

Polanyian Philosophical Resources for Mental Health Professionals Dealing with Trauma Related Pathologies

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Keywords: trauma, subsidiary/focal, metaphor, tenor/vehicle, frame/story, tacit knowledge, EMDR, meaning, emergence, embodied self, memory, perception

Abstract

Polanyian insights into the ways meaning is created within the arts provides a coherent perspective for understanding why and how the arts are useful in ameliorating the devastating effects of trauma. Recent discoveries by humanistically oriented practitioners of trauma therapy confirm, and helpfully extend, Polanyi's views of the relationship of mind and body.

PART ONE

Polanyian Poetics: Facts of the Imagination

To participate in the creative renewal of the world is as close as we may come to touching the cloth of existence's original daybreak ... Alice Hirshfield, Poet and Essayist

In their book, *Meaning*, Polanyi and Prosch (hereinafter P&P) demonstrate that life is oriented toward meaning and that the highest form of life, human being, is fundamentally oriented toward discovering and creating meaning. When trauma occurs language and metaphor are cut off rendering experience "unspeakable". The capacity for making a meaningful story of events is lost. P&P do not directly address the issue of trauma. However, explaining the way meaning is created in poetry and the arts, P&P unwittingly provide mental health

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professionals a philosophical/literary understanding of why and how for victims of trauma the arts can become a path toward recovery.

In the view of P&P there are two kinds of meaning: natural and artificial. Natural meanings are coherences discovered in nature. Artificial meanings are created by humans and form the basis for human culture. Relying on their understanding of tacit knowing which includes the from/to relationship of subsidiary to focal formed by *the acts of a person*, P&P show how a symbol, for example a national flag, initially just a piece of cloth with no intrinsic interest, becomes a focal object into which into which a person through indwelling pour their diffuse experiences, memories and feelings. Whereupon, tacitly unified by this act of self-giving, they are “carried away” by the flag, now a passionately interesting symbol.

Moving from symbol to metaphor P&P address the question of how a metaphor like a symbol gains the extraordinary power to “move us greatly” to “carry us away”. Again relying on tacit knowing they propose that the two seemingly incompatible but both intrinsically interesting aspects of a metaphor, “tenor and vehicle”, when combined not only form an object i.e. a metaphor but because they are combined by the action of a self “... the subsidiary clues—consisting of all those inchoate experiences in our own lives that are related to the two parts of a metaphor—are integrated into the *meaning* (italics mine) of a tenor and vehicle “ ... The result is that a metaphor carries us away, embodies us in itself, and moves us deeply as we surrender ourselves to it” (M, 79). While addressing the question of how a metaphor can “move us” P&P have exposed the vital role which emotion fused with thought plays in giving meaning to our lives.

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As in a metaphor but even more so in a poem we can be “carried away”. P&P point to the ways we are able to read a poem. We may focus on its subsidiary elements such as rhythm, rhyme, sound, etc. thereby making them focal but in doing so we lose the meaning of the poem which can be recovered when we focus on the poem itself considered as a whole. However the *pattern* of the subsidiary elements of a poem are what set it apart from ordinary speech, *detach* it from ordinary life thereby making its *story* no mere recitation of facts but a story set apart, heard by the *imagination* (M,80, italics mine).

To make their point P&P introduce the concept of “frame and story” quoting I.A.Richards who says that in a poem “metre” produces a frame effect which isolates the poem’s *experience* from everyday existence which if stated in prose “... would be too *personal* ...”(M, 81,italics mine). Therefore, a work of art does not affirm any fact of *experience*. Instead it represents certain *facts of the imagination* in a *form* to which we respond “... by surrendering from our own diffuse memories of moving events a gift of purely resonant *feelings*” (M, 88, Italics mine). P&P proceed to show how frame and story not only applies to poetry but also the arts of painting (framed by paint and canvas) and theater (framed by script, set, costume playacting etc.) which detach them completely from ordinary experience making their meaning dependent on “facts of the imagination”.(ibid.)

