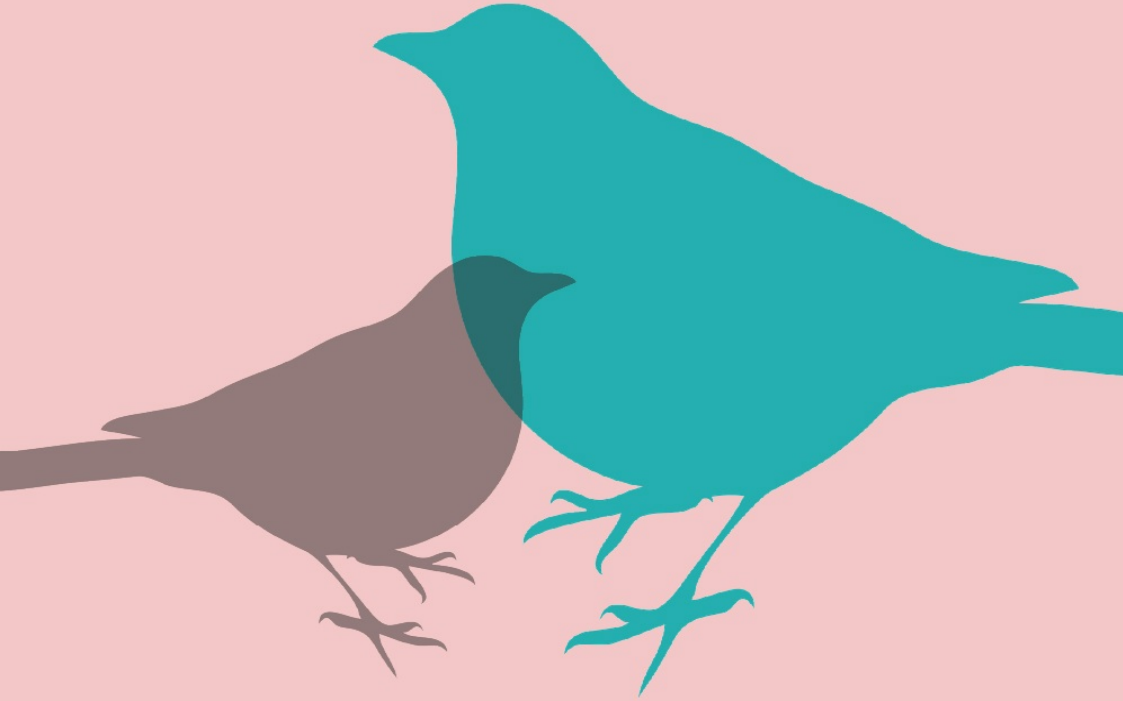
Dorothy W. Baruch

Little Mocking Bird



Existential Child Therapy

Little Mocking Bird

Dorothy W. Baruch

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The Author

Dorothy W. Baruch, who died September 4, 1962, was a clinical psychologist in private practice, working with children and adults in individual and group therapy, with a special interest in psychosomatic problems.

Little Mocking Bird

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Since I am living on time that medical science enables one to borrow these days, I keep asking myself: In what there is left to me, shall I write poetry? Or a novel? Or the things I've wanted to put into other books, but which were too startling? Not to be spoken of. At least not as I hope to speak, of truth about children, which sounds as if truth were stretching on an unsteady tiptoe.

As fiction anything goes these days, but not as truth, when the truth holds a shock about the thoughts of a child. A child must pathetically hide inside him the monstrous things, the preposterous giant imaginings, the incredibly serious wonderings, the crazy sounding but poignant longings. For fear of ridicule, he must hold these in. For fear of being met with astonished condemnation.

I have great feeling for parents who feel they know so little, who fear they can't do what they need and want to do for their children. "It's always hardest with your own." Parents are eager and hungry to know. But, for too long they have been made to feel unable to handle what they deserve to know. Parents are puzzled. They worry over their own strictness (there's been so much said about "freedom"); sex in their children (so much about

freedom here too); masturbation; delinquency; hostility, most of all.

