Chapter twenty six

Girl, Disrupted
Trauma, Narrative Disruptions, and Autoethnography

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“Tell me about despair” [she says, Mary Oliver—my solace, my muse].

“Tell me about despair, yours. I will tell you mine. Meanwhile the world goes on” (Mary Oliver, 2004).

My despair is barren, broken. Battered by armies of injustice, foxed by tall and ugly tales of apathy and ignorance. She’s fractured, discordant, distorted.


In the face of love.

I will tell you more. My despair is mediated, moderated, measured in degrees of separation between you and me, here and there, then and now. My despair is distanced, once and twice removed, by the luxury and luck of happenstance and time.


My despair is pathetic and privileged. Imperfect and futile. Inadequate. Hope-less. Hopeful. My despair is distanced by birth. By blonde hair and blue eyes, by oceans and big skies, and books and wine and friends and family. (And my cat.)

For meanwhile, the world goes on.

My despair is yours.

For borders are invisible to stories (Warner, 2014). Stories fly through frontiers, soar on the wings of words and slip the bounds of time and space. Stories go rogue, and roam and rearranged, reframed and remade. Stories look for a listening, an opening, an invitation to hear the truth behind the telling. They wreak havoc and harmony, in service of the mistress of meaning. They endear and endure, in artful, heartfelt retellings of time and space. Meanings creep in on the craft of coherence and settle in the cracks of character and consequence, plot and circumstance. Stories exist to be told (McAdams, 2006), so they look for a listener to give them life, a sacrificial offering to the Gods of the Other-World. That imaginary territory, that “elsewhere of possibility,” the landing space that a story might, just maybe, call home.

I could be your home.

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I advocate here for an autoethnographic space, a home, that embraces the disrupted, the incoherent, and chaotic attempts at meaning-making that deny and defy convention. I hope for a space where, sometimes, ruptures remind us more of the living, rather than the telling. I look for the false starts and half-endings and wrong turns that situate our stories on some spectrum from concordant to discordant,
coherent to incoherent. I want to be reminded of the possibility of hope (or something *more*) in this world.

**ON TRAUMA, STORIES, AND MEANING**

Autoethnographers write eloquently of the significant and transformational power of story (e.g., Bochner, 1997; Goodall, 2008; Poulos, 2009; Speedy, 2017). We know too “(Why) Stories Matter” (Boynton, 2014, p. 45). Stories matter because stories shape selves and lives. Stories offer avenues for personal validation and affirmation, intention and redemption. Stories script memory and meaning and possibility. And as autoethnographers, as storytellers, we know intuitively “the staying power of a good story . . . the universality and endurance of narrative” (Young, 2008, p. 1016). For our stories serve to define and refine our sense of self and in our cultural and crafted constructions of plot and circumstance, we find the “me” in meaning (or, she says, the meaning in me). And so, in this storied world, our very identities are “narrative achievements” (Neimeyer & Levitt, 2001), and those narrative identities, our life stories (our autoethnographies), provide our lives “with unity, purpose, and meaning” (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2006, p. 83). Except, perhaps, when they don’t. Or they won’t. Or they mess with our meaning and mess with our heads.

I write, as I suspect we all do, from a time and place of “crisis ordinainess,” this global condition of constant threat and unexceptional precarity—where precariousness exists as inherent and internal to the ordinary, and the political and social interdependence of our very existence leaves us vulnerable to destruction by others (Berlant, 2011, 2012). In the crisis ordinary world, trauma is the term we turn to when we seek to label and explain the devastating circumstances that significantly disrupt and change people’s lives. Berlant (2011) suggests that what we call “trauma” is inevitably part of the modern condition. Trauma is unavoidable; trauma is the norm. For Berlant (2008), “crisis ordinainess” offers a way of talking about social traumas that “are lived through collectively and that transform the sensorium to a heightened perceptiveness about the unfolding of the historical, and sometimes historic, moment” (p. 5). To conceive of trauma in this way points to the “affective economy of trauma culture” (Luckhurst, 2003) . . . and highlights the lingering ways trauma shapes peoples, places and emotions” (Coddington & Micieli-Voutsinas, 2017, p. 52). But more significantly, as Coddington and Micieli-Voutsinas (2017) suggest, Berlant’s argument reminds us of the structural nature of our collective and contemporary “exposure to structures of violence, some more than others” (p. 52). This, they state, is “why trauma continues to matter” (p. 52).