Trauma victims have extreme difficulty putting thoughts and feelings into words. Trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk, MD says that even years after the traumatic event(s) “Their bodies *re-experience* terror, rage and helplessness, as well as the impulse to fight or flee, but these feelings are almost impossible to articulate. ... When words fail, haunting images *capture the experience* and return as nightmares and flashbacks. (Kolk, 43f, Italics mine)

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Kolk emphasizes that there are two forms of self-awareness that are vitally important to put right in the healing process each, not incidentally, related to different parts of the brain. The first is a narrative form rooted in language which keeps track of the self across time and makes possible a coherent autobiographical story. The second form monitors moment to moment self-awareness which is based primarily in the neural substrate of physical sensations connected to emotions. In both instances paying careful attention to bodily processes is the bridge to overcoming the effects of trauma (Kolk, 236).

In Polanyian terms the self is embodied. Tacit knowing extends even to "... neural traces in the cortex of the nervous system." (TD, 15) "... by elucidating the way our bodily processes participate in our perceptions we will throw light on the bodily roots of all thought including man's highest *creative* powers." (ibid.) It could be said that the main thrust of van der Kolk's work on trauma as reflected in his book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, is how to understand and treat the massively negative impact trauma has on the bodily processes which distort trauma victims' perceptions even years after a traumatic event.

Among many other treatments van der Kolk points to the usefulness of the arts in treating victims of trauma. Acknowledging their effectiveness, Kolk is nevertheless puzzled about how it is that the arts can "... circumvent the speechlessness that comes with the terror ..." (Kolk, 242f). I contend that a Polanyian understanding of the arts points toward an answer. Relying on the insights of I.A. Richards Polanyi has demonstrated how the creators of poetry, painting and stagecraft incorporate diffuse experiences into a work of art. The resulting work of art bears some resemblance to the original lived experience but, by virtue of the framing effect, is effectively cut off from those

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experiences. For someone suffering the effects of trauma the framing effect of a work of art which makes it “unreal” can effectively reduce the feelings of terror etc. which would be reactivated if it were only a retelling of the “real” story. By imaginatively indwelling this “unreal” story which bears some resemblance to the original lived experience a trauma victim gives himself away to its healing emotional/thoughtful power and meaning.

Although P&P do not mention “play” or “pretense” in their discussion of art, I believe play/pretense are essential to the framing effect of the arts. After all we often call a theatrical production a “play”. Poetry is a playing with and a play upon words. Painting is play with line, color, space etc. I believe the element of play and pretense, although unmentioned, is implicit in P&P’s presentation. The Dutch historian Huizinga viewed play as a form of action contained within a separate reality, a reality set off and demarcated from that of ordinary life. (Cited in Modell, 26f) Play serves to remove the art object from the realm of the “real” and make it a “safe” place in which a trauma victim may “dwell”, a place to play! ¹

An examination of van der Kolk’s chapter on the effectiveness of theater in overcoming the effects of trauma vividly highlights the usefulness of P&P’s perspective on the arts as I have outlined it. Significantly this chapter is titled “Finding Your Voice: Communal Rhythms and Theater”. Kolk describes three theater programs which he has observed and studied. He states that all three have a common foundation: “confrontation of the painful realities of life and *symbolic transformation* through communal action” (Kolk, 335, italics mine). Kolk goes on to say that “Traumatized people are terrified to feel deeply. They are afraid to experience their emotions, because emotions lead to a loss of control. In contrast theater is about embodying emotions, giving voice to them, becoming rhythmically engaged, taking on and

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embodying different roles. ... Traumatized people are afraid of conflict. They fear losing control ... Conflict is central to theater—inner conflicts, interpersonal conflicts, family conflicts, social conflicts and their consequences. Trauma is about trying to forget, hiding how scared, enraged or helpless you are. Theater is about ways of telling the truth and conveying deep truths to your audience. This requires pushing through blockages to discover your own truth, exploring and examining your own internal experience so that it can emerge in your voice and body on stage.” (ibid.)

Throughout the chapter Kolk alludes to various aspects of theatrical experience which P&P call “framing” including props, costumes, rhythm, and emotional distance. At one point, describing the work of Bishop Tutu with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Kolk uses the word “frame” to describe Bishop Tutu’s use of collective prayer, song and dance to “contain” the emotional and physical collapse of the victims as they spoke about their experiences (Kolk, 333).