They worry whether they are good parents, whether they love enough? They doubt themselves in this when they feel the outcroppings of animosity toward their children that most parents feel at times. They worry whether their children love them enough. And they doubt this love when a child gives frank expression to the hostility within him. They fail to realize that at least some of the child's grievances are unrealistic: the result of not having imagined wants fulfilled.

There should not be the need for children to bury feelings and fantasies that breed troubles when unaired. There should be more earnest and knowledgeable attention, more hearing, more understanding that goes forth at a quiet pace to meet our children's feelings.

All people with children can give themselves to this: parents and teachers who care for most of our children throughout their years of growing, doctors and clergymen, people in many professions. Because they are human and have once been children themselves, they hold within themselves the ability to understand children's feelings.

We can all understand. We can all listen and hear.

But first, the clogging wax of ignorance must be removed from our ears.

We must emerge from behind our bunkers of adult defense against a child's indecencies, monstrosities, preposterous leanings—and discover how to make peace. We can become less offended by the raw inner stuff of childhood's emotions, less skeptical of their presence, if we are given the chance.

This is a dream for the future, but not too far distant. Some of us have already opened the gates toward understanding. Some have already made the beginnings of showing children that what they have in their minds can be accepted so that it comes to confuse and worry them less, so that the normal problems of childhood remain normal, so that much of what is unhappy, unpeaceable, unproductive is prevented before its underground root-branchings have spread.

What can I do? What do I feel "called on" to do, as it were, in the time that I still have? The closest I have come to it is a kind of going back over experiences I've had as a therapist ... a kind of informal talking with parents and teachers, other therapists, and people in other professions who are interested in children, about what children feel and think and don't ordinarily talk about but want desperately to have us understand, about us, too, and our adult reactions and the things that keep us from understanding, and what we perhaps can do to open our hearts.

We have come to this day

of astronauts ... of missiles ... of men with
machines
who handle with sureness
the finger-tip message of death.

And yet—
as man and woman,
fathers, mothers, people with children—
we are at a loss.
From our shut-in places of silence we ask:
What to do about feelings that keep us apart?
Anxiety. Anger.
Anger that we have arrived at this pass.

We have come to this day
of science ... of computations. . . .
And yet as man and woman,
we are still searching
for ways of saying with trust,
"I give myself to you
without fear of losing myself."

We have come to this day
uncertain of paths
to loving our children
with warmth that endures
those times when warmth lags.
We have come to now—
at last knowing we must
find in the message of human to human
more sure, tender touch.

There are so many things a child thinks and feels and dares not talk about, that he holds inside. If he so much as lets one of these push timidly out of its hole, he catches our look, our horror, our indignation, or our amusement. Not the listening attentiveness that trouble deserves.

Children want us to listen and to hear them.

Why don't we?

Too little time?
Too busy?

What they feel should not be said, isn't fit to be heard. The little animal in them should keep out of sight.

But perhaps with more honesty: We are afraid.

The fear of our own feelings—and of our children's as an echo of what ours may have been—keeps us from doing the very things we most want.

How do we know what children feel?

The child therapist has an ear to their heartbeat . . .
And so let us talk about—

What the therapist hears

What this can mean to children—

Here I think of a child, a very disturbed child, possessing many of the fantasies and feelings typical of “normal” children, but so intensely loaded that they might seem quite otherwise.

When I went into the reception room, the mother was showing the child a magazine. My eyes took in the two blond braids, ends tied with pink bows. The spotless white pinafore ruffled over the shoulders. The starched pink dress.

The mother looked up. “I forgot to tell you,” she said in her too sweet voice, “Timmy wanted to do this today. He just loves to dress up like a girl.”

In the playroom I stared at him and muttered half to myself, “I wonder does Timmy really like it so much?”

