

IDENTITY AND RESURRECTIVE IDEOLOGY

IN AN AGE OF TRAUMA

Robert D. Stolorow, PhD

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold. –William Butler Yeats

I'll be with you when the deal goes down. –Bob Dylan

Emotional Trauma

Over the course of the 17 years in which I have been writing about emotional trauma (Stolorow, 2007), two interweaving central themes have crystallized. On one hand, painful emotional experiences become traumatic in the absence of a relationship in which they can be held and integrated. On the other hand, emotional trauma is built into the basic constitution of human existence. Because we and all our loved ones are finite beings, death and loss constantly loom. In trying to grasp our present era as an Age of Trauma, I focus first on this second theme—trauma's existential dimension.

I glimpsed emotional trauma's existentiality first-hand at a conference in 1992, when I relived an earlier devastating loss:

I seemed like a strange and alien being—not of this world. The

others seemed so vitalized, engaged with one another in a lively manner. I, in contrast, felt deadened and broken, a shell of the man I had once been. An unbridgeable gulf seemed to open up, separating me forever from my friends and colleagues. They could never even begin to fathom my experience, I thought to myself, because we now lived in altogether different worlds. (pp. 13-14)

The key that for me unlocked the meaning of emotional trauma was what I came to call *the absolutisms of everyday life*:

When a person says to a friend, “I’ll see you later” or a parent says to a child at bedtime, “I’ll see you in the morning,” these are statements whose validity is not open for discussion. Such absolutisms are the basis for a kind of naïve realism and optimism that allow one to function in the world, experienced as stable and predictable. It is in the essence of emotional trauma that it shatters these absolutisms, a catastrophic loss of innocence that permanently alters one’s sense of being-in-the-world. Massive deconstruction of the absolutisms of everyday life exposes the inescapable contingency of existence on a universe that is random and unpredictable and in which no safety or

continuity of being can be assured. (p. 16)

In shattering the tranquilizing absolutisms of everyday life, emotional trauma brings us face to face with death and loss as possibilities that are simultaneously both certain and indefinite as to their “when” and that therefore always loom as constant threats. Stripped of its sheltering illusions, the everyday world loses its significance, and the traumatized person, as shown in my traumatized state at the conference, feels anxious, alienated, and estranged—no longer safely at home in the everyday world.

Several outcomes of such traumatization are possible. If a relational home can be found in which traumatized states and anxiety can be held and eventually integrated, the traumatized person may actually move toward a more authentic way of existing, in which existential vulnerabilities are embraced rather than disowned. More commonly, in the absence of such a relational home, he or she may succumb to various forms of emotional numbing. Alternatively, the traumatized person may attempt to restore the lost illusions shattered by trauma through some form of what I call *resurrective ideology*.

Ressurective Ideology in An Age of Trauma

The tranquilizing illusions of our everyday world seem in our time to be threatened with collapse from all sides—by global diminution of natural resources, by global warming, by global nuclear proliferation, and by global terrorism. As Lear (2006) puts it:

We live at a time of a heightened sense that civilizations are themselves vulnerable. Events around the world ... have left us with an uncanny sense of menace. We seem to be aware of a shared vulnerability that we cannot quite name.... It is [an existential] vulnerability that we all share in virtue of being human. (pp. 7-8)

Here I wish to focus in particular on the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 as a devastating collective trauma that inflicted a “rip in the fabric” (Lear, 2006, p. 65) of the American psyche. In horrifyingly demonstrating that even America can be assaulted on its native soil, the attack of 9/11 shattered our collective illusions of safety, inviolability, and grandiose invincibility, illusions that had long been mainstays of the American historical identity. In the wake of such shattering, Americans became much

more susceptible to resurrective ideologies that promised to restore the grandiose illusions that have been lost. It was in this context of collective trauma and resurrective ideology that Americans fell prey to the abuses of power of the Bush administration.

Following 9/11, Bush et al. did not merely go after Al Qaeda. They declared war on global terrorism and drew America into a grandiose, holy crusade that enabled Americans to feel delivered from trauma, chosen by God to rid the world of evil. Bush essentially said to us: “You have not been devastated and crushed. You are not exposed as excruciatingly vulnerable human beings, just as vulnerable to assault, destruction, death, and loss as are all other people around the world. You are still great and powerful, godlike, and together we will bring our way of life to every nation on earth.” Tragically, every effort to actualize such ideological illusions inflicts collective trauma on those whom *we* attack, and they respond with an intensification of *their* resurrective ideologies. It is this dialectic of traumatic collapse and ideological resurrection that fuels the lamentable, endlessly recurring cycle of atrocity and counter-atrocity that has been so characteristic of human history.

Davis (2006) suggests that to learn from history we must be able to live in experiences of collective trauma rather than grandiosely evade them. I

would add with regard to the trauma of 9/11 that we must be able to *grieve*—grieve not only for the people who were killed but also for the illusions and innocence we have lost. How can this be done?

An Alternative: Siblings in the Same Darkness

Just as finiteness and vulnerability to death and loss are fundamental to our existential constitution, so too is it inherent to our existence that we meet each other as brothers and sisters in the same darkness, deeply connected with one another in our *common* finiteness. Thus, although the possibility of emotional trauma is ever present, so too is the possibility of forming bonds of deep emotional connection within which devastating emotional pain can be held, rendered more tolerable, and eventually integrated. Our existential kinship-in-the-same-darkness makes possible the ameliorative power of human understanding.

Imagine a society in which the obligation to provide a relational home for the emotional pain that is inherent to the traumatizing impact of our finiteness has become a shared ethical principle. In such a society, human beings would be much more capable of living in their existential vulnerability, anxiety, and grief, rather than having to revert to the defensive, destructive evasions of them that I have been discussing. In such a societal

context, a new form of identity would become possible, based on owning rather than covering up our existential vulnerability. Vulnerability that finds a hospitable relational home could be seamlessly integrated into who we experience ourselves as being. A new form of human solidarity would also become possible rooted not in shared resurrective grandiosity but in shared recognition and respect for our common human finiteness. If we can help one another bear the darkness rather than evade it, perhaps one day we will be able to see the light.

References

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