There is a certain inevitability to being broken in this crisis ordinary world—this world of atrocity and monstrosity. This world of headlines that amplify heartache, where the public is personal. Where trauma is contagious, if not vicarious, and contagious trauma spreads, binding and compounding unrelated life traumas (Coddington, 2017). Trauma matters, and so too stories for trauma reside not in the traumatic event nor in some past self, trauma lives in memory and lingers in story. Trauma defies logic, and dwells in affect, traveling “in and through bodies . . . across places, spaces and times” (Coddington & Micieli-Voutsinas, 2017, p. 52), so the traumatized, in efforts to make meaning and tell stories, seek to recover from the unknowable and the intangible. Insofar as definitions of trauma transcend the singular stressor to account for traumatic repetition and residual effects, trauma lives in memory, and memories of memory, and the “reinvention of life from disturbance reemerges in cadences, rhythms, the smallest predictables” (Berlant, 2008, p. 5).

Storying trauma, then, becomes an attempt, an exercise, in storying self and suffering across time and place. It becomes, sometimes in consequence, an exercise in coherence and craft (Speedy, 2013), “an exercise in alienation” (Tamas, 2009, para. 18), or perhaps, I wonder, an exercise in futility. For, the affective experience in the unfolding historic moment leaves us feeling always, maybe, on the edge, on the verge, overwhelming, underwhelming, dissolving, snapping, *something* (Berlant; 2008; Stewart, 2007).

**ON ALIENATION AND FUTILITY**

She writes and rewrites in these familiar rituals of revision and remaking. These norms of story and structure that define and deny and break and remake and better what matters. What matters. She wonders what matters any more. She’s spent the last week lost in the shadows. Lost in fragments of *ifs* and *maybes*, and life and circumstance. Lost in futility and fragility and fear and for *f*ucks sake. She writes and rewrites. Lost in stories, found in fictions.

She perseveres in this quest for coherence, tangled in the threads of paradox—significance and silence. The auto of this ethnography, this *something*, denies and defies expression. There is a risk in revelation—this depiction of this self, that self, or another, but so too loss, a grieving, in the passing of possibility. A devastation in the rumination, the remembering, the
writing. Etched in invisible ink, these traces of history and mystery fade in/fade out, the lyrical and liminal, personal, political, here and now and then.

Her stories are small stories, stories of almosts and not quite. And didn’ts and could havens. Cat calls and close calls. And there but for the grace of gods, of timing, action, and distraction. They’re small stories, stories of disaster-deflected and trauma avoided. Stories not worth telling. Stories that don’t matter. Or so she says.

She thinks she writes of space and distance, stories measured in degrees of freedom and separation. But listen for the silenced desperation—stories quashed by cultural reserve or personal preserve. Stories best avoided. Stories not told. Stories that ripple from some unnamed epicenter of loss and innocence and ignorance. Un-tellings of past-life possibilities of what could-have, would-have, might-have been in the story-living between then and now. Stories of manhandling and me too. Me three. These little white lies of words and omission that scrub the blank-slate body clean. She wonders what is to walk this world unafraid, to embrace the ink-stained, indigo, night-time dream and omission that scrub the blank-slate body clean. She wonders what is to walk this world unafraid, to embrace the ink-stained, indigo, night-time dream-time and live without fear. She wonders ... You know what? Never mind.

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I’m drawn to Richardson’s (2000) notion of writing “as a way of ‘knowing’—a method of discovery and analysis” (p. 923), perhaps in no small part because of the seeming relevance of this approach to this topic. For it seems reasonable to propose both method (autoethnography) and meaning-making post-trauma center on practices that are both process and product, means and ends, recovering and recovery.

My work in process here reflects only a fraction of the field of inquiry, as the literature on trauma and meaning-making transcends disciplinary boundaries and encompasses a wide-ranging body of interdisciplinary research spanning the depth and breadth of the humanities and social sciences. A cursory survey of literature in the area reveals a diverse scholarship that extends beyond the expected psychological theorizing to include social geography (Coddington, 2017), postcolonial studies, cultural studies, feminist studies, memory studies, and more. Collectively, such work shares a fundamental concern with the experience of individual emotional distress or wounding (Herrero & Baelo-Allué, 2011) and focuses generally (and variably) on the “circumstances that significantly challenge or invalidate important components of the individual’s assumptive world” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006, p. 3).

I’m interested in the stories we tell and retell of trauma (and more). The narrative consequences of rumination and reflection. Once-told stories (Ellis et al., 2018). Revisions and remakings—those very processes of self-narrative that potentiate meaning-making: resolution, recovery, meaning-made (Neimeyer, 2004, 2005; Park, 2010). That elusive happy ending. From this perspective, perhaps, all stories matter—but some matter more than others. Autoethnographers and narrative psychologists alike are consistent in their shared belief that “human beings are natural storytellers” (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233) and that people make sense of their lives through stories (Bochner, 1997; Goodall, 2008; Neimeyer, 2004). As McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals (2007) explain, through a constructed life story, a “narrative identity,” selves create stories, which in turn create selves.

