Language is the house of being. In its home man dwells.

Martin Heidegger

[In] man's relation to the signifier [are] the moorings of his being.

Jacques Lacan

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a world at all... Being that can be understood is language.

Hans-Georg Gadamer
In this chapter I draw on some personal experiences as a springboard for a theoretical discussion of the contextuality of the several varieties of unconsciousness and, in particular, of a form of unconsciousness that I propose to call the *ontological unconscious*. I begin with a poem about my youngest daughter entitled “Emily Running” (Stolorow, 2003), which I wrote in September of 2003. Because I was not in a traumatized state when I wrote it, the poem could exhibit the temporal unity of existence discussed in the previous chapter.

My favorite time of day
is walking Emily to school in the morning.
We kiss as we leave our driveway
so other kids won’t see us.
If I’m lucky, we have a second kiss,
furtively, at the school-yard’s edge.
My insides beam as she turns from me
and runs to the building where her class is held,
with blonde hair flowing,
backpack flapping,
my splendid, precious third-grader.
Slowly, almost imperceptibly,
a cloud begins to darken
my wide internal smile—
not grief, exactly, but a poignant sadness—
as her running points me back
to other partings
and toward other turnings
further down the road.

I recite this poem to myself every morning during my daily jog. The significance of this ritual will soon become apparent.

On the morning of February 23, 1997, I awakened to find Dede lying dead across our bed, 4 weeks after her lung cancer had been diagnosed. As I described in chapter 3, the loss of Dede shattered my world and permanently altered my sense of being. In March of 1993, still consumed by emotional devastation, I met Julia Schwartz. We married a year later and were blessed with the birth of our daughter, Emily, on June 3, 1995.

Although Julia, and my relationship with her, lit a candle in the dark world of my grieving, I continued to be subject to feelings of deep sorrow and to recurring traumatized states, the latter being produced by any event leading me to relive the horrors of Dede’s illness and death (chapters 3 and 4). Julia tried valiantly to be available to me in my sorrow and traumatic states, but her ability to do this for me gradually eroded, as she felt increasingly and painfully erased by my continuing grieving for Dede. Eventually she told me that she could hear my grief no longer, and I responded by deciding to do my best to keep it to myself. I felt a terrible loneliness and, insidiously, my emotional aliveness began to shrink as my broken heart, unwanted and banished, went into deep hiding. “I die slowly, so no one sees,” I wrote in a very dark poem from that period.

Christmases were particularly difficult. The symptoms of Dede’s undiagnosed cancer had significantly worsened during our last Christmas holiday together before she died, so Christmas was a time at which I was especially vulnerable to traumatic relivings. In such states I felt painfully isolated and estranged from the holiday cheer shared by Julia and her family. Even now, the words “merry Christmas” assault me like a thousand fingernails scraping against a thousand chalkboards. I covered my sense of isolation and estrangement with a defensive contempt for the holiday celebrants, much as I had covered the alienation I felt as a boy at Christmas time as the only Jewish kid in my grade school in rural Michigan. 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.

During Christmas 2004 something different and quite remarkable occurred. On Christmas Eve I remembered something very painful, which, perhaps sensing a greater receptivity in her, I decided to tell to Julia. One morning during Dede’s and my last Christmas holiday together, Dede had tried to go jogging with me, but had to stop running because of her worsening cough. As I conveyed this concrete image of Dede having to stop running and the horror it held for me, Julia was able to feel my state as a retraumatization of me rather than as an erasure of her, and she said she much preferred my real emotional pain to the defensive contempt with which I had been covering it. On Christmas morning, when I was once again picturing Dede having to stop running, Julia held me tenderly as I quietly wept. Later that morning, as I was preparing to go jogging, I sat in near paralysis, unable to put on my second running shoe. In agony, I said to Julia,
"I can't stop thinking about Dede having to stop running," Julia, a psychoanalyst with a fine intersubjective sensibility, said, "Your last poem—its title is 'Emily Running.'" "Oh, God!" I cried out, and then burst into uncontrollable, hard sobbing for several minutes. In a flash I grasped the meaning of my ritual of running every morning with "Emily Running," reminding myself each day that dear little Emilly, unlike Dede, keeps on running. "My favorite time of day," I now realized, is seeing Emily running, not stopping.

Julia's interpretive comment was a key that unlocked the full force of my emotional devastation, which now found a relational home with her within which it could again be spoken. When I finally did go jogging on Christmas morning, I felt a sense of vitality and aliveness that had been profoundly absent during the prior Christmases since Dede's death. The blue Santa Monica sky seemed especially beautiful to me as I ran.