He stared at me. Opened his mouth. Blinked his eyes into the unseeing squinch of tightness his mother had described as the tic that lately had come with increasing frequency when he tried to talk and could not get out his words.

I wanted to open my arms, to hold him to me, to say to him, “Look, all of this isn’t you!” But I didn’t follow my instinct. I was stupidly stiff. Letting protocol steer me, I pointed to the box of playthings on the floor.

He stood looking down at it. “I—I—I c-c-can’t get my dress dirty.”

And suddenly I was free from protocol. The dress be damned. The important thing was the boy! And aloud, “To hell with the dress then. Take it off if you’d like. And do what you, yourself, want.”

He burst into peals of laughter. He shook with laughter. Doubled over in giggling. Then stood straight and tall. “To hell with the dress.” And off he went into peals again.

He pulled at the apron strings. Pulled apart the beautiful bow his mother had so carefully tied. Very soberly he undid the dress. Pulled off the braided wig. In the sunsuit he’d worn underneath, he sat on the floor, looked up at me and declared, “I’m your little mocking bird. To hell with the dress!”

When his mother had come in initially, she had told me about his blocked speech, his tic, his bed-wetting, the masturbation she “was afraid he engaged in” in spite of her warnings that if he touched himself he would make himself sore and might—vaguely—"suffer permanently.” He would beat himself over the ears, cupping his hands. (I thought: Perhaps so as not to hear.) She mentioned his unaggressiveness with the other children in kindergarten. His timidity with them. His fear of being “picked on.” His lack of standing up for himself. But what she did not mention was the dressing-up business. Nor that his father had blown up at her, “If he turns out to be a

homo I'll kill him. Or at least disinherit him."

"Not that his father ever really has liked him," she added at the time she told me this.

During her pregnancy, Beth "knew" the child would be a girl. She dreamed of dressing her little girl to perfection. "All pink and white and ruffly!"

When she saw her baby after its birth, still in the delivery room, her head "half-woozy," she'd looked at him and had thought, "That pink thing. How beautiful!" And quickly, "How vulnerable. How awful for me to have to be responsible for that!" But, "I learned how to take care of it. To wash it. To keep it clean." And now with Timmy at five and a half, she still held his penis when he urinated. "He can't steer it himself."

"Don't touch!" she would tell him. To him, she seemed to be saying, "It's not yours to steer." His wetting "in his sleep" was a kind of protest to feel that he still had what it took to make him whole physically. A kind of avowal of himself, which he dared not avow in his waking moments.

He was part of her. She was teaching him to read. Taking his brainpower to herself with great pride. She wrote notes to me from him that I discovered he knew nothing about. And yet she wrote in first person singular and signed

his name. (He is mine! He is me! My son! But dress him up, Beth, so no one can see. Turn him into—My girl!) Men were no good. But I sensed from what she had said and from the expressiveness of her face and body that slumbering in her was the wish for a man warmly beside her, a grown man, not a small boy. Some day perhaps this wish would emerge. But meanwhile, for her with her therapist and for her son with me, there would be long, struggling days.

Just as for his own preservation, he had felt he needed to stay part of his mother, so now Timmy felt he had to stay part of me. "I am your mocking bird." (As if he were saying, "I cannot be me, freely moving in my own direction. I must follow you.")

Inside myself I had to keep saying, "Go gently, gently. It will take the long, gentle plan. He will need gradually to separate himself from you. But he must do this without feeling rejected. It will give him protection for a while to be part of you-who-can-release-him. This will help him gain courage to release himself from a part of someone who cannot yet wish him Godspeed on his own. Sooner or later, he will need to find that he does not have to remain part of me to be safe, that he can be a separate person, and that I will still protect him as one human being protects another in need." I would have to watch for the clues, the cues, the signs, even the smallest, that would show his readiness to take his first independent steps. And I would need to open gates and structure the situation from time to time in order to lead him ahead.

