

NONVERBAL AFFECTIVE PHENOMENA REVISITED

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This article presents theoretical and clinical material to show how nonverbal core affective experience is a central constituent of the sense of being and, despite a failed caregiver surround, serves throughout life as a persisting, guiding source of continuity. In the course of the article, I explicate the crucial distinction, often obscured, between *felt thinking* and thinking about feeling. When these two phenomena are conflated, an emotionally informed sense of being-in-the-world and, with it, the experience of emotional vulnerability is covered over with cognitive reflections about it that distance the experience and explain away the meanings embedded within.

Keywords: developmental enactments; emotional vulnerability; felt thinking; nonverbal affectivity; relational subtext; selfhood

I know a work is good when I get from it the shock of my own feelings. All the arts have to do with the world of the senses, and it doesn't mean they don't have ideas but the ideas are never first. . . . I've made pictures that are failures but I think I've made very few that are lies
[Robert Motherwell, 2007, p. 54].

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For as far back as I can remember, I have experienced sudden, sharp sensations that penetrate my chest and pulsate in the pit of my stomach. Sometimes they move upward, gripping my throat as if it is in a chokehold. At other times, they make their way to my eyes, filling them with tears. When I was a child, they often got away from me and erupted into an outburst of tearful sobbing.

These physical sensations, although often devastating and unrelenting, paradoxically serve to connect me to the aliveness of my being. In a similar vein to Motherwell's (2007) "shock of feelings," they allow me to experience my emotional vulnerability, bring clarity to my thinking, and provide an enduring link to my authentic sense of self. I cannot always put words to these feelings, but they have survived in wordless form nonetheless. This article is about such nonverbal affective phenomena, previously referred to elsewhere as core affective experience,¹—that is, the lived experience of emotion that transcends words and provides "cohesion in space and continuity in time" (Kohut, 1984, p. 99). Unlike Stolorow (2007), who believes one's sense of being comes about through the integration of bodily affect with language, I propose that there is an extra-linguistic sense of being, located in what I call *core affective experience*.² My understanding of this dynamic is the result of the clinical work I conducted in the early years of my practice, particularly with Ben, the subject of this article's clinical illustration.

It was during the preliminary years of psychoanalytic self psychology, an exciting and creative era for new ideas and new directions in the formulation of the therapeutic relationship and the experience of selfhood, that Ben first came to see me. I was immediately struck by the contrast between his expressive appearance and the lack of affect in his speech. His emotional vulnerability, highly palpable in his face and presence, belied the

¹See Cates's (1995) unpublished manuscript, *Nonverbal Affective Experiences and Their Role in Generating Selfhood*, presented at an APA symposium on affect.

²My concept of nonverbal *core affective experience* bears a kinship to Merleau-Ponty's (1945) conception of "embodied being-in-the-world," a term that emphasized that the experiencing body is a form of consciousness, and to Heidegger's (2001) comparable conception of being-in-the-world as a "bodying forth." Although core affective experience also bears some resemblance to contemporary psychoanalytic views of embodied experience, it is my delineation of the *subtextual dimension of the affective bond* (see description on page 512) as embodied experience that points with particular clarity to a relational interaffectivity that exists outside the field of a symbolically organized reflective recall.

extent to which he was disconnected from his feelings. It was evident that, were a relational bond to develop, it would be one that transcended words.

I see now that it was through my own feelings of vulnerability that I unknowingly connected to Ben's. The strength of the unspoken tie, unfolding during the early part of the treatment, significantly shaped the therapeutic action. In fact, it was the salient element that pulled him out of his immersion in a highly intellectualized set of ideas he called "a vision of a better world," which dangerously bordered on the messianic, and into a dyadic dialogue that would ultimately imbue his affective silence with relational meaning.

Suggestive of the contributions of those who have observed interactive process in infant research (e.g., "moments of meeting" [D. N. Stern et al., 1998; D. N. Stern, 2004] and "implicit interaction" [Beebe and Lachmann, 2002]),³ I also propose that the *subtextual dimension of the affective bond*—the rich world of emotional communication expressed, in part, through gaze and gesture—provides a therapeutic pathway for moving disarticulated affective experience into the constitutive dyadic dialogue. Once such experience acquires relational meaning, it eventually becomes integrated into a grounded sense of self.⁴

This article is organized into theoretical considerations, a clinical illustration, and concluding remarks. The first section distills the ideas of several authors who assert the motivational primacy of affect. It clarifies and explores the role of emotion, nonverbal affect, and core affective experience, as they are evocative of a person's true being. The clinical illustration, which informs the theoretical ideas of this article, delineates the progression of the unfolding transference subtext. I conclude with some thoughts on the deleterious impact of a Cartesian schema as expressed in the conflation of "thought about feeling" with "feeling thought," and in the abrogation of the lived experience of emotion and emotional vulnerability.