It is perhaps worth noting that, despite any evidence so far to the contrary, I am aware of the conceptual distinctions between life stories and autoethnography, narrative and craft. I’m also half-tempted to ignore these complexities and hope that no one notices, although I suspect they will. I think my hesitancy in drawing these lines stems from the belief that any such lines would be inevitably blurred. Jane Speedy’s (2013) work in this area is helpful, noting that personal narrative, autobiography, and life writing in general, however reflexive, poetic, evocative, and compelling they may be, “lack the critical, political edginess of autoethnographic work” (p. 31). However, she further notes that it is in the troubling of the auto(biography) with the ethno(graphy), within the “bumping and grinding of contradictory and multiple narratives . . . that the most collectively therapeutic dimensions reside” (p. 31). Similarly, Liz Bondi (2013) draws the parallels between qualitative research and psychotherapy, suggesting that both “can be understood as projects of making meaning” and as such, “the meanings they generate are intended to make life more livable, often by deepening our understanding of both ourselves and others” (p. 16). It is, perhaps, the latter distinction, the inclusion of “others,” that serves to differentiate between life narratives and autoethnography, with autoethnography actively framing the personal in the cultural, the self in relation to other, cultivating and compelling a reciprocal relationship with an audience (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). Yet, even this distinction seems an artificial one given the work of narrative psychologists who emphasize the social, relational, and cultural dimensions of narrativized meaning-making (Neimeyer, 2004, 2005).

Following on from Bondi (2013), I see autoethnographic inquiry as a form of research that involves
personal meaning-making. Although personal meanings are not the central endeavor in such work, and the crafting of autoethnographic narratives necessitates both emotional and analytical labor, criticality and craft, autoethnography always necessitates the turning of a gaze inwards and in this respect the autoethnographic endeavor parallels elements of the constructed life story process.

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I gaze in, gaze upon, turn in, and turn away. The words won’t go where I want them. I start here and end up anywhere but there. I write forwards, write back, rewind, and delete and somehow end up right (write?) where I started. Tell me about despair. . . . I will tell you mine. These words, these lines on a page, mess with my memory, mess with my meaning, mess with my head. Mess. “Your heart’s a mess” (Gotye & Attaway, 2007). This shall be a “messy” text (Ronai, 1992).

My despair breaks me, makes me . . . cracks me open at the edges of my mixed-up memory. My vision blooms in ever-widening ellipses of repressed trouble, of could-be, maybe, would-be trauma. Silenced stories and toxic moments trickle in and out of the periphery; a half-remembered haunting of grabbing, groping, stroking, stalking. Strangers and familiar, in strange and familiar almost stories that bump and grind, piling up, piling high. Gross reminders of the should-be, could-be, best-be forgotten. Almost stories of the fine lines and *c*hecked up edges of consent and coercion, pleasure and danger, agency and objectification.

No good can come of this.

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I turn instead to the literature on narrative identity which affirms what we perhaps intuitively understand, we tell and retell stories about emotionally negative events for the purpose of meaning-making as a fundamental process by which people search for understanding or significance in response to stressful life events—the latter an arguably inadequate term that is considered synonymous with a broad spectrum of traumatic experience.

I’m conscious that referring to trauma as a “response to a stressful life event” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) in a crisis ordinary world—in a heart-broken life—is problematic to the extent that such a definition may be perceived to minimize the very real disruptive and distressing experiences of the traumatized. In this respect, I echo again the sentiments of Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), who note the “profoundly disturbing” and “seismic” nature of traumatic events. That said, it is also Tedeschi and Calhoun who have systemically observed that the experience of negative traumatic events can result in positive change—or post-traumatic growth. Despite what might be characterized as the definitional inadequacies of the literature, the substantive and burgeoning body of research on post-traumatic growth and relatedly meaning-making (Park, 2010; Park, Currier, Harris, & Slattery, 2017) drawn from diverse areas of psychology including constructivist psychology, positive psychology,
existential psychology, and clinical psychology suggests some semblance of hope for the traumatized, given its collective evidencing of positive personal transformation in response to the traumatic disruption of an individual’s world of meaning (see Batthyány & Russo-Netzer, 2014 for an overview).

The (psychological) meaning-making literature differentiates between meaning-making (process) and meaning-made (outcome). An attempt to cohere this wide-ranging literature on meaning-making, Park’s (2010) integrated model of meaning-making and her more recently revised reciprocal meaning-making model (2017) prove useful in their articulation of “meaning-making” as those processes of reconciliation and reappraisal, that involve automatic or deliberative cognitive and emotional processing, that in turn facilitate changes termed “meaning made.” Meaning made, more specifically, is deemed evident in various forms of changed meanings of trauma, changed beliefs and goals, reconstructed identity, and perceptions of growth (Park, 2017).

