere and all could hear the silvery jingle of her bell, but she had no face. For quite a while there were no more changes and Moominmamma discontinued Granny’s medicine.

One day they went to the seashore to pull the boat on land for the winter’s storage. Ninny had never seen the sea, and confided to Moominmamma that she was frightened by the horribly big sea. Moominmamma sat down on the landing stage, pensively looking into the water. Moominpappa, pretending to push her into the water, tried to sneak up behind her:

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“But before he could reach her a pink streak shot over the landing stage, and Moominpappa let out a scream and drooped his hat into the water. Ninny had sunk her small invisible teeth in Moominpappa’s tail, and they were sharp.”

“Good work!” cried My. “I couldn’t have done it better myself!”

Ninny was standing on the landing stage. She had a small, snub-nosed, angry face below a red tangle of hair.

“Don’t you dare push her into the big horrible sea!” she hissed.

“I see her; I see her!” Shouted Moomintroll. “She’s sweet.”

“Sweet my eye,” said Moominpappa. “She’s the silliest, nastiest, badly brought-uppest child I’ve ever seen, with or without a head.”

When Moominpappa tried to fish his hat out of the water he accidentally toppled into the shallow sea. Ninny erupted into shrieks of laughter as he stood there, dripping wet. No one had ever heard her laugh! She could now be seen as well as heard!

Several things continue to strike me about this story. Ninny faded and disappeared because the aunt’s arrogant irony slowly sent her sense of self into hiding. My client, Ms. A. had experienced herself as invisible because her work environment did not appreciate her and her bosses actively took away her voice by falsely claiming her creative input as their own. Mrs. A.’s presenting dream was that she had given birth to a still-born baby. She was unaware of this and had to be told of this event by a nurse. This potential healing agent, the nurse, who needs to inform her of the painful truth, could well be an image for her analyst, who was to make her aware of the situation. The theme of giving birth to babies became like a little silver bell for Mrs. A.’s journey. Over the years during her therapy, the babies Mrs. A. birthed in her dreams were alive, often brimming with extraordinary gifts.

The utter sadness of being noticeable only by the chiming of a little silver bell moved me much. There is so nothing else of and to yourself. In my work with clients I try to keep a lookout for the sound of their silver bells. They tell me that there is a truer someone there, although not visible at present.

Moominmamma does not want to take the invisible child to the doctor because she intuitively feels that shy Ninny may want to remain invisible for a while. The other day a dear colleague and I talked. He was enthusing about rereading D. W. Winnicott and his understanding of the true and the false self. The false self, the compliant one, is part of the development of the persona, a necessary social mask, which serves one pretty well. More profoundly, though, it also is around in order to protect the true self. And somehow, my colleague continued, the false self knows of its important role in the individual’s psyche. Ninny is shy and her invisibility may serve a protective purpose for her true self. Establishing a connection between these two parts has to be done with care and not in a rush. It reminded me of stories my father’s generation brought home from the Russian front after World War II. Many of them had frostbitten limbs, fingers, toes, hands, feet. The dangerous process of thawing had to be done very slowly and thoughtfully. If you stuck the frozen limb into hot water you would indeed thaw it - and lose it! The perilous process of becoming visible, or, in analogy to our work and staying with Winnicott, becoming yourself, more connected to your true self, needs to be undertaken carefully and slowly.

Some of my clients, who are hiding their true selves from their environment, from me and even from themselves, require patience, a slow thawing. Titanic efforts at illuminating every last crevice of their emotional world with the harsh, hot light of Apollonian consciousness can be destructive. I wonder if it continues to be our foremost mandate to bring unconscious elements to consciousness, as it had been for the pioneers of our profession?

On June 26, 2011, The New York Times ran an article headlined “Shyness: Evolutionary Tactic?” In it the author says that the act of treating shyness as a pathology, which needs to be fixed by primarily medical means, needs to be revisited. The author suggests several occasions when shyness (and introversion, invisibility in an extroverted culture like ours) can be a gift. Some years ago a colleague returned from Saudi Arabia with a burka. We all tried it on and among the many emotions I experienced being in it was a realization that this invisibility gave me a sense of being protected, safe and very private. Some of my veiled acquaintances attest to the same experience. To be seen can be exhilarating as well as frightening. My client, Mrs. A. stopped working for the corporation and started her own creative business. Her dreams seemed to support this shift. They now showed her birthing miraculous children. Although she was anxious about how her future would turn out, she also experienced great joy and happiness about coming out!

Ninny does not know how to play and no one has ever heard her laugh!