³In addition to "moments of meeting" (Stern, 1995) and "implicit interaction" (Beebe and Lachmann, 2002), relational interaffective phenomena that are suggestive of what I call the *subtextual dimension of the affective bond* have variously been referred to by others as "recognition process" (Sander, 1995), "implicit relational knowing" (Boston Change Process Study Group, 2002), "intimate edge" (Ehrenberg, 1992), "musical edge" (Knoblauch, 2000), "the edge of awareness" (Preston, 2008), and "subsymbolic communication" (Bucci, 1997).

⁴In contrast to the Boston Change Process Study Group (2002) and their elegant formulation of implicit relational knowing and, in particular, "non-interpretive mechanisms," my emphasis here is on the power of worded meanings constituted through a dyadic dialogue for transforming nonverbal emotional experience into the lived experience of being.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although an in-depth historical discussion of emotion is beyond the space and scope of this article, given that so much complexity and ambiguity exist in the theory and language of affect and emotion, I offer an intersubjective phenomenological definition drawn primarily from the work of Stolorow (2007) and Stolorow, Atwood, and Orange (2002). *Affect*, not being distinguished from emotion, is defined as a subjective emotional experience that evolves, through a relational developmental process, from purely bodily states to those that encompass language. When these bodily aspects become integrated with language, they become fully developed feelings.⁵ I use *affect* and *emotion* interchangeably, and my choice of terminology is based on the preferred language of each particular theorist's construct as employed in my exploration.

"I FEEL, THEREFORE I AM"

Given the significant advances of the last two to three decades in the understanding of affect/emotion, not only in psychoanalytic thinking but also in the human sciences, today, in lieu of "I think, therefore I am," Descartes might have said, "I feel, therefore I am." Authors from many different theoretical perspectives view emotion as an important source of information about the individual and the social world. Rather than getting in the way of rational thought, emotion, in fact, helps to shape it (Zajonc, 1980; Gardner, 1983; Hochschild, 1983; Frijda, 1988; Salovey and Mayer, 1990; Damasio, 1994; Ben-Ze'ev, 2000; Fisher and Ashkanasy, 2000; Nussbaum, 2001; Barrett and Salovey, 2002; Elfenbein and Ambady, 2002; Forgas, 2002; Magai and Haviland-Jones, 2002; Caruso and Salovey, 2004; Stewart, 2004; Solomon, 2007). The consensus among the aforementioned theorists and those referenced later is that "our emotions orient us to the world and give us insights, even knowledge about our place in the world" (Solomon, 2007, p. 3).

Emotion, in all its complexity, cannot be explained by viewing it as separate from the lived experience of the human being but, rather, by letting the contextuality of our experience of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1927) remain intact. It is from such a phenomenological perspective that

⁵Antonio Damasio (1999) proposed that emotions are body-brain states, and feelings are the phenomenological experience of those states.

my understanding of emotion as a bodily, nonlinear, dynamic, contextualized, emergent experience has evolved.

Those authors who argue for the centrality of affect, albeit from different perspectives, have most influenced my thinking (e.g., Tomkins 1962–1963, 1968; Green, 1977; Emde, 1980; Socarides and Stolorow; 1984–1985; Demos, 1988, 1992, 1995; Krystal, 1988; Morrison, 1989; Stolorow and Atwood, 1992; Jones, 1995; Orange, 1995; Damasio, 1999, 2003; Stolorow, 2007). I single out three of these authors, in that their original work has had an especially deep impact on my understanding of affect/emotion. They are Silvan Tomkins, Antonio Damasio, and Robert Stolorow—Tomkins for his assertion that affect is the primary motivational experience of the human being; Damasio for bringing to the fore the often overlooked role of emotion as the source of a person's true being; and Stolorow for lifting into an intersubjective perspective the primacy of affect, as well as the inextricably interrelated connection between emotion and the sense of self.

Tomkins (1962–1963) offered his affect theory as a remedy to rescue psychology “from an overly imperialistic cognitive theory.” Already working within a systems framework in his 1962 and 1963 volumes, his complex and comprehensive formulations, covering four dense volumes published from 1962 to 1992, constitute a multidimensional blend of “biological, anthropological, psychological, phenomenological” and “philosophical perspectives.”⁶ It is Tomkins's focused attention on the motivational primacy of affect that is especially relevant to what is expressed here.