With his funny little gnome face and cropped sandy hair, he would look up at me—this very disturbed five-and-a-half-year-old child. “I am your little mocking bird.”

So began his persistent siege. He would remain a part of me. He would sit as I sat, stand in whatever pose I happened to stand, pretend to write when I wrote. . . .

I remembered he had been afraid to get his dress dirty. I wondered if I might utilize his wish to imitate me to help him past this fear into an introduction to greater freedom. So I hauled out the clay bucket from its comer of the toy closet and felt a hand beside mine on the handle. He was hauling too.

Dump out the moist clay. Dig in. Dig in. My hands digging.

His hands dug too.

Finger paints slurrfing on paper.

No pattern. Just action. With me hoping he would go into patterns of his own.

Finally one day I said to him, “Perhaps today, my little mocking bird, you can choose something you’d like to play with.”

“Can choose something you’d like,” he echoed seriously.

I nodded.

He nodded.

“You can take it out now yourself.”

“Out now yourself.”

Glancing at him I thought I detected a wicked, small smile.

“You—you,” I laughed gently and I think tenderly—at least that was the way I felt. “I think you want to be a real mean little mocking bird.”

“Mean little mocking bird....” He was grinning broadly. Then the giggle burst forth.

Moving swiftly, he took out one thing, another. Everything. Everything. Piling things high on the floor.

Then, looking at me he struck my pose again. “Your mean little mocking bird,” he grinned.

He loved words. “I think you want to be my ex-asp-er-ating little mocking bird.”

“Exasperating,” he said. And he was. The fact that I was accepting his wish to be a nasty little mocking bird, a naughty little mocking bird, a teasing, angry little mocking bird, seemed to give him more courage.

The hauling out of things moved from its formless clutter. He would touch something, take it out, put it back.

“You seem to be looking for something?”

“Looking for something.” But this time his words were not just an echo. He spoke them without my questioning intonation. He was talking with his own positive voice.

In the next session he asked for finger paints. And he painted a picture. (He was six now.) It was, he told me, a girl in a pink dress sitting on the toilet. And it was, quite distinguishably. Then carefully mixing a darker pink with his finger, he made a stroke between the girl’s legs. “Her pink stick,” he said. Then squinched up his eyes.

Back and forth. It always goes that way. A spurt of courage. A sputter of fear.

He looked dejected. He touched one thing. Then another on the toy shelf. Lifted it. Put it down.

“Do you want something, Timmy? Can I help you find it?” I rose and went to the closet.

He looked up at me. Started to cup his ears, as he did when he would beat at them. But this time it was an abortive gesture. He dropped his arms, leaving his ears free to hear. Then he put one hand out slowly toward me and pulled me gently to a chair.

And then, wordlessly, he opened his pants. Took hold of his penis and showed it to me. Barely above a whisper he asked me, “Is it an all right pink stick, Dorothy?”

Perhaps I should have said, “Why do you ask, dear? Tell me about it.” But I didn’t. I felt this was not a time to explore. But a time to confirm. I nodded. “I think it’s a wonderful pink stick.”

"Do you?” with puzzling incredulity. “Do you really like pink sticks, Dorothy?”

“Yes,” caution to the winds. “Yes, Timmy, I do.”

And suddenly the gnome face gave way to the face of a boy.

He never showed me his penis again. He didn’t seem to need to. He came to the same point in other ways. There was, for instance, his play with the

bird.

He went to the toy closet and got it from the box, where it lay with an assortment of molded animals. A tiny bird. He went after it deliberately, knew exactly where it was so that it was apparent he had seen it before but had not dared take it out. He stroked it gently. Cuddled it fondly in his hand. Touching it, beaming. “We won’t let anybody hurt our bird.” He wanted me to help him shape a clay nest in which the baby bird could lie “safe and hidden” and to fasten this onto the wall high in the toy closet, where no one could reach it. And he exacted a promise from me that I would not let any other child bring in the ladder to “even peek.”