From this meaning-oriented perspective, a traumatic experience challenges a person’s global (or macro) view of the world as, for instance, controllable or comprehensible, safe or good. The experience of consequential distress means the individual is driven to search for meaning, motivated to try, and understand the (situational or micro) event. “Meaning-making reflects an attempt to answer (often unanswerable) questions such as: Why me? Why did it happen? And who am I now?” (Henson, 2015, p. 37). And it is in this respect, and more, that I believe our autoethnographic work frequently embodies the form and function, process and outcome of meaning-making.

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The troubling of her trauma, can-she-should-she call it trauma, small trauma, big drama, shadowed-selves troubles. Meaning connects things . . . that time, walking talking, late night, young-time, fun time, drunk time—short skirt, long legs, short sleeves, Summer. Hand on her heart, heart in her mouth, hands on her, lines crossed, legs crossed, grabbing, groping, running. . . You know what? Doesn’t matter.

Her thoughts are scraps, images, lyrics, lines of stories stolen from the depths of memory and reserve. She sees the disembodied hands of half-made men on blank flesh burned in scars and years of squandered shame and rage. The private violence of almosts and not-quites and the is it/ isn’t it borderlines of arrogance and assault that stain the everyday living in the ever-after. The minimizing and the sanitizing of old scripts, old stories, old selves in compulsive ruminations and renderings of the too hard, too sad, too much. Not enough.

She’ll lock doors, deadbolt, check doors, and check again. She’ll carry keys and carry on. She knows the villainy of victimhood, of being stuck in a story. So, she turns at dusk to the blanketed security of familiarity, of company, when the ifs and maybes walk this world in the shadows. She’ll cross streets and walk fast, faster, driven by the sixth sense, commonsense, nonsense of living while female, fighting like a girl.

Or she’ll just stay home.

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I return again to the literature, my safe space, “safe” research—my academic equivalent of Elizabeth Wurtzel’s (1994) Prozac, something “that doesn’t make you happy but does make you not sad” (p. 301). It’s not sad, and not enough, but here, it seems, empirical research on post-traumatic meaning-making has flourished over the past three decades through various theoretical lenses including post-traumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), benefit-finding (Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006), coping (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001), resilience (Lepore & Revenson, 2006), and, more recently, savoring (Samios & Khatri, 2019). In illustration, foundational work on post-traumatic growth by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) identifies five primary domains of the experience of growth. These domains, effectively forms of meanings-made in Park’s (2010) terminology, include an increased appreciation for life, a changed perception of personal strength, new possibilities, changes in relating to others, and spiritual change. It seems reasonable to suggest that this literature reminds us of the potential benefits of our meaning-making efforts, autoethnographic or otherwise.

I’m not sure these more positive forms of meaning-making come naturally to me, nor for that matter, to story—to autoethnography. Although, I’d not need look far to identify autoethnographic work that articulates elements of personal experience that parallel these domains of meaning-making generally, and post-traumatic growth specifically. Our autoethnographic work frequently coheres around themes of transformation, conflict, or crisis; autoethnographers write about “epiphanies”—selective and retrospective renderings that reflect, shape, and are shaped by aspects of the cultural experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Indeed, the very craft of writing autoethnography typically positions conflict at the center of evocative storytelling (Goodall, 2008). And so, we see a genre of autoethnographic work grounded in
trauma and recovery, articulating, writing, healing, from and through pain and uncertainty, suffering and loss (Adams, 2011; Boylorn, 2014; Spry, 2011; Speedy, 2015; Tamas, 2011). Such renderings situate the personal in the political, the cultural, and the global and arguably reflect more heuristic and positive forms of meaning-making and meanings-made insofar as the process of autoethnography seemingly results in a “changed meaning of trauma, changed beliefs, goals, sense of life meaning, reconstructed identity [and] perceptions of growth” (Park et al., 2017, p. 16) for the autoethnographer.

That said, I fear the extent to which our natural attraction to narrative tension, to the dramatic and harrowing, rather paradoxically denies the lightness in our dark. Or, maybe more commonly, locates the light in our lives as the aesthetically attractive narratively luminous, end of our long, dark literary tunnel. I suspect we veer from the light in autoethnography, for aesthetic or anesthetic (Buck-Morss, 1992) reasons, storytelling our way into and through tragedy and trauma that all too often serves to define us by some strangely asserted narrative dominance (Holland et al., 2010). Storying trauma in the domain of self while simultaneously stealing the “authorship of the individual’s life narrative” (Neimeyer, 2004, p. 56). As in, she thinks, the star-crossed separations of mind and body, self and story; the loosen up, lighten up, obviously asking for it imaginings of dominant discourse and lived experience that disorganize the organized and disrupt conflict and compete with the acceptable and inevitable. . . . Failed fantasies of justice and vengeance and innocence. . . . And he laughed, they laughed, denied/dismissed/disbelieved . . . undone. The rifts between story-living and storytelling. As in distance and voice and words that mute my meaning and silence my story or render me imposter in my messed-up, mixed-up-memories.