Damasio's (1999, 2003) neuroscientific research and understanding of emotion support a critical theme of this article—that emotion is the source of a person's true being. His ideas appear to be consonant with those of Tomkins (1962–1963), given Damasio's hybrid view of consciousness as constituted by mind, body, emotion, reason, nature, and culture. Damasio (1999) has often been quoted, especially in the field of organizational development (OD), for suggesting that, without our emotions, we would not be capable of rational decision making, thereby offering a significant counterpoint to the preponderance of an overly rational bias toward what is referred to in the OD literature as “executive decision-making.” His explanation of emotion as “theatre of the body”

⁶Personal communication from George Atwood (August 4, 2010), a colleague of Tomkins's, who co-authored “On the Subjectivity of Personality Theory” with Tomkins (see Atwood and Tomkins, 1976).

corresponds to Stolorow's (2010) view of prelinguistic emotion as organized by "sensorimotor schemas."

Stolorow (2010), holding true to his phenomenological contextualism, positions his understanding of bodily schemas within an intersubjective-systems theory perspective—"such schemas are laid down in early childhood interaction patterns prior to the development of symbolic thought, which makes language possible for the child" (p. 9). Of critical significance is Stolorow's (2007) original and bold work on emotional trauma in which he puts the emotional world of the human being back into the experience of trauma. A rendering of his own experience of trauma has awakened his readers to the profound understanding of how unheard painful feelings and one's emotional vulnerability can easily become disavowed when the needed "relational home" for receiving those feelings is absent. Most important, Stolorow's (2007) work with his co-authors, Atwood and Orange (see Stolorow and Atwood, 1992; Orange, Atwood and Stolorow, 1997), and that of Orange (1995) bring to the conversation the primacy of "emotional understanding" as an inextricable link to our authentic sense of being.

NONVERBAL AFFECT

When I use the term *nonverbal affect*, I am referring to a kind of wordless *felt thinking*, a vague registering of a bodily sensation that exists without words. Nonverbal affect, then, is viewed as a mode of knowing and the first (earliest) form of thinking (Tomkins, 1962–1963; Demos, 1982; Atwood and Stolorow, 1984; Damasio, 1994; Jones, 1995). The similarity between nonverbal affect as a form of emotional knowing and tacit experience as conceptualized by the philosopher Michael Polanyi (1971) is that they both capture the sense of "knowing more than can be told." Psychoanalytic theorists whose work relates to this wordless sense of being have referred to it as "unformulated experience" (D. B. Stern, 1983) and the "unthought known" (Bollas, 1987), which, for me, alludes to an experience that is not part of a defensive strategy; it simply has not evolved into words and meaning.

D. N. Stern's (1985) concept of "interaffectivity" also refers to nonverbal affect; and, in this context, it is not about a "yetness" that will emerge into language, but a "match" that the infant makes "between the feeling state . . . experienced within and . . . seen 'on' or 'in' another"

(p. 132). Beebe and Lachmann (2002) relationalized this nonverbal interaffective experience, demonstrating that mother and baby communicate from the beginning of life through this nonverbal process. In addition, Beebe and her co-authors, Lachmann and Knoblauch (see Beebe and Lachmann, 2002; Beebe, Knoblauch, Rustin and Sorter, 2005), have framed this interactive process in terms of an “implicit mode of processing,” which is inclusive of procedural and emotional memory—that is, outside the “symbolically organized intentional recall” of explicit memory (Beebe and Lachmann, 2002, p. 215).⁷

As expressed in Motherwell’s (2007) quote at the beginning of this article, the bedrock emotional element of this wordless, felt experience is that of intense bodily affect. It starts with the senses. What he was referring to is an affective knowing of experience that can be transformed into language but, in essence, is extra-linguistic. It comes into being and exists independent of language. The sense of an innate truth that Motherwell depicted as the source of creativity, Tomkins (1968) described as the primary motives of man. As in Motherwell’s mystery of art and the human spirit, affect precedes the idea on which it is presumed to be based, thereby informing it with a viscerally felt integrity. In a somewhat different language than that of Tomkins and that of Motherwell’s “shock of feelings” is Damasio’s (1999) suggestion that with the “feeling of knowing,” what I have previously expressed as a kind of *felt thinking*, there is a general sense in which feelings may come first. Heidegger (1927) also suggested that “[O]ntologically mood is a primordial kind of Being for Dasein [the human being], in which Dasein is disclosed to itself *prior* to all cognition and volition” (p. 175).⁸

CORE AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE

The dynamic I refer to as core affective experience is one example of the pervasive role nonverbal affect plays in human psychological life. I can more easily say what core affective experience is not than what it is. It is not concerned with something concrete, like a rock one holds in one’s

⁷See footnote 3 for references to other authors who address relational interaffectivity on a procedural level.