Why have I introduced a chapter on "ontological unconsciousness" with this autobiographical vignette? Ontology is the study of being; hence, I use the phrase ontological unconsciousness to denote a loss of one's sense of being. When my traumatized states could not find a relational home, I became deadened, and the world became dulled. When such a home became once again present, I came alive, and the vividness of my world returned. I believe my vignette provides 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.

The theme of losing and regaining one's sense of being calls to mind Heidegger's (1927) formulations of the inauthentic and authentic modes of existence, the former characterized by lostness and a forgetting of one's being and the latter by anxiety and the sense of uncanniness that accompanies the recognition that inherent to our existence is the ever present possibility of its extinction. As I will elaborate in detail in the next chapter, Heidegger's conception of authenticity bears a certain similarity to my description of my traumatized states in chapter 3:

The essence of emotional trauma ... is a catastrophic loss of innocence that permanently alters one's sense of being-in-the-world.... [Trauma] 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. Trauma thereby exposes "the unbearable embeddedness of being." As a result, the traumatized person cannot help but perceive aspects of existence that lie well outside the absolutized horizons of normal everydayness. (p. 16)

For Heidegger, the inauthentic and authentic modes are given a priori, as necessary and universal structures of our sense of being. As a clinical psychoanalyst, by contrast, I seek understanding of individual experiences of losing and finding one's sense of being, as these take form in constitutive intersubjective contexts. Before discussing this question further, I first summarize the previous efforts my collaborators and I have made to contextualize differing varieties of unconsciousness.

Over the course of three decades, Atwood and I (Atwood & Stolorow, 1980, 1984; Stolorow & Atwood, 1989, 1992) have been formulating three interrelated, intersubjectively derived forms of unconsciousness. The prereflective unconscious is the system of organizing principles, formed in a lifetime of relational experiences, that pattern and thematize one's experiential world. Such principles, although not repressed, ordinarily operate outside the domain of reflective self-awareness. The dynamic unconscious has been reconceptualized as consisting of those emotional experiences that were denied articulation because they were met with massive malattunement and thereby came to be perceived as threatening to needed ties to caregivers. Repression is grasped here as a kind of negative organizing principle determining which emotional experiences are to be prevented from coming into full being. The unvalidated unconscious encompasses emotional experiences that could not be articulated because they did not evoke the requisite validating responsiveness from caregivers that would make their articulation possible. All three forms of unconsciousness, we have repeatedly emphasized, derive from specific intersubjective contexts.

Foreshadowing the central thesis of this chapter, our evolving theory rested on the assumption that the child's emotional experience becomes progressively articulated through the validating attunement of the early surround (see also Coburn, 2007). During the preverbal period of infancy, the articulation of the child's emotional experience is achieved through attunements communicated in the sensorimotor dialogue with caregivers. With the maturation of the child's symbolic capacities, symbols gradually assume a place of importance alongside sensorimotor attunements as vehicles through which the child's emotional
experience is validated within the developmental system. Therefore, we have argued, in that domain in which emotional experience increasingly becomes articulated in symbols, unconscious becomes coextensive with unsymbolized. When the act of articulating an emotional experience is perceived to threaten an indispensable tie, repression can now be achieved by preventing the continuation of the process of encoding that experience in symbols.

In a later contribution (Stolorow, Arwood, & Orange, 2002, chap. 3), in which Orange joined the collaboration, we borrowed the horizontal metaphor from Continental phenomenology in order to capture further the contextuality of unconsciousness. For this purpose, the idea of a horizon is a particularly well-suited metaphor because we know that visual horizons constantly change as we move about in space from one context to another. Hence, we can picture unconsciousness, of either the dynamic or unvalidated form, in terms of the changing, limiting horizons of one's experiential world. Whatever one is not able to feel or know can be said to fall outside the horizons of one's experiential world. Such horizons of awareness take form developmentally in the medium of the differing responsiveness of the surround to different regions of the child's emotional experience. A similar conceptualization applies to the psychoanalytic situation, wherein the patient's resistances can be shown to fluctuate in concert with perceptions of the analyst's varying receptivity and attunement to the patient's emotional experience.

Unlike the repression barrier, which Freud viewed as a fixed intrapsychic structure within an isolated mind, world horizons, like the experiential worlds they delimit, are conceptualized as emergent properties of ongoing, dynamic, intersubjective systems. Forming and evolving within a nexus of living systems, experiential worlds and their horizons are thoroughly embedded in constitutive contexts. The horizons of awareness are thus fluid and ever shifting—products both of one's unique intersubjective history and of what is or is not allowed to be felt and known within the intersubjective fields that constitute one's current living. Our conception of world horizons as emergent features of intersubjective systems bears a kinship to Gerson's (2004) and Zeddie's (2000) idea of a "relational unconscious" and D. B. Stern's (1997) discussion of "unformulated experience."

