Portkeys, Eternal Recurrence, and the Phenomenology of Traumatic Temporality

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I am no longer one of them, however. They are up there, on the face of the earth; I am down here, in the bottom of a well. They possess the light, while I am in the process of losing it. Sometimes I feel that I may never find my way back to that world, that I may never again be able to feel the peace of being enveloped in the light. . . . Down here there are no seasons. Not even time exists [Murakami, 1997, p. 392].

A patient of mine (discussed in Stolorow, 2007) with a long, painful history of traumatic violations, shocks, and losses arrived at her session in a profoundly fragmented state. Shortly before, she had seen her psychopharmacologist for a 20-min interview. In an apparent attempt to update her

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files, this psychiatrist had required the patient to recount her entire history of traumatization, with no attention given to the emotional impact of this recounting. The patient explained to me that with the retelling of each traumatic episode, a piece of herself broke off and relocated at the time and place of the original trauma. By the time she reached my office, she said she was completely dispersed along the time dimension of her crushing life history. Upon hearing this, I spoke just three words: “Trauma destroys time.” The patient’s eyes grew wide; she smiled and said, “I just came together again.”

I use the term portkey, which I borrowed from Harry Potter (Rowling, 2000), to capture the profound impact of emotional trauma on our experience of time. Harry was a severely traumatized little boy, nearly killed by his parents’ murderer, and left in the care of a family that cruelly mistreated him. He arose from the ashes of devastating trauma as a wizard in possession of wondrous magical powers, and yet never free from the original trauma, always under threat by his parents’ murderer. As a wizard, he encountered portkeys—objects that instantly transported him to other places, obliterating the duration ordinarily required for travel from one location to another.1 Portkeys to trauma return one again and again to an experience of traumatization. As dramatically shown in the foregoing paragraph, the experience of such portkeys fractures, and can even obliterate, one’s sense of unitary selfhood, of being continuous in time.

Trauma devastatingly disrupts the ordinary unity and linearity of temporality,2 the sense of stretching along from the past to an open future. Experiences of emotional trauma become freeze-framed into an eternal present in which one remains forever trapped, or to which one is condemned to be perpetually returned through the portkeys supplied by life’s slings and arrows. In the region of trauma, all duration or stretching along collapses, past becomes present, and future loses all meaning other than endless repetition. In this sense, it is trauma, not, as Freud (1915) would have it, the unconscious that is timeless.

Because trauma so profoundly modifies the universal or shared structure of temporality, the traumatized person quite literally lives in another

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1My wife, Dr. Julia Schwartz, first brought this imagery of portkeys to my attention nearly one decade ago, as a metaphor that captures the impact of trauma on the experience of time. I am also grateful to her for giving me the quotation from Murakami (1997), which appears at the beginning of this article.

2By temporality, I mean the lived experience of time.
kind of reality, an experiential world felt to be incommensurable with those of others. This felt incommensurability, in turn, contributes to the sense of alienation and estrangement from other human beings that typically haunts the traumatized person. Torn from the communal fabric of being-in-time, trauma remains insulated from human dialogue.

The phenomenology of traumatic temporality was beautifully captured by Friedrich Nietzsche (1882) in his famous doctrine of “the eternal return of the same”:

*The greatest burden.*—What would happen if one day or night a demon were to steal upon you in your loneliest loneliness and say to you, “You will have to live this life—as you are living it now and have lived it in the past—once again and countless times more; and there will be nothing new to it, but every pain and every pleasure, every thought and sigh, and everything unutterably petty or grand in your life will have to come back to you, all in the same sequence and order... The eternal hourglass of existence turning over and over—and you with it, speck of dust!”... If that thought ever came to prevail in you, it would transform you, such as you are, and perhaps it would mangle you [as cited in Heidegger, 1954, pp. 19–20].

The poetic language of the thought of eternal return seems to beautifully capture the nullity and groundlessness of our existence—"you... speck of dust!"—endlessly recurring, with no divine goal or purpose, no preordained order or meaningfulness: “God is dead.” “The collective character of the world is... to all eternity—chaos” (Nietzsche, 1882, as cited in Heidegger, 1954, pp. 66 & 91).

The eternal return of emotional trauma is ensured by the finitude of our existence and the finitude of all those with whom we are deeply connected. Authentic temporality, insofar as it owns up to human finitude, is traumatic temporality. “Trauma recovery” is an oxymoron—human finitude with its traumatizing impact is not an illness from which one can recover. “Recovery” is a misnomer for the constitution of an expanded emotional world that coexists alongside the absence of the one that has been shattered by trauma. The expanded world and the absent shattered world may be more or less integrated, depending on the degree to which the unbearable emotional pain evoked by the traumatic shattering has become integrated or remains dissociated, which depends, in turn, on the extent to which such pain found a relational home in which it could be
held. This is the essential fracturing at the heart of traumatic temporality (Stolorow, 2011). Authentic existing that seizes and affirms its own nullity must bear the agony of thinking the eternal return of the same and feeling the dark foreboding that accompanies it as the signature affect of traumatic temporality. However, in contrast with Nietzsche’s Zarathustrean vision, I have contended (Stolorow, 2007) that the mangling and the darkness can be endurably borne, not in solitude, but in relational contexts of deep emotional attunement and understanding.

References