⁸The quote refers to what Heidegger (1927) called *Befindlichkeit*—how-one-finds-oneself-ness—which, as Gendlin (1988) point outs, is inclusive of both our situatedness and the mood (disclosive affectivity: Stolorow, 2007) in which we find ourselves by virtue of our situatedness.

hand or uses as a tool. Rather, it is concerned more with kinds of “beingness.” Gendlin’s (1988) ontologically informed words⁹ are very helpful here: “People *are* different than either stones or tools. They live-in and live-with. They live-in a world they themselves define with their living-in. People, too, *are* not inside their skins, but *are* their living-in the world and their living-with others” (p. 48). As an experience of beingness, “it precedes and eliminates the distinction between inside and outside and self and others” (p. 48). Orange (2009) expressed this ontological dynamic of living-in and living-with as “I inhabit my experiential world as it inhabits me” (p. 242).

Nonverbal core affective experience, then, as a dynamic phenomenon of human emotional life is not viewed from a Cartesian dualistic perspective of inner and outer or of one thing as opposed to another. Rather, core affective experience is a contextualized, multidimensional phenomenon. For example, it not only embodies a “yetness”—that which is to be transformed into words and meaning—but may also embody a realm of language that transcends words, such as metaphor, gesture, dance, the visual arts, and actions (enactments). The life of this experience, although not organized through the sole construction of the individual but through that of a dyadic system, at the same time may remain and persist outside of any mutually informed process or system. The crucial point here is that the form this experience takes depends on the relational life of the human being—that is, the kind of “living-in” and “living-with” of the familial, social, and cultural settings that the individual embodies. Core affective experience persists as a complex relational system because we carry within us all the intersubjective fields of our experience even when we are alone.

My contention¹⁰ is that, in the absence of an emotionally attuned caregiver response, nonverbal core affective experience that has not been brought into language nevertheless persists across development with an

⁹Gendlin’s (1988) descriptive words explicate Heidegger’s (1927) *Beifindlichkeit*, as Gendlin (1988) points out, referenced in previous footnote 8.

¹⁰The spine and intention of the claim of my original formulation of core affective experiences (Cates, 1995) was based on Kohut’s (1971) principle of the primacy of human self-preservation, and was in consonance with Spinoza’s (1677) 17th-century “wisdom of emotion.” In a phenomenologically informed spirit, Spinoza, as interpreted by Damasio (2003), intuited “the notion that, of necessity, all living organisms endeavor to preserve themselves without conscious knowledge of the undertaking and without having decided, as individual selves, to undertake anything. In short, they do not know the problem they are trying to solve” (Damasio, 2003, p. 28).

integrity of its own. Although it exists in an unrelated, unintegrated form, this less-developed experience acts as a bodily reference for a felt sense of authenticity. Like a river that snakes through the terrain, the experience carves its own unique pattern. Tomkins (1962–1963) formulated nonverbal affect as an experience of continuity developing over time. In accordance with this view, I describe nonverbal core affective experience as one of continuity that emerges through actions (including enactments). As the meanings of those actions unfold within an intersubjective context, the experience, itself, becomes a full-fledged story.

I offer this construct as a heuristic framework for addressing questions about nonverbal affective phenomena and the implications for treatment. Such core affective phenomena as unbroken dynamic processes of experience, despite a failed caregiver surround, can persist, throughout life, as a guiding source of continuity and provide a significant pathway in the evolution of self-organization. And so it was with Ben.

CLINICAL ILLUSTRATION

From our first meeting, I was moved by Ben's quiet, sad presence. Although he knew he was isolated from others, he was unable to recognize that it stemmed from his own emotional alienation. One year prior to entering treatment, he had left his studies at a prestigious university, where he had expected to find a more utopian "better world" than the one he had known. His hope vanquished; he left school to embark on a self-initiated "vision quest," journeying through much of the country searching out religious scholars he believed would provide him with the answers to what would constitute a better world. After 1 year's quest, feeling alone and confused, he ended his search and moved to New York.