A few years ago my daughter and I spent a month in Morocco. We went to a hamam, a public bath place, this one for women only. In the anteroom we shed our clothing, stored our jewelry in our purses in open cubbyholes. We heard laughter and talking from the next room and entered it naked. Already about four naked Moroccan women gathered, giggling, laughing, splashing on the slippery floor. There were two women, whose job it was to wash us. They poured buckets of warm water over us, rubbed our entire bodies with exfoliants, washed and oiled our skin with fragrant liquids. Much commentary and joking in Arabic and French, which we could understand, was going on through the entire process as we lay in puddles on the floor. My beautiful daughter elicited appreciative comments and as one of our attendants wobbled my rather flabby belly, peels of recognition and laughter echoed in the chamber. In the course of the time we spent together it seemed to me that all of us had communally and individually been restored to our true selves, such a great gift! Finally all of us had to leave again, return to the antechamber, and put on pants, blouses, and burkas. For a short while we had no longer been identified with the accoutrements of our persona, but understood them to be welcome protection as we emerged back into the world. Ninny cannot play or laugh with abandon because she is, perforce, identified with a very polite persona: she curtsies, says many thank yous and apologizes profusely every time she “does it wrong”. Everyone is bored with this behavior and she is left alone, maybe to grow into who she really is (her true self) while protecting herself by holding on to the invisible face.

Ninny cannot get angry. In our culture anger is a socially unacceptable emotion, especially for women. In Psychology 101 we were taught that depression is anger turned inward. Logical—for where else could it go when it cannot be allowed into awareness? With deeply depressed clients there is often the dan-

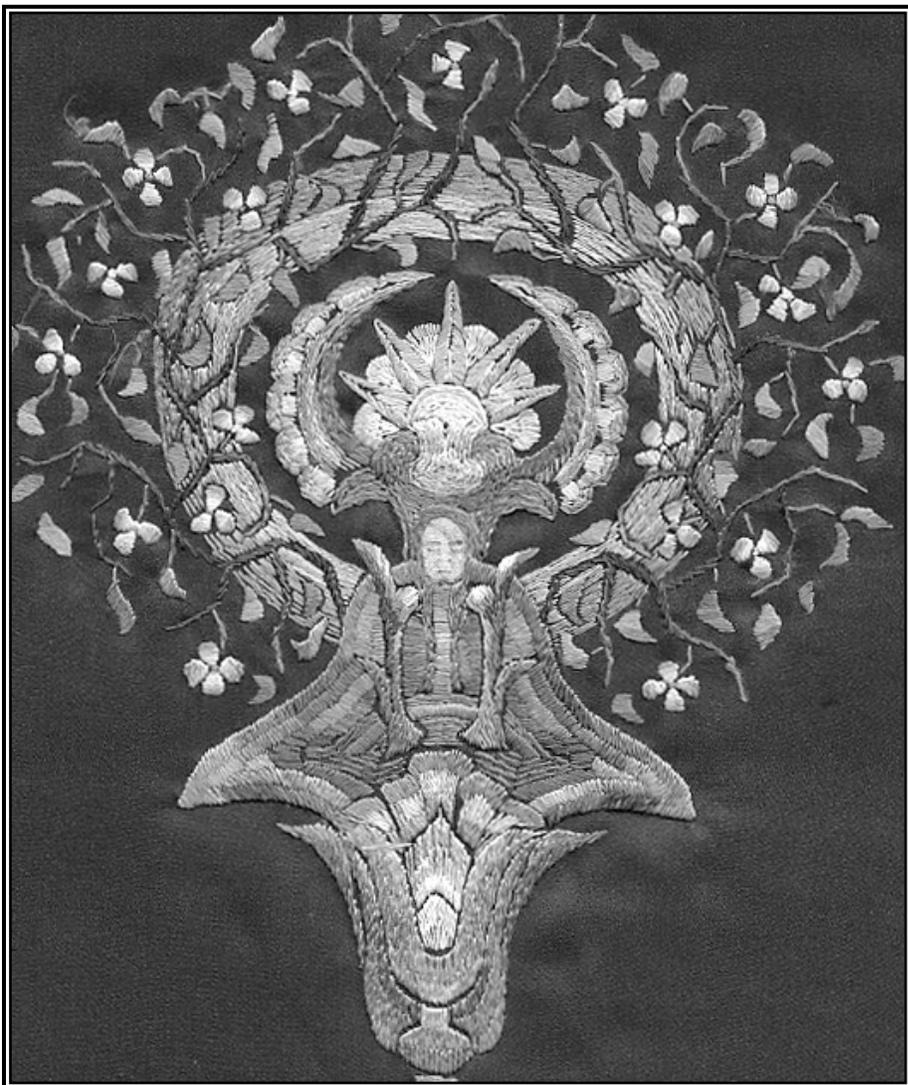
ger that they will commit suicide, *Selbstmord*, German for “murder of self.” Once you are dead, you have concretely made yourself invisible. Finally there is an action but by now it is destructive. In his *Suicide and the Soul* James Hillmann comments that a suicide is a very concrete and literal interpretation and application of the inner urge calling for a profound change; life can no longer be tolerated the way it is. Anger carries a great deal of energy, psychic energy that is there to be applied to a transformation in our inner approach to life. A Swiss friend of mine was told by her analyst: “Wut gibt Boden.” That would translate to: Anger/rage provides the ground under our feet. Since we are asked to divorce ourselves from this great solidity and transformer, depression has become an epidemic mostly in women of our culture. It is, finally, only when Ninny gets angry that she becomes visible in the most astounding way: the polite little “thing” is now hissing like a furious cat, creatively and ferociously protecting the one she loves. Over time, once her attachment to Moominmamma had become strong enough, Ninny was finally able to enter the mess of life. Somehow the power of love had become greater than the fear of life.