Let’s examine more closely one of the theater programs Kolk mentions¹: In the New York City Possibility Project, ongoing for twenty years, the trauma victims are mostly teenagers. Over nine months for three hours a week under the tutelage of professional actors, dancers and musicians they write and perform their own full length musical. Significantly they are not given a prepared script but write their own based on conversations which are recorded and then written down out of which emerges a script. The sessions begin not with words but with the framing effect of singing and moving together. Only after several of these sessions are they encouraged to speak. The director of the program describes their first attempts at saying something about themselves: “... they freeze, their faces expressionless, their eyes cast

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down, doing anything they can to become invisible” (Kolk, 341). As they begin to talk they discover they are not alone and they discover a voice in which they are central. With that start they begin creating a script embodying their own feelings/emotions in their own words.

Significantly, as rehearsals begin the “focus” shifts from their “pain, alienation and fear” to how they can become “the best actor, singer, dancer, choreographer, or lighting and set designer I can possibly be” (ibid.).

Observed from the standpoint of P&P this theatrical (artistic) process begins with an individual trauma victim focused on his/her subsidiary feelings of fear, pain, terror and therefore “speechless”. Encouraged by a “frame” of singing and movement which somewhat reduces the influence of the fearful responses on their perceptions they gradually shift their attention from their subsidiary feelings to a focal awareness of the theatrical production itself. More specifically the trauma victim becomes a contributor to a creative script fashioned out of his “inchoate experience” of victimization thereby detaching that experience and transforming it via his/her imagination into an artistic creation filled with meaning. A central element in this process is the creation of a metaphor in which the “tenor”, certain of his/her “inchoate experiences”, which are of course of intrinsic interest, are combined with a “vehicle”, the script, also of intrinsic interest, which becomes a *focal* object resulting in a metaphor, a ‘story’ in which the adumbrated victimizing experiences become the fuel which give the story compelling emotional and intellectual power. The trauma victims, through *imagination, indwell* their story. Simultaneously they “surrender” themselves to it and are “carried away” by it, resulting in “a wholistic imaginative achievement of meaning” (M73, italics mine). The overarching frame within which this story takes place is a theatrical “play”, not incidentally a musical which by virtue of rhythm and vocals

provides a strong additional framing, through which the story is told. By virtue of the formal *subsidiary* elements of staging (lighting, sets, actors, directors, costumers, theatrical setting, music) the story is *detached* from but bears some “resemblance” to the trauma victim’s traumatizing experience. Precisely because it is *detached* from but still bears some resemblance to their traumatizing experience and because their attention has been drawn away from *focal* awareness of those experiences to the “play” itself they are able to overcome their “speechlessness” and articulate their feelings/thoughts in the enactment of their story. This explains why trauma victims’ involvement in theater arts is helpful in ameliorating the effects of trauma.

A very significant part of the process I have just described is its convivial nature. Theater is a supremely collaborative art form and provides victims of trauma an experience of solidarity, mutual recognition and respect for individual contributions. Trust becomes an absolute necessity for successful performance and a meaningful consequence of participation in what has been “set apart” from real life as an “artistic” enterprise. The convivial dimension of the theatrical experience outlined above is an unspoken part of the gestalt from within which the theatrical production emerges and is greatly enhanced by virtue of the fact that the focal object of the story which the trauma victims have created is derived from their shared experience making it that much more meaningful.

Although the gains made by trauma victims in programs such as those outlined here are very significant, according to Kolk they are not helpful for all victims of trauma. It is important to recall the two forms of self-awareness to which Kolk earlier referred: a self-awareness rooted in language which enables a narrative communication and a second form which monitors moment to moment self-awareness “... based primarily in the neural substrate of physical sensations connected to emotions”

(Kolk, 236). These two forms of self-awareness are integrally related but require separate attention for a fuller understanding.

In part two of this paper I will look at this second form of awareness from a Polanyian perspective. Doing so will allow us to delve more deeply into the subject of the embodiment of the self, including the so-called “mind-body problem”. The practice of trauma related therapy by humanistically oriented therapists like Kolk has resulted in discoveries which have direct bearing on how that problem may be conceived, not only confirming aspects of P&P’s perspective but by implication I believe usefully extending and enhancing a Polanyian understanding of embodiment.

PART TWO

Michael Polanyi and Bessel van der Kolk: The Embodiment of the Self

To be continued ...

Endnotes

¹*For a very illuminating discussion of the framing effect of play see A. Modell’s chapter titled “Play, Illusion and the Setting of Psychoanalysis” pp 23-43 of *Other Times, Other Realities*, referenced below.*

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