During the beginning phase of treatment, the reverberation of genuine feelings that existed between us created an emotional opening on both sides of the intersubjective field. For me, it was the sense that Ben's strength and fierce determination, hidden behind his sad, soulful face, dominated his innermost being—an impression that echoed within the depths of my own unspoken experience. For Ben, I believe it was the hope that I would be able to receive and resound with what, as yet, had not been told. Through our silent interchange—the subttextual dimension of the bond—he slowly began to find the words to express the painful feelings that the quest for a better world had simultaneously contained and obscured.

My initial visual memory of Ben remains clear. Although he spoke with very little affect, I was able to see and feel his emotional aliveness. What struck me as imperative was what I saw, sensed, and felt in and about his presence. He very often filled the room with reams of affect for which he had no words. At those times, his color changed, his body became relaxed, his eyes filled with a warm intensity, and his gaze became steady. He seemed to be bathing in the comfort of just being there.

Although he reported the events of his life in a near monotone, the subtextual dimension of the developing bond was imbued with a quiet, affective play that came through in Ben's gesture, posture, inflection, and the quality of my own emotional experience that was being evoked. He arrived at each session with a bridled sense of excitement which failed to conceal that he was as happy to see me as I was to see him. The faded suede cap and baggy trousers he routinely wore created a waiflike impression. Through gesture, he seemed to be claiming what he had lost or possibly never had. At times, a spontaneous smile breaking into the quiet of his face communicated the depth of his joy. His steady gaze was quietly observant.

Within the boundaries of the growing warmth that was developing between us, he had begun to trace the relational possibilities for expressing his struggle. Like a root preceding and generating its stalk, the subtextual dimension of the transference contained a relevant story about what, as yet, had not been said. Similar to a Greek Chorus, it preceded and foreshadowed the deepening of the affective interplay, moving it to new ground where it began to acquire communicative language.

Here, I describe part of a session that ushered in a dramatic shift. What was most striking about the shift was that, from an individual who, up to that point in time, spoke in a flat, matter-of-fact, conversational style, a commanding force came through in the sound of his voice. A visible bodily charge that preceded his affectively toned words remains fixed in my mind. It was as if a bolt of lightening, originating from within the depths of his viscera, insinuating its way through his body, and animating every muscle and limb as it moved upward, broke his affective silence. With his words, which now took on an impassioned vibrancy, he began to communicate what he felt.

Sitting in his chair in an upright position, he gestured to the large window in front of him. He looked at it in such a chilling way that I, too, felt the terrible cold. He was able to convey that there, before him, stood a glacial wall of ice. He explained it as something that separated him from the

rest of the world. It was the first time he connected to the actual experience of what he deeply felt. It would slowly lead him to his own pain. Initially, he felt it as the world's pain, not his own. It seemed as though he first needed the outward expression of sorrow before he could identify his own. With heartfelt emotion, he talked about the abandoned building in which he lived, and the neglected neighborhood and its people as if they were all crying out to be heard. Through the images of this disenfranchised world, he was building a transitional/intermediate language. When he imaged his own sense of isolation as "a White boy in a glass coffin where everything in the outside world is beautiful, nothing is wrong out there, but it's horrible inside," it provided him with the metaphor¹¹ he needed to relate to the experience of his own pain.

Over the following months, his emotional pitch, incrementally rising with his description of the abandoned buildings and the disenfranchised people living around him (which stood as concretizations for his own feelings of desolation), reached an intensity whereby he began to improvise what he felt. Still lacking the words, he pantomimed its physical ache with the gesture of an imaginary knife cutting into him. When the experience became so powerful that both the emotion and the physicality came together, it bore the outcry of a sobbing wretchedness. The massive sadness he had been holding onto alone for years poured forth, and it continued for weeks and then months. At times, he seemed to recoil from his excruciating pain by moving his body into a curling posture as if, at those moments, his hurt had become too overwhelming to endure. On occasion, he would talk about the loss of his former girlfriend. It provided him with language for his feelings of loss, but not the language he needed for his deeper feelings of despair. Within the next few months, he became powerfully connected to the devastating sense of maternal loss he experienced when his younger brother was born. Having been the center of his mother's warm adoration before the birth of his brother, he was now the object of her critical

¹¹D. B. Stern's (2009) recent work, evocatively entitled *Partners in Thought*, sensitively captures the centrality of the use of metaphor in psychoanalysis. Especially relevant here is Stern's claim that when trauma becomes part of metaphor—that is, seeing it first as part of life similar enough to recognize it, yet different enough for it to remain separate—the painful feelings embedded in the experience of trauma, rather than remaining "unformulated," come to life with relational meaning.

rejection that, over the years, turned into a cruel indictment of him as being the one who was cold and unloving. Once he connected to the massive loss of the early maternal bond, it opened the dam to what seemingly had been sealed off. Through the constituted dyadic interaction, the core affective experience had attained symbolic meaning.

