

TRAUMA, MEANING, AND EXISTENTIAL-HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

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The purpose of this paper is to focus on the problem of making sense of, or constructing meaning about, previous experiences of trauma. The most important point in this examination is that meaning making following trauma needs to be an instrumental process, not an end point, that 1) provides closure and detachment regarding the past, 2) significantly reduces the feelings of anger, hurt and loss evoked by traumatic experiences, and 3) creates or restores what R.D. Laing (1969) calls primary ontological security (a sense of wholeness and well-being). Efforts to find meaning in the human use of force and violence which do not contain clear statements of an intention to reach a state of primary ontological security may be turned to maintaining a lingering, morbid attachment to previous suffering and accompanying despair.

Under the latter condition, the necessary level of hope and will required to sustain the process of reaching ontological security would rarely be available.

Cautions Concerning Meaning

There are several problems which may occur in the search for post-traumatic meaning that are addressed in the following sections.

Meaning and Transcendence as Substitutions

Werner Erhard, the founder of est, is variously regarded as a charlatan or a liberating genius, however he wrote pungent aphorisms that were used in his training seminars which were accurate and to the point. One popular statement was that "in life understanding is the booby prize." Kovel (1981) wrote: "...society itself labors mightily to block the means of overcoming its deadliness, substituting instead an arsenal of consolations -- mass culture, drugs, gadgets, an insipid fiction called mental health, material success, religious submission, or -- best of the lot -- a privatizing love." (p. 242) To the list of inadequately consoling substitutions may be added a compulsive, unending search for understanding when there is nothing complex to understand. The complexity comes in tolerating the conscious awareness of the brutality of human beings. Compulsive avoidance of this harsh reality, seeking to substitute meaning for experience, must ultimately fail to provide existential relief (courtesy of Walter I.) because in this case, understanding truly is the booby-prize.

A Mis-perception of the Locus of Effective Action

Alan Watts (1973) suggests that things spiritual and mystical appear to be in lofty opposition to the practical, commonplace things of ordinary material life. He urges us to end this polarity

so we may "see that *this* -- the immediate, everyday, and present experience -- is IT, the entire and ultimate point for the existence of a universe." (p. 11) If in fact "this is it," then we must realistically consider the implications of living in a physical universe. This is where ideas of mistaken causality come into play.

Meaning and transcendence as dissociative gambits are derived and sustained according to the laws of what could be called Newtonian Psychology, most notably Newton's third law of motion that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. For instance, in terms of child abuse, a blow to the head of a five year old child coming from an inebriated caregiver brings about a literal state of psychophysiological shock. The search for meaning initially is a search for causal effectiveness in discerning and managing situational violence, whether coming from neglect or active abuse. In short, most people, especially those who have suffered massive and prolonged trauma, do not desire to expose themselves to the possibility of being deprived, thwarted, hurt, injured, or killed. Meaning constructs which carry an implicit message to submit to this brutalization goes against the instinctive species learning whose basic purpose is to safeguard being in a physical plane. The rationalized and intellectualized search for meaning becomes, in Kovel's word, deadly, killing the very life force that it initially sought to preserve.

Violence and the Incomplete Resolution of Trauma

At this particular moment, mental health professionals and nonprofessionals alike are being inundated with evidence that millions of people, especially children, are dying of famine, armed aggression, and preventable diseases. The figures are so staggering as to essentially be meaningless. Interested readers may consult the FBI Uniform Crime Reports (1991) and the Fifty State Survey of Child Abuse Reporting and Fatalities (Daro & McCurdy, 1992) for statistics. Recounting the experiences of survivors of the Nazi death camps may be so surreal as to impart a sense of disbelief as well.

Following are two quotations that are not written dramatically but nevertheless convey the debilitating effects of irrational trauma. The first is from a daily account of the Jewish ghetto in Lodz, Poland during World War II (Dobroszycki (ed.), 1984). Although it served as a way station for the concentration camps, members of the ghetto itself did not suffer the daily threat of imminent extinction.

THE MONTH OF MARCH, 1942

SUICIDES

The universal mood of depression and panic that reigned in March as a result of the resettlement action provided fertile soil for acts of desperation. The following chronicle of the suicides committed in March illustrates the state of affairs.

