

BOOK REVIEW

TRAUMA AND HUMAN EXISTENCE: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL, PSYCHOANALYTIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS, Stolorow, Robert D. *New York: Analytic Press, 2007, 62 pages, \$19.95.*

In his elegant 2007 work, *Trauma and Human Existence*, Robert Stolorow offers the reader keen insight into the “the unbearable embeddedness of being” (1992), including the impact of being alone with pain. Emphasizing the contextuality of human emotion and the concomitant primacy of affectivity, Stolorow defines trauma as unbearable affect without a relational home. The work, while theoretically dense, is remarkably lucid in its account of human emotional pain. Paradoxically, an understanding of this most basic of human experiences suggests a complex, multi-disciplinary formulation. The result is a brilliant blend of what the author has subtitled his *autobiographical, psychoanalytic and philosophical reflections* on “emotional trauma and the place it occupies in human existence.”

Stolorow, an esteemed figure in the world of self psychology and contemporary psychoanalysis, has written extensively on intersubjective and relational perspectives. Although renowned for his scholarship, it is his profound human sensibility that defines the tone of this book. Through an inquiry into his own trauma, the particularity of which he both captures and transcends, Stolorow’s painful struggle lays bare the horrific experience of alienation and isolation intrinsic to emotional trauma.

The author begins his text by telling us that trauma and human existence will be described through two interweaving themes—the contextuality of emotional trauma and its existential dimension:

One pertains to the contextuality of emotional life in general and of the experience of emotional trauma in particular. The other theme pertains to the recognition that the possibility of emotional trauma is built into the basic constitution of human existence. Whether or not this constitutive possibility will be brought lastingly into the foreground of our experiential world depends on the relational contexts in which we live (p. xi).

The book, as a whole, takes the reader on a journey through which Stolorow deftly traces how these two themes became crystallized through his own experience of traumatic loss.

In 1991, Stolorow's wife Dede died suddenly. He recalls the experience as shattering his world and permanently altering his sense of being. Through a sensitively-rendered account, he gives the reader a glimpse into his devastation following Dede's death, as well as the unique aspect of the relationship they shared—one in which their "genuine painful emotional experiences" were highly valued, and informed their being and their work. He describes his world without Dede, and without a relational home to ease the excruciating pain of catastrophic loss, as a retreat into dissociative forms of numbing and a deepening of feelings of alienation. A lyric from the rock musical, *Next to Normal*, "Do you know what it's like to die alive?" reverberates with Stolorow's self-described sense of deadness—an experience that is also evocative of traumatized persons who, without a welcoming relational home for their grief and other painful affect states, experience a loss of the sense of being, what Stolorow terms "ontological unconsciousness."

Such ontological unconsciousness, as formulated by Stolorow, exemplifies the author's claims about the contextuality of emotional experience and about how painful affect states, too overwhelming to be endured alone, cannot be integrated and result in massive alterations in the sense of selfhood. Stolorow's reflections on trauma, in addition to a psychoanalytic and autobiographical rendering, are imbued with philosophical constructs, primarily those based on the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger whose most influential work explores the meaning of being and time. Merging his own insight with the philosopher's analysis of time and temporality enabled Stolorow to spell out the critical role time plays in the unfolding impact of trauma's devastation to the experience of beingness. Specifically, inextricably interconnected with a loss of a sense of being is the collapse of temporality—essentially, a breakdown in the unity of time between past, present and future. Without this unity, one becomes "freeze-framed into an eternal present" devoid of life's coherence and meaning. Stolorow links his theoretical understanding of trauma to his own self-described experience of alienation, isolated estrangement, and the losing and regaining of his own sense of being.

Initially, his experience of alienation was expressed as bodily lethargy: "Lacking an intersubjective context within which they could be voiced, my feelings of sorrow and horror lived largely in my body, devolving into vegetative states of exhaustion and lethargy" (p. 25). It was as if the body was expressing what the emotional selfhood could not bear alone. To more fully delineate the experience of alienation that pervades the phenomenology of trauma, Stolorow offers a compelling view into the deep chasm from which traumatized persons experience an imprisoning estrangement from others. This is vividly illustrated in his account of a conference dinner with close colleagues and old friends that took place 18 months after Dede's death: "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" (p.14). Through the analysis of his own harrowing experience, Stolorow was able to identify how the "absolutisms of everyday life" that so-called "normals" take for granted are no longer part of the existential world of traumatized persons. For traumatized persons, it is not just that a discrepancy exists between the two worlds, but that their world is one that is experienced as "*essentially and ineradicably incommensurable*" (that is, forever fundamentally and radically different) from the

world of so-called normals. It is within that deep chasm, he explains, that isolated estrangement takes form.