Ben and I fleshed out the feelings that resulted from his mother's rejection and vilification of him: the sense of futility he felt in trying to meet her demands of his perfection, and his subsequent sense of aloneness and despair. Through the shifting interplay of our transferences, he was able to connect to the disappointment, hurt, and anger he felt toward his mother and, later, toward me. He consistently expanded on and articulated the experience of what he felt through frequent dreams, imagery, and rich allusion. As an example, my role, as he described it, shifted from that of the blue fairy from *Pinocchio* (giving life); to that of the Sirens (taking it away); and, finally, to that of a shepherdess, who followed his lead but continued to keep an eye on him that he might not stray. The shift into words and meaning gave him the foundation he needed for expressing his affective struggle.

The most difficult time in the treatment was when the bleakest of his unarticulated pain emerged. Ben felt it as an unbearable endless struggle, and saw me as one who was either unwilling or unable to stop it. My experience became one of utter helplessness. I was touched by what he was going through, yet remained passive in the face of his deepening sadness.

It was much later that I came to fully understand what the unspoken dimension of the transference interplay involved. For Ben, the pain had a life of its own that would unfold as long as I was able to tolerate my own feelings as they were being evoked. What overrode my own extreme discomfort was the compelling nature of affect coming to life before me. I somehow implicitly understood that the experience he was bringing forth had its own integrity, and it needed to be expressed in pure, unbounded form. The intentionality of his experience dominated that point in the treatment, and left me with little to do but to receive it.

Given his mother's eviscerating response to him, one of the most curative elements of the treatment was my containing presence as he expressed the deep feelings that had been buried within. Ben communicated the meanings of my attentive emotional presence in the following way: "My mother could never do it, and never will and only through osmosis here with you can I pick up living my life without destruction and omnipotent disintegration."

DEVELOPMENTAL ENACTMENTS

I wish to add something here about enactments.¹² For Ben, the vision quest was a developmental enactment that preserved the integrity of his unarticulated emotional experience. Had his vision quest been viewed as an enactment tilted toward pathology, rather than an organizing experience, such a reading would have dramatically interfered with the treatment process. Instead, through a phenomenological therapeutic approach, as the treatment unfolded, so, too, did an understanding of the vision quest—as a developmental enactment in search of worded understandings for his core affective experience that had become distanced from relational meaning.

When he left school, his ideas had taken on increasing importance and, with it, the urgency to communicate them to others. In seeking out scholars whose ideas might resonate with his own, he kept his hope alive. When those who he thought would respond did not, he became increasingly isolated, and his quest took on the quality of a messianic mission. Oddly enough, it was his identification with Christ, especially the kinlessness that characterized Christ's life, that transmuted the meaning of the messianic mission into his long-held dread of being unbearably alone. His recognition of Christ's aloneness impelled him to end his journey.

Rather than returning to the pristine environments he had known, he chose New York and, in particular, a community that had been seriously neglected. Living among those who were disenfranchised was another developmental enactment that ultimately led him to his disavowed emotional pain. Although actions may obscure or contradict the affective underpinnings, they are important attempts, and sometimes the only means, to make explicit what might otherwise remain untold.

In opening up his affective struggle, he was able to come to terms with the experience of painful feelings that had been obfuscated through his vision of a better world. The message implied in the core affective experience had, all along, been a simple one. It was a search for relational meaning through close emotional bonds.

¹²In a future article, I plan to delineate developmental enactment as a counterpoint to the way enactment gets pathologized, demonstrating, instead, that it is simply an organizing experience.

There is obviously a lot more to Ben's treatment. I concentrated on the early part to illustrate how affect can be an already present experience waiting to be accessed, brought forward, and understood within the relational bond. From Ben, I learned that the lived experience of affect is not a reactive one or an explanation of how one feels, but the emotionally alive experience of the present.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As the illustrated treatment demonstrates, the lived experience of emotion is not expressed through cognitive reflections about it alone. In fact, such cognitive reflections can often get in the way of connecting to the lived experience. Accordingly, the conflation of "thought about feeling" with "feeling thought" pinpoints how cognitive reflections about feelings abrogate the aliveness of emotional experience. Specifically, when "thought about feeling" is conflated with "feeling thought" (referenced within the text as *felt thinking* in which feelings may come first), emotional knowledge is replaced with a disembodied, decontextualized, and derelationalized form of thinking. Such a conflation obfuscates an emotionally informed sense of being-in-the-world and, with it, the experience of emotional vulnerability.