On March 1, a married couple, Wiktor and Daisy Heller, resettled here from Prague, committed suicide together by taking an overdose of Luminal....They left a letter from which it appears that Heller was driven to his desperate act by illness and anguish, while his wife wished to share her husband's fate....

On March 4, Sara Tenenbaum (of 26 Gnieznienska Street),... took her own life by leaping to the road from the bridge over Zgierska Street, near the church.

On March 2, Elza Bender... jumped from a fourth-story window in the building at 10 Jakuba Street, where the collective of Jews from Prague is located....(p. 133)

On March 9,... Rola Pacanowska, a widow, born in Warsaw in 1877, committed suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills....

On March 11,... Johann "Israel" Schultz..., who had been resettled here from Frankfurt am Main, committed suicide in his lodgings at 70 Zgierska Street by taking Veronal....

On March 12, Dwojra Rubinsztajn,... hung herself in her apartment at 61 Brzezinska Street.... (p. 134)

There was a total of 17 suicides during March, 1942 in Lodz.

The next quotation is from "The Etiology of Combat-Related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders," (Goodwin, no date)

It was an endless war with rarely seen foes and no ground gains, just a constant flow of troops in and out of the country. The only observable outcome was an interminable production of maimed, crippled bodies and countless corpses. (p. 10)

We live in a sea of violence. I do not mean to imply that human beings are intrinsically violent. In a number of earlier papers (Smith, 1987; Smith, 1989; Smith & Jones, 1993; Smith, Hoppmann, & Sheridan, 1993), the idea was put forth and developed that during the evolution of societies, random acts of cruelty and violence came to be superstitiously perceived as causally required for individual and social survival. These beliefs are passed from generation to generation without reinspection, and the members of each new generation are petrified to risk deviating from these irrational proscriptions out of a fear that the instrumental elements may be excluded and complete psychosocial collapse may ensue.

Reacting to and guarding against the magnitude of violence in our world while we simultaneously pretend that it does not exist requires an enormous amount of personal and social dissociation. We encounter extreme difficulty in dealing with horrifying physical

realities that we are not supposed to notice. We become numb and alexithymic which further blocks the sensory input necessary to make conscious, feeling, rational choices in accordance with the laws of concrete reality and instrumental meaning.

This mix of relying upon violence while denying its occurrence is not only unhealthy to individuals but also to the social group as well. A number of writers over the years have noted that this attempt at social duplicity constitutes a form of mental illness. Fromm (1955) writes about the pathology of normalcy and *folie au millions*. Jacoby (1975) refers to social amnesia while Szasz (1970) details the manufacture of madness.

The sadness surrounding the incomplete resolution of trauma is reflected in the lives of two survivors of the Holocaust, Victor Frankl and Bruno Bettelheim. Frankl (1985), in Man's Search for Meaning, writes about the case for a tragic optimism. This is heart-wrenching because it seems to imply a hopeless acceptance of truly devastating experiences. The tragedy lies in Frankl's tacit communication that he cannot, after years of struggle, emerge joyful and happy. This appears to be the heart of the matter regarding meaning after trauma; in actuality, the damage seems to be irreversible, the sting of massive violation cannot be removed, the expression of child-like exuberance and spontaneity has been permanently inhibited.

Bettelheim (1952, 1979), in Surviving and Other Essays, notes the following strategies of trauma survivors, "...the life of the survivor largely determined his post-camp existence. If one wishes to sum up -- all too glibly -- the three different responses to being traumatized to the most extreme degree, one might say that one group of survivors allowed their experience to destroy them; another tried to deny it any lasting impact; and a third engaged in a lifelong struggle to remain aware and try to cope with the most terrible, but nevertheless occasionally realized, dimensions of man's existence." (p. 28) His courage kept him in the last group, yet his suicide raises the question of how well he did in coping with and ending his nightmare. Towards the end of his life, Bettelheim served as an advisor to a shelter for abused children and remarked (Petersen, personal communication, 1989) that what he had failed to see at his Orthogenic School was the effects of trauma on the children. Perhaps he was unable to grasp the deep and lasting effects of his own trauma.