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She lives in this hard place/thin place. This place of wanting and contradictions and impossible realities—impossible stories. This place of laboring in service of aesthetic fictions “to persuade us of beautiful untrue things. . . . I tend to define metaphor as a figure of desire rather than a figure of knowledge” (Harold Bloom, as cited in Warner, 2014, p. xxii). As do I, Harold, as do I. She labors in this place of anesthetic fictions, where every story is a bit of a lie and every story a bit of her Self. This place, this space of narrative disruptions, where loss is inevitable and stories are always other than that to which they refer (Bondi, 2013).

### NARRATIVE DISRUPTIONS

Robert Neimeyer (2004) advances a narrative perspective on post-traumatic growth that centers on the disruptive events that affect an individual’s personal life story and potentially challenge identity. Specifically, Neimeyer identifies three forms of narrative disruption that may impact on the personal plot of an individual’s self-narrative. As he explains, “disorganized narratives,” as a form of narrative disruption, exemplify the stark reality in which traumatic events may impair or exceed an individual’s abilities to make sense of the experience and integrate these into a coherent “organized” life narrative (Neimeyer, 2004; Neimeyer, Herrero, & Botella, 2006). This form of disruption reflects a person’s inability to reconcile a post-trauma self-narrative about the traumatic event (the “micro-narrative”) with their broader “macro-narrative”—or life story (Neimeyer, 2004). The dissonance between these two narratives is considered to incur revisioning processes that potentiate meaning-making and, ideally, “meaning-made” (Neimeyer, 2004; Park, 2010).

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Elaborating on the theme of narrative disruption, Neimeyer et al. (2006) cite White and Epston’s (1990) conceptualization of “dominant narratives” as those that “colonize” an individual’s life narrative and sense of self. Dominant narratives, then, are described as almost the antithesis of disorganized narratives, insofar as they may be deemed “far too cohesive,” and serve to deindividuate the individual’s self from the trauma by marginalizing more preferred, fragile, accounts of self while simultaneously stealing the “authorship of the individual’s life narrative” (Neimeyer, 2004, p. 56). As a form of disruption, dominant narratives are considered reflective of the “landmark perspective” of trauma, which suggests the hegemonic, singular, labeling or description of self that is not uncommon to trauma may mean the traumatic event remains salient to the individual and consequently influential on identity (Holland et al., 2010). Storying trauma in the dominant narrative may therefore translate to a tendency...
to script life outside the event in “ways that are only referential to the traumatic landmark. [Before the floods; after the earthquake]” (Henson, 2011, p. 822). In such stories the traumatized risk externalizing the dominant narrative, and the impact of labeling oneself as “patient” or “victim” is made manifest at the personal, social, and even cultural levels (Neimeyer et al., 2006). Conceiving of living post-trauma as a “situated interpretative and communicative activity” as Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis (2014) propose, suggests some need to (contextually) conform to or resist the broader cultural narratives that script the “proper performance” of surviving trauma.

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As in, the hegemonic norms of testimony and social scripts—the Do It To Yourself Guides for Good Victims. The dominant account—you know this story, we all do. This careful construction of pivotal points; beginning, middle, and end. Character and plot. Curations of lives and lies and cliché and convention. In social and self-assassination, I’m afraid for the missing.

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The third form of narrative disruption, according to Neimeyer (2004), centers on narrative dissociation. Dissociated narratives are described as silent stories that resist both personal and public acknowledgment (Neimeyer, 2004). Dissociation therefore encompasses both the exclusion of aspects of the traumatic memory from conscious awareness and the social narration of the experience. Explanations for dissociation from trauma typically center on the belief that maintaining the traumatic experience in an “unassimilated” form may understandably function to protect the traumatized individual from reliving the traumatic memory and similarly defend against social censure or invalidation at the interpersonal level (Neimeyer et al., 2006).

No good can come of this.

**NARRATIVE INTERVENTIONS**

Neimeyer and his colleagues propose that narrative interventions offer potential avenues for overcoming the ruptures and consequences of disorganized, dominant, and dissociated narratives. In brief, such methods suggest the potential utility of rewriting and revising self-narratives to better enable the integration of the traumatic experience into the broader life story. Considered in concert with the wider literature on post-traumatic growth and meaning-making, such work offers some comfort to the traumatized. From this perspective there is a clear possibility for transformation, growth, and personal recovery through the rendering of a well-integrated and coherent narrative identity (McAdams, 2006).