The theme of regaining his sense of being was introduced as an important intersubjective “moment” with his present wife, Julia. It provided the context for how he was able to come back from the abyss of alienation and isolation. As characterized by Stolorow, the nub of the intersubjective moment with Julia was based on her understanding his traumatized state in a way she had not before. Feeling emotionally understood enabled him to connect with his pain, truly grieve and, ultimately, regain his sense of aliveness. The significance of his interchange with Julia demonstrates how grieving is not a solitary experience but, rather, an irrefutable part of intersubjective relatedness. True to Stolorow’s context-dependent constructions, grieving follows when painful emotional experiences are welcomed into language, held, and rendered more tolerable—a dynamic that Stolorow evocatively calls a relational home. “When my traumatized states could not find a relational home, I became deadened, and my world dulled. When such a home became once again present, I came alive, and the vividness of my world returned.” Disclosure of his own state of ontological deadness and the restoration of his ontological aliveness is characterized by the author as “a powerful illustration of the fundamental contextuality of our sense of being and of the intersubjective contexts in which it can become lost and regained” (p. 26).

Stolorow’s experience of being alone with pain, shared with courage and described through the poised economy of his language is, in actuality, part of our ordinary, everyday human existence. The facts and details of people’s lives obviously differ. But the psychological impact of pain endured alone underlies emotional trauma and, in many different forms, is woven into the fabric of all our lives, whether or not it experientially comes to the foreground. Where each of us may fall along the continuum of pain is based on the context of our relational lives. At one end of the continuum are those who, lacking a relational home, need to disavow their unheard painful affect states and, as a consequence of retreating into dissociative forms of inauthenticity, often become alienated from their emotional life. At the other end are those who have found a relational home where their pain can be understood and integrated into an expanded emotional existence.

The architecture of Stolorow’s ideas, constructed into a well-balanced design, fits together with symmetry. His language, used sparingly and deliberately, is filled with nuance, and often conveys meanings that extend far beyond the actual words. Similar to a jazz riff, his ideas are the starting point from which other connections are forged. The imagistic *relational home* brings to mind, in two words, the contextuality of experience and the central role of intersubjective relatedness in providing attuned responsiveness to one’s emotionality. The terse phrase, *pain is not pathology*, contains far-reaching implications. For example, pathologizing pain is shame-inducing and shameful inferences block the emergence of painful affect states. Another implied meaning counters the message insinuated into the pervasive cultural zeitgeist that one has somehow broken the social contract if one’s painful affect states are not “managed” with “positive” thoughts. With *trauma destroys time*, he captures the essence of the breakdown of a cohesive and dynamic sense of the “stretch” of one’s life (past, present and future) at the hands of trauma.

Stolorow's emphasis on the seminal role of language and the importance of "somatic-linguistic integration" (the voicing of one's feelings) brings to mind my own work on nonverbal affect. As I have previously proposed, in accord with Kohut's principle of the primacy of self-preservation (1971), nonverbal, core affective experiences, persisting in an unformulated form with an integrity of their own, provide an important pathway to an underdeveloped sense of self. Through a transference response that invites words and meaning to previously unheard feelings, these nonverbal core affective experiences can be transformed into an articulated emotionality and, eventually, a vital sense of selfhood (1995).

In contrast to the initial chapters that delve into the contextual, intersubjective field within which affect and emotional trauma are positioned, the closing chapters, framed within Heidegger's idea of resoluteness, resound with a dimension of authenticity. When our sense of being has been forever altered by trauma, we can no longer evade the acknowledgement of our human vulnerability or, for that matter, conceal from ourselves the ever-present possibility of death. Ironically, it is the unveiling of our human vulnerability that brings to the fore the possibility of authenticity and resoluteness. Stolorow asks: "Does trauma free one for possibilities that are authentic?" He counters with:

At first glance the answer would seem obviously to be negative, since, as Freud (1926) recognized, the most immediate impact of trauma is to feel overwhelmed and powerless—hardly in the mood for a possible resolution. Yet, as the smoke begins to clear a bit, traumatized people sometimes feel they have gained "perspective," a sense of what "really matters" (p.45).

Six months after Dede's death, Stolorow took hold of his experience of traumatic loss and began his study of the conceptualization of emotional trauma, which has occupied him for the last 17 years. In effect, making sense of his own painful experience led to greater wisdom in his work and provided him with a dimension of authenticity referenced by him as a "source of self-continuity."

To me, Stolorow's disclosure and analysis of his emotional struggle is the centerpiece of this most remarkable work. The openness with which he shares his feelings of vulnerability is both noteworthy and significant. In opposition to the cultural norm that views vulnerability as weakness, Stolorow's vulnerability comes through in his poetic reflections as self-constancy and strength. His openness and emotionality is especially evident when he muses about a "kinship-in-the-same-darkness," suggesting that we are joined in our common finitude. For Stolorow, as for legions of others who have been forever altered by trauma, this kind of kinship mitigates the feelings of singularity that persist long after the traumatic event has passed.

In conclusion, Robert Stolorow's *Trauma and Human Existence* brings to the contemporary psychoanalytic conversation a beautifully written study of the unbearable impact of being alone with pain that is fundamental to both our therapeutic work and our own existential worlds. With this publication, Stolorow advances his thinking on the perspective of intersubjective contextualism (developed with his collaborators) to another level—one that is filled with fine distinctions and clinically relevant insights on trauma, grief, human existence and finitude. I highly recommend this slim volume of expansive and robust ideas to all clinicians

who seek an in-depth understanding of emotional trauma and its implications for treatment. It will be especially appreciated by those who welcome a phenomenological approach to the immeasurable impact of traumatic loss in one's own life, as well as in the lives of those who come to us for understanding.

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