Cartesian dualism—exemplified in American cultural life as "the pursuit of happiness," an avoidance of painful affect and a disregard of emotional vulnerability¹³—offers two alternatives, neither of which is helpful in fostering the lived experience of emotion: a cognitive, derelationalized management of affect and the disavowal of affect. Given the extraordinary extent to which the Cartesian universe in which we live is out of sync with the flow of felt thinking, emotional vulnerability subsists under the cultural radar where it is easily disguised, unnoticed, or explained away.

Emotional vulnerability is expressed here as an affective state that is distinct and separate from other forms of vulnerability, such as those attributed to social and situational circumstances. As a domain of

¹³For a parallel point of view, a recent commentary (Layton, 2009) discussing the Cartesian distortion of what it means to be human unveils the problematic "repudiation of Vulnerability" that occurs inside and outside the consulting room.

experience that is imbued with the lived experience of felt thinking,¹⁴ emotional vulnerability is undervalued and misunderstood—not only as a result of Cartesian dualism that divides feeling and thinking into separate entities, but also, as Stolorow and his collaborators (Orange, Atwood, and Stolorow, 1997) contend, as a result of the false psychoanalytic dichotomy that exists between insight through interpretation and affective bonding. Their position is that the therapeutic action is constituted within the emotional relationship between patient and analyst. In a parallel perspective, my view is that feelings of vulnerability and shame are more likely to emerge when insight comes about within the affective bond.

The experience of guilt, beginning with the oedipal issues that dominated Freud's theory, was considered to be more worthy of attention in patients than emotional vulnerability and shame. Kohut's (1971) contributions to our understanding of narcissism and the development of selfhood, introducing an independent line of development for narcissism, brought shame to its rightful place as a central organizing affect. Kohut (1971) related shame to traumatic deflations of archaic expansiveness. Morrison (1989) extended Kohut's (1971) ideas by relating shame to the experience of failure to live up to what might be called a grandiose self-ideal. In such a context, emotional vulnerability, in and of itself, can be a source of intense shame because it represents a failure to embody such a grandiose self-ideal.

Defensive grandiosity is understood here as a by-product of the early child-caregiver system of mutual regulation, shaped by the requirement of perfection and by malattunement to the child's affect states, especially painful and vulnerable ones. Defensive grandiosity serves as a defense against underlying feelings of vulnerability and, in essence, may also serve as an attempt to eliminate shame itself. When the defense fails, shame erupts. It is important to note that organizing principles that guard against the emergence of feelings of vulnerability and shame preclude the lived experience of emotion, the *felt thinking* that imbues the experience of being with a sense of authenticity.

I find it essential to think about the experience of emotional vulnerability and its emergence as signifying "true grit," rather than manifestations

¹⁴Coburn (2007, 2009) distinguishes two levels of discourse—one being the language of theory (explanation) and the other being the language of experience (phenomenology). The latter best captures the lived experience of emotional vulnerability and, with it, the intersubjective field in which such experiences may come to the fore.

of failure. The failure is not in the existence of the experience, but in the breakdown of an early child–caregiver system of mutual regulation that was malattuned to painful and vulnerable affect states, leaving the child to cope with feelings too overwhelming to bear alone. Without a welcoming relational context that makes it safe to acknowledge those feelings, the child suffers with an excruciating sense of shame for having feelings at all, as well as an imperative to be absolved from feeling shame. The clinical illustration demonstrates that feelings of emotional vulnerability, when received and resonated with attentive interest, are evocative of a phenomenon that is dynamic and ongoing, never lies, and preserves the truth of one’s being-in-the-world in which untold stories may be embedded.

In conclusion, the shift in psychoanalytic thinking from the motivational primacy of drive to the motivational primacy of affectivity, which moved the therapeutic action in psychoanalysis from an objective one-person psychology to an intersubjective two-person psychology, has placed human emotional life at the center of the treatment process. In this article, I argue for the centrality of affect as it relates to one’s sense of being-in-the-world and, as exemplified through the clinical illustration, propose that there is an extra-linguistic sense of being located in what I am calling core affective experience.