The conceptualization of narrative identity in this manner has emerged as an integrative idea across both the humanities and social sciences, as evidenced particularly in research by Lilgendahl and McAdams (2011), who offer the compelling argument that the “open acknowledgment of the negative emotional impact of an event can act as a ‘narrative springboard’” for self-growth (p. 421). Self-growth, by their definition, is not conceptually dissimilar to post-traumatic growth, yet specifically encompasses “any interpretation of a past experience that in some way moves a person toward (as opposed to away from) experiences and mindsets that enhance positive self-development and quality of life” (p. 395). Intentionally broad, they describe this perspective as including more specific concepts such as positive self-transformation and meaning-making and encompassing growth in the forms of sense of purpose, clarity of identity, self-insight, and self-efficacy, well-being, and meaningful connections with others. In sum, their research posits that integrating painful memories of negative events into narrative identity may be best achieved by recognizing such events are an enduring aspect of the self and articulating personal growth that has occurred as a result of the experience.

In the post-traumatic meaning literature, I find myself well-armed with well-organized, coherent (yet cautious) accounts of the beneficial consequences of meaning-making. My past life, statistically trained Virgo self, lover of lists and numbers, finds herself in her element. She’s drawn to the promise of narrative revisioning, re-storying, and repair. She likes to fix things. She’ll quote statistics and note the evidence that suggests meaning-making post-trauma seems to counter some of the negative effects of the traumatic experience. She’ll cite a range of scholars who have noted post-traumatic growth or positive outcomes deriving from an array of traumatic events, including loss and bereavement (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001, cancer survivorship (Park, Chmielewski, & Blank, 2009), and sexual assault (Frazier, Conlon, & Glaser, 2001). She’ll be hopeful and optimistic in a manner consistent with the domain of positive psychology. (She’ll be hopeful and optimistic in a manner most annoying.)

But she doesn’t write autoethnography. She couldn’t if she tried.
[She tries.] Past-lives and possibilities grind and bump in surfacings that put the damage on. She comes home half-written—made and unmade. And in the space between self and story, she’ll watch the world go on. She’ll charm and disarm with soft-tellings of how it was, how it could be, would be. Made small, made over. Made small, made whole.

COHERENCE AND CLICHÉ

My present life, recovering quantitative, lover of words and meaning, shadows and shades of complexity, prevails and calls my past life Pollyanna to task. She might do well to remember that the “imperative of coherence” (Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010) is a hard taskmaster and the effects of narrative coherence may range the spectrum from “remediation to suffocation” (Hammond, Teucher, & Hamoline, 2014, p. 144). For in perpetuating the narrative conventions of causal, temporal, autobiographical, and thematic coherence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), in seeking to be—to write—the “good story” (McAdams, 2006), we operate under an “organizing principle that may never be fully achieved” (Neimeyer et al., 2006, p. 130). Despite the impossibility of real organization, the inevitability of incoherence, violations of the normative expectations of plot and structure, content and form are commonly deemed indicative of both of a disordered mind (and story) (Dimaggio, 2006). And, as McAdams (2006) suggests, the problem of narrative coherence fundamentally centers on the problem of being understood.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, our every day, real-life, real-world stories of trauma commonly follow a familiar script that serves to sanitize the self and story: If it hadn’t happened, then I wouldn’t be the person I am today. I’m stronger because of it. I’ve grown as a person. I don’t take things for granted. I know now what really matters. I’ve found out who my real friends are. I found my faith. Everything happens for a reason (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Our narratives clear, coherent, and complete, (and not occasionally cliché). Meaning-made (Henson, 2015).

These forms of ready-made meaning are compelling and, often, entirely valid. There’s a reason such scripts are cliché, they arguably reflect the optimal narrative outcome post-trauma. That is, these convenient resolutions reflect the cultural narrative of a “happy ending” and in doing so illustrate the organization of the disorganized narrative. The micro-narrative of the traumatic event is effectively integrated into the broader life narrative by promoting post-traumatic processing of negative events that facilitate interpretations of self-growth (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011). Or, in the more accessible form of knowledge we’re often accustomed to as autoethnographers, “good stories make life better.”

The greater irony, however, seems to be that good stories, in an autoethnographic sense, typically adhere to the principles of craft. That is, evocative storytelling—evocative writing—depends on stylistic criteria that center on conflict, connection, curiosity and, significantly, climactic satisfaction (Goodall, 2008). Autoethnographic writing is good if it is inevitable, but not predictable. Cliché, no matter how personally beneficial it may be to our own meaning-making, is nothing if not predictable. And cliché is anathema to autoethnography.