How might this deeply contextual view of unconsciousness be extended to ontological unconsciousness? In order to explore this question, I must first consider two seemingly contrasting ideas about the foundation of the sense of being that are implicit in my viewpoint. One, which harks back to the early article written with Dede (Socarides & Stolorow, 1984/85), grounds the sense of selfhood, and, by implication, of being, in the experience of integrated affectivity: I feel; therefore I am. The other, to which the epigraphs at the beginning of this chapter allude, locates the ground of our sense of being in language or, more precisely, in the linguisticality of our experience. When one takes a developmental perspective on emotional experience, however, it immediately becomes apparent that these two ideas about the foundation of the sense of being are not in opposition to one another at all.

One of the first psychoanalytic authors to examine systematically the development of emotional experience was Krystal (1974), who delineated two developmental lines for affect: (1) affect differentiation—the development of an array of distinctive emotions from diffuse early ur-affect states of pleasure and unpleasure; and (2) desomatization and verbalization of affect—the evolution of affect states from their earliest form as exclusively somatic states into emotional experiences that can be verbally articulated. Jones (1995) refined our comprehension of this second developmental line by emphasizing the importance of symbolic processes in its unfolding. The capacity for symbolic thought comes online maturationally at the age of 10–12 months, making language possible for the child. At that point, the earlier, exclusively bodily forms of emotional experience can begin to become articulated in symbols—for example, in words. Consequently, the child's emotional experiences increasingly can be characterized as somatic-symbolic or somatic-linguistic integrations.

As Krystal (1974) and then, more extensively, Dede and I (Socarides & Stolorow, 1984/85) pointed out, this developmental progression takes place within a relational medium, an intersubjective context. It is the caregiver's attuned responsiveness, we claimed, phase-appropriately conveyed through words, that facilitates the gradual integration of the child's bodily emotional experience with symbolic thought, leading to the crystallization of distinctive emotions that can be named. In the absence of such verbally expressed attunement or in the face of grossly malattuned responses, an aborting of this developmental process can occur whereby emotional experience remains inchoate, diffuse, and largely bodily.
In the chapter on world horizons (Stolorow et al., 2002, chap. 3), we discussed the case of Anna, whose early childhood was spent in Budapest during World War II and the Nazi occupation, and whose father was killed in a concentration camp when she was 4 years old. She described a "nameless terror" that was revived in the analysis when she remembered the horrors of the war years and, especially, her father's incarceration and death. Her mother consistently denied the frightening realities of the war and of the father's death, never openly grieving. Anna perceived that her own terror and grief were unwelcome to her mother and that she must not feel or name her emotional pain, so her most unbearable emotional states remained outside the horizons of symbolized experience—nameless—until they found a hospitable home with her analyst within which they could be named. As shown in my autobiographical vignette, the aborting of somatic-linguistic integration is not restricted to early childhood. So long as my traumatized states found no welcoming relational home within which they could be given voice, they remained largely vegetative in nature.

I have become convinced that it is in the process of somatic-symbolic integration, the process through which emotional experience comes into language, that the sense of being is born. Linguisticality, somatic affectivity, and attuned relationality are constitutive aspects of the integrative process through which the sense of being takes form. As shown in my vignette, the aborting of this process, the disarticulation of emotional experience, brings a diminution or even loss of the sense of being, an ontological unconsciousness. I have attempted to show that the loss and regaining of the sense of being, as reflected in experiences of deadness and aliveness, are profoundly context sensitive and context dependent, hingeing on whether the intersubjective systems that constitute one's living prohibit or welcome the coming into language of one's emotional experiences. Consistent with Heidegger's (1927) claim that human existence is always embedded—a "being-in-the-world," one's sense of being is inseparable from the intersubjective contexts in which it is embedded and in which it is sustained or negated.

I close this chapter with one final point. Heidegger (1927) claimed that humans are unique among other beings in that our being is an issue for us; that is, our sense or understanding of our being is inherent to, and fundamentally constitutive of, our being. If Heidegger was right, then for us the loss of a sense of being is, in fact, a loss of being. This can be seen especially clearly in the phenomenology of psychotic states, whose core my collaborators and I (Stolorow et al., 2002, chap. 8) have characterized as an experience of personal annihilation. In such extreme psychological catastrophes, the disintegration of being-in-the-world is so profound and thoroughgoing that the very distinction between the loss of the sense of being and the loss of being, in effect, collapses. There just is annihilation—an eradication of existing as human.