Next session he asked me to bring the bird down to be fed. “Those chocolate kisses.” He knew they were in the candy box in the cupboard. He’d discovered them when the cover had rolled off the box on one of his days of dragging things out indiscriminately. But he had never asked for any candies for himself. Now, however, his bird should be fed. “See, Dorothy. See how he opens his mouth!” With this, he stretched his own neck in a birdlike gesture and opened his own mouth demandingly wide for me to drop the chocolates in. He stood back. “Now lap-sit him carefully. Don’t let him fall.”

He handed the bird to me. Watched me cuddle it, rocking the tiny thing in the palms of my hands in my lap. He sighed deeply. Smiled.

But then his eyebrows puckered together. And in a far-off voice he said, “My mother, you know, she’s not a very lap-sitting woman. I don’t think she was a very lap-sat girl.”

For weeks, each time he came, he checked immediately, the anxious lines vanishing when he found the nest still there. “There are bad people after birds, you know. There’s one bad boy in school. He’s a grabber.” (To his mind, his mother in disguise? This could be one reason why he had been so afraid of other children in school.)

For weeks he had me tend the bird, lap-sit it, feed it. “We wouldn’t let anyone hurt it, would we?”

He used the “we” continuously now. I listened carefully to find out its meaning. He did not use it as the editorial “we,” meaning “I.” It was rather a replacement of his being my mocking bird, except that as part of me now, he did not just follow and imitate. He could at times suggest for himself what he wanted to do.

He played a lot with the “wild zoo animals.” “The monsters! They eat people up.” Suddenly stopping with eyebrows drawn, looking up at me anxiously, “We won’t let anyone hurt our bird? Feed him now, Dorothy.” Seeking with his own open mouth the comfort of being protectively fed.

He made lumpy monsters of clay. “They get themselves filthy. But, Dorothy, we won’t let anyone hurt our bird. Feed him now, please.”

Comforted and protected, he grew in inventiveness. Made up his own private set of animals. “The zoo-poohs.” Among them: The great, ferocious “sharkers” with enormous “toothful mouths.” And the fast-running, fast-swimming “baby grumpets” with many arms. “So *in case the sharkers bite off an arm, then one of the other arms can take over its work.”* And then, with the thought of an arm being bitten off, *“Cuddle him, Dorothy. Feed him. Feed him.”* Again and again: *“We won’t let anyone hurt our bird.”*

The “we” still made us one. He and I, amalgamated, were strong enough to circumvent hurt. But by the same token, the “we” was also a kind of resistance to going further on his own. For one thing, it was safer than soaring on spreading wings to the place where he would come upon his view of his mother’s fantasies and to the place where his own accumulated anger would bring its explosive dangers to light.

For awhile, I used the “we” with him. I hoped he would feel that even though I understood its meaning to him, still to me it meant something different. It meant: *You, Timmy, supported by me who am bigger and stronger and have the authority here; we together can keep you safe while you confront these fantasied dangers and discover that what you imagine is not actually fact.*

I fed the emotionally hungry, bird-mouthed Timmy and cuddled the little bird. At the end of each session, at his request, I helped put it safely back in its nest. And in my strongest voice I reiterated, “No, we will not let anyone hurt him.” Until one day Timmy took the little bird from me. Lifted it high above his head. Soared around the room. Jubilantly. *“See! See! He can fly now, Dorothy. He won't need his nest any more.”*

When he came in for his next session, he was noticeably anxious. Out of the cupboard with this and that. This and that. Dropping a cluttered heap on the floor. Skittering. Settling down on nothing.

It is usually this way. Back and forth. A spurt of courage. A sputter of fear.

What fantasies, I wondered, were frightening him? We had to get at them. This clutter obscured them. It did not reveal.