As I have previously proposed, in accord with Kohut’s (1971) principle of the primacy of self-preservation, nonverbal core affective experience, persisting in an unformulated form with an integrity of its own, provides an important pathway to an underdeveloped sense of self. Through a transference response that invites words and meaning to previously unheard feelings, nonverbal core affective experience can be transformed into an articulated emotionality and, eventually, a vital sense of self (Cates, 1995). More important, core affective experience persists in an unbroken form throughout life as a dynamic affective process that serves as a guiding source of vitality. As a corresponding construct, I have also proposed that the subtextual dimension of the bond, a wordless interplay or a *pas de deux* (being together in subliminal moments), contains important clues to the meanings of the core affective underpinnings. Similar to a Greek Chorus, the subtextual elements precede and foreshadow the articulated relational meanings in the yet-to-be-told story. I primarily focused on the initial phase of the therapeutic process of the clinical illustration to show how the core affective subtext was there from the beginning and how, once lifted into the constitutive dyadic dialogue, it became transformed into communicative language.

Ben's story is a unique one. From early on, his search for emotional aliveness became the centerpiece of his life. The vision preserved it; and the quest, as a developmental enactment that ultimately led him to find relational meaning, generated it. My work with Ben, which has had a profound impact on me personally and on my approach to clinical understandings, illustrates what Motherwell (2007) said: The ideas are never first. They follow what is silent and powerfully ongoing within each of us.

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TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

Este artículo presenta un material teórico y clínico para mostrar cómo la experiencia nuclear afectiva es el constituyente central del sentimiento de existir y, a pesar de un entorno cuidador negativo, sirve de fuente de continuidad y de guía. En el curso del artículo, explico la distinción crucial, a menudo no tenida en cuenta, entre *pensamiento sentido* y pensar acerca del sentimiento. Cuando estos dos fenómenos se juntan, el sentimiento de estar en el mundo y la experiencia de vulnerabilidad emocional están cubiertos por reflexiones cognitivas que distancian la experiencia y explican los significados de la misma.

Questo articolo presenta un materiale clinico e teorico utile a dimostrare come l'esperienza affettiva essenzialmente non verbale sia una dimensione costitutiva centrale del senso di esistere e, a dispetto di un contesto di sostegno genitoriale fallimentare, rappresenti una persistente ed orientante fonte di continuità in ogni momento della vita. Nel corso dell'articolo, chiarisco la distinzione cruciale, spesso messa in ombra, tra il *pensare percepito (felt thinking)* e il pensare al sentimento. Quando questi due fenomeni si fondono, le riflessioni cognitive tendono a nascondere un senso emotivamente plasmato dell'essere al mondo e, insieme, l'esperienza di una vulnerabilità emotiva; in questo modo, tali riflessioni si allontanano dall'esperienza stessa e dai significati impliciti in essa aggregati.

Cet article présente du matériel clinique et théorique afin de démontrer comment l'expérience affective fondamentale non verbale est une composante centrale du sentiment d'être et ce qui, en dépit d'un environnement soignant inadéquat, fournit une source persistante et dominante de continuité à travers la vie. Dans cet article, j'explique la distinction cruciale, souvent obscure, entre la pensée ressentie et la pensée au sujet du ressenti. Lorsque ces deux phénomènes sont confondus, un sentiment émotionnellement dérivé d'être-dans-le-monde et, avec celui-ci, une expérience de vulnérabilité émotionnelle sont dissimulés par des réflexions cognitives à leur sujet qui mettent l'expérience à distance et qui recouvrent d'explications les significations qu'ils impliquent.

Dieser Artikel bietet theoretisches und klinisches Material an um zu zeigen, wie nonverbale, tiefgehende affektive Erfahrung ein zentraler Bestandteil des Gefühls "zu sein" (sense of being) ist und wie es, selbst im Falle einer uneinfühlsamen Umgebung, während des ganzen Lebens als persistente und leitende Quelle von Kontinuität fungiert. Im Verlauf des Artikels erkläre ich den grundsätzlichen Unterschied, der oft unklar bleibt, zwischen *gefühltem Denken* (felt thinking) und Denken über das Fühlen (thinking about feeling). Wenn diese beiden Phänomene nicht klar unterschieden werden, wird das Gefühl "In-der-Welt-zu-sein" seiner emotionalen Basis beraubt und damit die Erfahrung der emotionalen Verletzlichkeit überdeckt von kognitiven Reflexionen darüber. Diese schaffen eine Distanz zum Erleben und bringen die Bedeutungen, die darin eingebettet sind, durch Erklärungen zum Verschwinden.