**Summary of Trauma and Illusion**

**Robert D. Stolorow, PhD, PhD**

Illusion and its dismantling have been central from the very beginning of my efforts to grasp the phenomenology of emotional trauma. Here I give an account of how my studies of trauma were initially inspired by a traumatized state that I myself experienced. When the book *Contexts of Being* (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992) was first published, an initial batch of copies was sent “hot‑off‑the‑press” to the display table at a conference where I was a panelist. I picked up a copy and looked around excitedly for my late wife, Dede, who would be so pleased and happy to see it. She was nowhere to be found, having died some twenty months earlier. I had awakened the morning of February 23, 1991, to find her lying dead across our bed, four weeks after her metastatic cancer had been diagnosed. Spinning around to show her my book and finding her gone instantly transported me back to that devastating moment in which I woke up and found her dead and my world was shattered, and I was once again consumed with horror and sorrow. I spent the remainder of that conference feeling like a strange and alien being.

 Over the course of six years following that horrible occasion, I tried to understand the dreadful sense of estrangement and isolation that seemed to me to be inherent to the experience of emotional trauma. Eventually I was able to grasp trauma as a shattering of what I then called *the absolutisms of everyday life*—the unquestioned set of beliefs that allow one to experience the world as stable, predictable, and safe (Stolorow, 1999).  Dismantling of the absolutisms of everyday life exposes the inescapable contingency of existence on a world that is unstable and unpredictable and in which no safety or continuity of being can be assured.

 I later expanded this formulation of absolutisms and their shattering to a consideration of metaphysical illusion and its dismantling, a formulation that applies not only to individual trauma but to collection trauma as well—the attack on the World Trade Center, the pandemic, and the Apocalyptic consequences of climate change.

I am claiming that the dismantling of metaphysical illusion is central in the phenomenology of emotional trauma.

 A common example can be found in the experience of being in love. “I will love you forever,” lovers say to one another, transforming the love relationship into a metaphysical eternity. The death of a loved one entails both the terrible loss of the beloved and a dismantling of the illusion of eternity. This is especially the case with the death of a beloved child.

 If there is hope to be found, I contended, it is to be sought in a form of dwelling with others that I call *emotional dwelling*-- an active, engaged, participatory comportment that I have recommended for the therapeutic approach to emotional trauma. In dwelling, one leans into the other’s emotional pain and participates in it. The language that one uses to address another’s experience of trauma meets the trauma head-on, articulating the unbearable and the unendurable, saying the unsayable, unmitigated by any efforts to soothe, comfort, encourage, or reassure—such efforts invariably being experienced by the other as a turning away from the experience of trauma. I give a vivid example of emotional dwelling in my response to my father’s having to face the possibility of being blinded by eye surgery—no empty reassurances or platitudes!