He’d been cuddled. Fed. He’d relived, as it were, a more satisfying babyhood than he’d had originally. It was time now to move on. He’d signaled his readiness when of his own accord he’d discarded the nest.

“Such a mess!” I mused aloud, viewing the muddled heap. “It looks like a junk heap that a bird might think it could hide in. But not a very comfortable one.” And to Timmy, “I think you’d better choose some one thing you’d like to

play with, or two, or three. You decide which. And then I'll help you put the rest away."

He sat dejectedly on the floor, stared in front of him, and didn't even look up at me.

I sat down on the floor beside him, put an arm around his thin little shoulders. "I think you're kind of scared."

He was ramrod stiff. But almost imperceptibly he shifted and leaned against me. So I sat there with him a few long minutes. And then I said matter-of-factly, "There! Let's get going. I'll get back to my chair and my note-taking. And you put your thinking cap on and choose what to play with."

"Which two things? ..." in a whisper. And half-heartedly, "The clay, I guess. And the bird."

When the clutter was cleared, he looked at his two things, the mound of clay and the bird. But his shoulders were still droopily hunched.

"I think maybe you're still pretty scared."

"The little bird is," he nodded. "He wants to go back to his nest."

"I know," I said, this time addressing the bird. "I know you want to go

back to your nest. But I know too that you're strong enough now to be able to fly."

"B-b-but," with hands over ears. "H-h-he wants to go back."

"He's awfully scared not to."

He nodded tearfully. Rose. Came and stood beside me. With the shy touch of uncertainty he pushed my hair from my ear, and he whispered into it. "But you don't know what he'll do if he flies." And then, moving around so he could watch my expression, he brought it out with a rush, looking petrified as he did so. *"The little bird'll doodoo right down on mean people's heads."*

I put my head back and laughed, and he laughed with me. "We thought that was funny," he chuckled.

"Yes," I said, "we did. And I think too that every little bird I know, naturally wants to do that when he's mad."

He was quiet and thoughtful. "Will you lap-sit him now again?" (Would I care for him still after glimpsing his hostility?) "But of course."

Pathetic little Timmy retreating, like the bird wanting to go back to its nest. Or further back, to a state before birth. But even in his backward-going, he had taken a tremendous step forward. He had said, *"You* keep him there,

safe for *me."* We were two separate people! Timmy was at last acknowledging that he himself had his own identity, which he could look to me to protect.

One day the toy delivery truck, he declared, was a "Dorothy truck." He placed one of the dowels in it. Then he had the "mother fire engine" chase after the delivery truck. "She's going to try to steal the stick."

"But the truck isn't going to give it to her. It's delivering it to Timmy. That's the person it's for."

"Oh!" he exclaimed. And his mind made a jump seemingly disconnected but in actuality triumphantly sound. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "I just thought of my monkey. Did you know, Dorothy? He's ready now to be born a boy."

When he had the monkey out of my pocket, he inspected it critically. "It's not right," he said. "He has no sticking-out pink stick." And with a tinge of anger at me, "Can't you get him one?"

In some way I would.

Between then and the following session I puzzled and experimented. How would I do this? Finally, by putting a pin into the body of the monkey in the proper place and covering it with pink, waxy, hard clay that held firmly, I'd done what he asked.

Timmy came in. “Did you? Did you do it?” Doubts mingling with eagerness.

When he saw it he threw his arms around me. “He has it! He has it!”

He reached for the monkey, his face radiant. Held it in one hand and with the other hand proudly touched its most treasured part.

Timmy placed the monkey on the stool next to my chair. And there it sat during many sessions. A kind of symbol of his own right to be. Monkeyish. Monster and gentle creature varying. As he expressed it himself later, *“Both the bad and the good. Like me. I’m both the bad and the good. I'm the director, you see, doing both parts. So both have to naturally be parts of me.”*

With both bird and monkey, by keeping the token of his body’s wholeness, he came to feel that he could grow more whole in being himself.

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