My concern here is that in writing the “good” trauma autoethnography, in scripting our own versions of logical, linear, directional, and redemptive stories of trauma we may avoid the more personally beneficial post-traumatic outcome, or cliché, yet somehow still reify the conventional expectations of plot and structure in renderings that serve to perpetuate artificial and alienating accounts of happy-endings and ever-afters (Purnell & Bowman, 2014). Sophie Tamas (2009) writes compellingly on the latter point, noting that it is not necessarily the realization the we are “lost and broken” that causes despair, “what breaks us is the impression that everyone else isn’t” (para. 18).

Hammond and his colleagues (2014) explain the problem of coherence as centering on the “prevailing assumption that a certainty of meaning can provide consolation” (p. 144). They further suggest the ubiquity of more simplified psychological discourses means that “we lose sight of the complex, paradoxical, and diverse ways that people make sense of and cope with experiences of suffering” (p. 143). In certainty and coherence, I’m afraid we privilege consolation and craft at our peril, risking the possibility of falling into a newly dominant narrative, a story whereby one becomes nothing, if not organized. Or, alternatively, we risk a form of “narrative foreclosure,” where in scripting one story we perceive other life plots as no longer possible (Freeman, 2010).

This view is consistent with Bondi’s (2013) observation that “even in the absence of trauma, there is a gap between experience and reflection on that experience” (p. 15). A gap that is, furthermore, arguably implicated in our “sane, readable” autoethnographic accounts of trauma that seemingly suggest some order in the universe prevails insofar as we surrender to the imperatives of coherence and convention and write the “good story.” This gap between experience and expression, as Bondi suggests, “locates loss at the
core of meaning making” (p. 15). Loss, in this sense, is inevitable in story. Irrespective of authenticity, stories are always “other than the subjective realities of which they tell or to which they refer” (p. 15). In our crisis ordinary world, our assumption of coherence and its curative properties is, one might argue, snake oil to our narrative identity. We’re so accustomed to the prevailing plot of cause and consequence, rhyme and reason, that any alternative is often deemed unworthy—unsorted, unsafe, and unhinged (Speedy, 2013). Yet, as narrative psychologist Monisha Pasupathi, cited by Beck (2015) reminds us, in the context of life narratives, it’s not even truth that matters; as she notes, “any creation of a narrative is a bit of a lie.”

The conclusion that some degree of deceit is implicit in our life stories and autoethnographies may be somewhat reassuring to victims of trauma (and narrative). The inevitability of deception in narration (Hammond et al., 2014) reminds us that storytelling, by definition, implies re-storying. That despite our tendencies to perceive ourselves stuck in the “same old story” or dominated by a past event, the very construction of a narrative identity enables us to escape these damaging repetitive compulsions and gain freedom from a particular plotline. In this respect, the positive psychology literature on meaning-making and post-traumatic growth suggests some avenues for promoting positive storytelling, organizing the disorganized, and narrating our way to something else, something “more livable.” Toward this end, I wonder if there is an opportunity in our autoethnographic processes (and products) to narrate the personal experience in a more therapeutic direction by emphasizing post-traumatic growth, positioning positive outcomes as a direct consequence of trauma. For the traumatized, this suggests a narrative pathway toward a “happier” ending, and a “post hoc ergo propter hoc” (after this, therefore because of this . . .) plotline that is less logical fallacy and more a means of moving toward a positive meaning-made otherwise.

Storying one’s way to resolution and recovery is obviously easier said than done. A traumatic experience may resist storying, remain silenced, dissociated, or defy organization. There’s no unbreaking the broken, no ready-made meaning that determines meaning-made that promises resolution or recovery. It’s these promises, I believe, that leave the broken tangled in ineffectual efforts to exorcise their ghosts (recovery), rather than learning to live with them (recovering) (Durrant, 2004). It’s here where I’m left questioning the conventional wisdom of conceptualizing trauma as a “personal wound” (Herrero & Baez-Alváé, 2011, p. x), for a wound heals—or it doesn’t. A wound is fatal or not. A wound leaves little room for recovering, rather than recovery. Confusing outcome and process, end and means, seems an unnecessary hazard when one is busy negotiating with ghosts.