Invisibility, hiding our true selves, can happen in many ways. With some of my clients I have the impression that the sound of their silver bells is obscured by the logical, reasonable voice of their titanic intellect. This can result in an identification with only one of our four functions, which leaves the others neglected and falling into the shadow land of the unconscious. We can and do deny our shadow aspects, our natural self is hiding out safely in the shadow. It is a courageous task for any of us to face shadow aspects and bring them up from unconsciousness, make them visible and us aware of our true selves. We get to be a rounder person. Incidentally, and most importantly, we no longer see that particular nasty aspect of ourselves lived out by someone else and denigrate it there. While Mrs. A. was struggling with her decision to follow her star, she complained bitterly about the lack of initiative her husband showed. She had to think of everything and if she did not research and make reservations, always taking the initiative, they would never go on a vacation or anywhere else! Nothing would ever change in their lives because he just sat there! She saw her own shadow and no longer her husband looking across at her at the dinner table. On a collective level, we often pronounce the other country or statesman as evil incarnate. The speeches of some politicians are obvious examples. We also make incompatible persons, events or situations invisible shutting our eyes and turning away from the old, the poor, the ugly, the unpleasant, the failures, the foreigners and so on. The band of socially appropriate, acceptable, compliant behaviors, emotions and ways of conducting our lives is becoming ever narrower. What’s left is a gnawing sense of meaninglessness and emptiness, which brings many clients into my practice.

Another aspect of invisibility is the visual void, not being detected or discovered which

can be desirable, a powerful asset. Spies come to mind, great heroes like Siegfried with his *Tarnkappe* and many others in myths and fairy tales, who can don hats or magic capes, twist rings etc and thus choose to become invisible in order to gain the great treasure or redeem the princess for themselves or someone else. Disguised as men, many famous women hid themselves in plain sight: Saint Joan of Arc, Alexandra David-Néel, and Swedish Queen Christina are well known examples. Recently I learned from an Episcopal priest one reason why in our Christian culture women hide by disappearing into masculine attire. In the thirteenth century Pope Honorius III decreed that women should not speak because “their lips carry the stigma of Eve, who lead men to perdition.” The general repression, rendering invisible, not only of women but of the feminine in all of us in our culture has only fairly recently been reversed. Carl Jung’s discovery, welcoming and cherishing of the anima in all of us has drawn many women to his analytical psychology.

Many great stars seek invisibility and try to hide behind huge sunglasses wanting not to be noticed. Jazz musicians, for example, tried to avoid notoriety. Marilyn Monroe, when she performed as a singer, wanted people to “want to hear me sing without looking at me.” (The New York Times, August 7, 2011. AR 17, “Channeling a Bombshell, One Jazzy Note at a Time.”) On the other hand, Andy Warhol made himself invisible by cre-



Fabric Mandala by a patient of Carl Jung

ating a public persona that was extremely noticeable. Many monasteries and cloisters ask the members for a vow of silence. In the eleventh century the Carthusian order was created. The Grand Chartreuse, secluded in the French Alps, is considered one of the world's most ascetic monasteries. After waiting for permission for twelve years to film their everyday lives, German filmmaker Philip Gröning was finally allowed to film there with very strict boundaries. The result is "Into Great Silence" which is the virtually silent film that became a surprise hit in Germany in 2006. To watch it is a balm for our souls, which often have to go into hiding in our bustling days.

I hope my reflections about and associations to invisibility and silence have entertained you and that they may help widen your understanding and appreciation of what hides beneath invisibility, in our own as well as our clients' psyches ■