Two aspects of the struggle in which Bettelheim's third group of survivors engaged, remaining aware while attempting to cope with terrible but still occasionally realized horror, indicates the magnitude of the underestimation concerning the incidence of violence in the world. Violence is the norm not the exception, and the corporeal self is the recipient of massive psychophysiological insults. Consciousness and cognitions, affect and conditioned emotions rest on physiological substrates. The beginning of the journey towards primary ontological security correctly begins with attending to the needs of the traumatized physical self. The sequelae of post-traumatic stress disorder are confusion,

disorientation, neurotransmitter depletion, muscular bracing, organ breakdown, and death.

The next section will detail the importance of remaining in the range of physical constraints in searching for meaning following trauma.

Trauma, Shock, Insecurity, Miracles, and Anti-miracles

Smith (1987) noted how Laing's description of a collapse into ontological insecurity ending in a state of "chaotic nonentity" paralleled the descent into neurogenic shock ending in stupor, coma, and death. Arousal by trauma proceeds for only so long before the parasympathetic nervous system pulls the plug on consciously directed behavior. This pattern of arousal and collapse, and subsequent individual efforts to control this pattern, becomes the basis for an idiosyncratic dissociative system. Into this amalgam of individual dissociative patterns, societies invariably introduce the idea of miracles, the notion that the laws of physics will be temporarily suspended to provide protection and safety for the recipient of the miracle. This again appeals to superstitious meaning as opposed to instrumental meaning in that the incidence of miracles are so small as not to be reliable for guaranteeing a continuous state of ontological security. What would be truly miraculous would be an anti-miracle or non-miracle, if the carefully crafted and predictable orderly response to disordering stimulation did not occur and there was an absence of mock surprise in society regarding the effect of insanity.

First Things First

The personal re-unification of cognitive, emotional, and micro/macro behavior precedes transcendent communion and universal meaning. Smith (1987) lists the following elements for re-unification leading to ontological security:

Presence -- as object or subject;

Prediction -- stable orientation in time and space;

Causality -- decision making and responding based on the ability to register (feel) and evaluate the consequences of behaviors and to make corrections in the direction of well-being without fear.

Buber, Meaning, and Spirituality

1) It and It versus I and Thou. (Buber, 1970)

The It world is the world of unfeeling objects. People have to rise to the subjective level of feeling present as an I or a Thou for any genuine human relationship to take place.

2) The Between in an I and Thou relationship is the matrix for communing with the Eternal Thou (genuine transcendence and universal meaning). (Wood, 1969)

3) Becoming fully present as a feeling person capable of relating to another feeling person while being ontologically secure appears to be the desired result in the process of finding or making meaning after trauma.

Existential Humanism as a Foundation for Instrumental Meaning

Carl Rogers

Rogers (1961), in describing the process of the "good life," lists what appears to be three characteristics of this process: (a) an increasing openness to experience -- environmental stimuli would be relayed through the nervous system without distortion by any defense mechanism, (b) increasingly existential being -- an increasing tendency to live fully in each moment, and (c) an increasing trust in one's organism -- people who come "to trust their total organismic reaction to a new situation... discover... that if they are open to their experience, doing what 'feels right' proves to be a competent and trustworthy guide to behavior which is truly satisfying" (p. 189).

Abraham Maslow

Physical survival necessarily precedes self-actualization. Higher functions of the self can only develop when vegetative needs of the physical self are met in a satisfactory fashion. (Maslow, 1973)

Rollo May

Anxiety and guilt are ontological conditions based on underlying physiological sensations of dread and Angst. (May, 1983)

Conclusion

Exploring the idea of finding meaning in suffering is doomed to a limited investigation when there is little or no attention given to moving a traumatized person out of a state of shock and objectification into a state of being physically and psychologically present, capable of clear and rational thought. The making of meaning following trauma is one component of an instrumental process in moving from a state of primary ontological insecurity to a state of fundamental well-being. Pursuing meaning in the place of well-being simply perpetuates the deep feelings of loneliness and alienation brought about when the self-system of a person has been subjected to profound and lengthy wounding through trauma.

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