Highlighting the process of meaning-making, in both the traumatic experience and the autoethnographic endeavor, reminds the author of the life/story/autoethnography of the possibility of alternative endings in the book of events. And this is perhaps where the insights of meaning-oriented psychology offer a different perspective. The ironic potential of positive psychology—and autoethnography as described earlier—lies in the danger of participating in and perpetuating dominant discourses of transcendence from tragedy (Hammond et al., 2014), pathologizing by legitimizing some narratives while excluding or marginalizing others (Hyvärinen et al., 2010). Extending our view to acknowledge more existential notions of meaning encourages the recognition that life narratives (stories/autoethnographies) range a spectrum from concordance to discordance, and “however they are plotted on this spectrum they construct personal understandings of the human condition” (Hammond et al., 2014, p. 135).

Avoiding the restrictive dualisms of light and dark, coherent and incoherent, made and unmade meaning, perhaps necessitates an autoethnographic (life/story) space that embraces the interdisciplinary exploration of narrative—and trauma. Transcending the common borders of the humanities and social science, writing around the edges, and blurring the lines between suggests an avenue for not only broadening our understanding of trauma, but for developing autoethnography that challenges its frequent positioning in the peripheries of our disciplines of origin.

Hammond and his colleagues (2014) suggest that “narrative coherence does not always bravely overcome suffering, but instead shuffles anxiously around it” (p. 144). This metaphor invites for me some strange imagining of our autoethnographic stories in pajamas and slippers, playing some peculiar game of musical chairs whereby the last story standing wins some notion of meaning-made. My point here is not perhaps to trouble the fine line between genius and madness (although that’s not entirely irrelevant); instead, it is to observe the need for an autoethnographic space that includes recognition of the broken, the counter, and the barren attempts at meaning-making that make more mess than meaning.

Such stories (encompassing the incomplete, the empty, half stories, fragments, fictions, and fractures) reflect the shadowy space behind the curtain. The curtain occasionally opens, and we see glimpses of the darkness that resides on the other side of coherence and convention (Speedy, 2015, 2017; Tamas,
2009, 2011). My hope, as we continue to life/story/autoethnography our varied ways forward, both individually and collectively, is to advance and embrace a safe space where writing privileges process and product and in doing so offers some acknowledgment of the false starts and half-endings and wrong turns that situate our stories on the pointy end of some spectrum from concordant to discordant, coherent to chaotic.

I hope too for a space—an autoethnographic home—that recognizes the small moments of grace, and fragments of joy, that make meaning and make us who we are, just as much, if not more than the tall, dark, and harrowing stories of tragedy and trauma that assert some strange narrative dominance on our story-telling-story-living autoethnographic lives. In the context of trauma recovery, being healed doesn’t mean being whole, as Buck-Morss reminds us, being healed just means being able to respond to “the present possibilities for happiness” (as cited in Kester, 1997, p. 45). In this sense, it seems reasonable to suggest that lived and narrativized disruptions may include a range of experience encompassing the traumatic and ecstatic, with the latter offering a more positive form of rupture that better reminds us of the possibility of finding joy and meaning in the present.

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She finds home in a listener. Joy in a warm body. A warm blanket. She finds home in a fallen leaf, a coincidental rainbow. A broken shell. In the shock of wave and water, the surge and swell of a tide, the slow undulation of a sea anemone in a rock pool, and the glass green of an opaque chrysalis, with its promise of the inconceivable. The spiraling of a yucca and the endless vortex of a lace-loved, cloud-scattered sky. She finds home in the crack of a concrete verge, soil and green, and a trail of ants on a quiet mission. A lady bird on a tattered leaf and our entire existence in this so-big, so-small world. She breathes in the depths of this desert. Breathes in. Breathes out. The colors of this rainbow world, filtered through the frame of a sunbrowned haze, fills her with pink and golds and sage-green solitude. She finds herself home. Made small, made over. Made small, made whole.

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It seems you find me turning in circles, writing in spirals, tilting at windmills. Storying and re-storying in strange meanderings along some spectrum of chaos and coherence. It seems you find me mixing my metaphors and making my meaning—some meaning. I think I live here now. In this hard place, this thin place. This space between, in the shadow of some ending. For it seems we’re fully convinced that as a narrative begins, as an autoethnography lives, so shall it end.

I’m not so convinced about endings. This story won’t stop, won’t end. It seems the traumatic and ecstatic both, challenge our rendering in words as they live and linger in the “stretched out now” (Berlant, 2008, p. 5). And in scripting some self, some story, I always sacrifice one to the needs of another. The same is true of endings—every ending is always one of many. So, I find myself standing in the balance. Tip-toed on the edge of this world and the next, in the space between one conclusion and another. This pick-a-path-and-passing-plotline suggests you choose your own conclusion: cliché and coherence on one side, chaos and cacophony on the other. My position is precarious here, paradoxical and privileged. Made and unmade. Despairing, repairing. Counter and familiar. Despair is necessary here, but so too hope.

Tell me about despair, yours. I have told you mine. Meanwhile the world goes on.

REFERENCES


