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Trauma, Contingency, and The Psychoanalytic Zero

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ABSTRACT

This article begins the examination of suffering and its relation to the experience of being human. Trauma is neither an experience nor an actual event, but the beginning of the "human" condition. The argument is illustrated through interwoven narratives of transgenerational trauma that arose in the psychoanalytic treatment of a traumatized patient whose parents were atomic bomb survivors in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It describes the patient's and analyst's surrender to the nameless universe in which the division between victim and victimizer is a production of contingency.

KEYWORDS

Traumatization; emptiness; psychoanalytic zero; surrender; victim-victimizer relationship; player-witness; taoism

During my psychoanalytic training in New York, one of the biggest issues for my personal analysis was my phobia of one picture—- a photo of a little girl in Hiroshima in 1945, who looked into the lens of the camera with empty eyes. The black and white picture showed the girl surrounded by burnt-out ruins; one precious life that had survived the atomic bomb. She showed no emotions, no feelings, and no fears. Her blankness was burned into my brain and seeing her image in my dreams often woke me up in the middle of the night.

In childhood, I was made to see many movies and photos of the Second World War at school and at home. Many of them were grotesque dead bodies and burned human faces. One day I encountered the little girl's photo. It did not look as horrible as the others; she was alive, with no visible injury. I could have found some hope in her picture, but what I felt instead was a deep fear and guilt. The photo was a symbol of my crime, my vulnerability, my craziness, and my victimization. Why was I so scared of seeing the photo? Who was she?

My late father was born in 1944. He was a committed activist during the student movement of the 1960s, fighting riot police throughout most of his college years. He disapproved of many aspects of his country and was especially critical of Japanese imperialism during the Second World War. Since my youngest years, he had taught me about Japan's actions during the Great War and forced me to view photos and movies of the destruction caused by the Great Tokyo Air Raid and the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I remember him shouting at me, "This is our crime. This is our sin," but only in reference to photos of dead or injured Japanese people. I do not remember him saying anything about other nationalities, whose countries were mercilessly invaded and bombarded by the Japanese army and navy before and during the Second World War. His twisted logic confused me. Who was I in these photos? Was I the victimizer or a victim? I have asked myself these questions many times in the years since but found no answer.

I knew that my paternal grandfather had been in Manchuria in the 1940s as a soldier in a mounted unit, although I knew nothing more in detail. After the war, he came home to Japan and became a police officer. A few days after my grandfather's funeral, when I was in junior high school, it occurred to me to wonder if there might have been some connection between my father's strong beliefs and my grandfather's military life. I asked relatives what my grandfather had said about the Great War, and

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how my father had talked about that period in his life, but my inquiries revealed nothing. No one had ever heard either of them speak about the war. My grandfather never talked about what he did in China and it seemed that no one had ever asked him what he saw there. It had been a taboo, not an incest taboo, but an intersubjective one (Togashi, 2016). So, was my grandfather a victimizer or victim? What about my father? Who were they?

"Human" Condition and Trauma

It is widely known that early in the history of psychoanalysis, trauma was not a reputable term in the psychoanalytic community. In the last two decades, however, there has been a reaction to this tradition and psychoanalysts have become more open to considering the role of trauma in human suffering (Huppertz, 2018). Relational groups, who deny "the myth of the isolated mind" (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992, 1994), place particular value on the idea of trauma.

Intersubjective theorists have emphasized that trauma is always and already a part of the historical, cultural, and social context in which it occurs (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992; Stolorow, 2007). They contend that all trauma can be called "epistemological trauma," in that "the effect of such a trauma is the shattering of confidence in one's own mind" (Atwood, 2011, p. 396). Although these are useful insights, this conception of trauma is still grounded in a Western perspective. When psychoanalysts refer to trauma, especially societal trauma caused by wars, natural disasters, and crimes, they implicitly claim that *something not-me* is wrong and that *something not-me* shatters something important *in me*. Their perspective includes, in itself, dichotomies and distinctions made between something which destroys me and the *me* who is destroyed; or between a wellfunctioning mind, before something happened and a malfunctioning mind as a result of something happening. This chapter examines trauma from a non-Western perspective, drawing on my own Asian cultural background, which rejects such differences.

Once we say that trauma is situated in an historical, cultural, and social context, we have to say that trauma *is* a human life, for emotional life in this context is no longer seen as an object that can be destroyed by something *not-me*. There are many types of traumatic events—natural disaster, war, social injustice, genocide, abuse, sexual violence, and other crimes—and the emotions that accompany them are destroyers as well as destroyed. A traumatic experience not only shatters human emotional experience but also *is* human emotional experience.

My understanding of trauma is influenced by *Taoism*, a philosophical tradition of Chinese origin that understands human suffering very differently from a Western view. *Taoism* presupposes the existence of *Tao*, the Way, the indefinable principle of the universe which is a reflection and manifestation of Nature. In *Taoism*, Nature is a dynamically continuous flow, infinitely changing and moving, and involving all aspects of being in the universe, a universe that has neither abstractions nor names. In this universe, there are no distinctions and all contradictions are resolved. Absence means being; being means absence. "Destroyer" is also "destroyed." *Taoists*, despite differences between particular schools, generally emphasize effortless action, "naturalness," and "spontaneity" which entails surrendering themselves to the nameless universe.

A human being attempts to avoid surrendering him or herself to the nameless universe by controlling and "naming" the world. A person attempts to prevent, escape, or understand the irrationality of a traumatic event by discovering its mechanism, making the trauma visible by naming its human condition. But in such efforts, the trauma creates suffering and shatters the person. One of my patients, who lost a beloved wife in a traffic accident, was preoccupied with the idea that, "I could have prevented the accident," and so tortured himself.

For *Taoists*, it is this human capacity for preoccupation—going against the flow of *Tao*—that creates a world of wounds and suffering. For them, "human life is a life of misery and a sad delusion" (Møllgaard, 2007, p.18) and the human life is trauma itself. In the human world's need for names and categories, *Tao* is divided and dichotomies emerge. "Not big" means "small," "not ugly" means "beautiful," and "not suffering" means "peace." Such is the "human" condition, the artificial "world that results in the neglect of the world qua world" (Møllgaard, 2007, p.17).

When a person fails to surrender to the nameless universe, they find themselves in the "human" traumatic world. Trauma, in this paradigm, is neither a human experience nor an actual event, but simply what a human life is, a life that becomes visible in the act of naming.

At this point, it is important to differentiate *trauma* from *traumatization*. The former is human life itself. Trauma creates the human world—including human suffering and anguish—but it does not necessarily lead to pathology or mental problems. Trauma can make a person aware of being in a particular world and awakens this awareness with powerful emotional impact. Without trauma, people would neither be able to see what the human world is like, nor play a role in the world.

Traumatization, on the other hand, is a psychological state in which a human mind or community is divided, and which creates mental illnesses in both individuals and communities. A traumatized person or community is preoccupied with division, identifying themselves as either "us" or "them," (Brothers, 2008) and dividing the world into "those who experienced it" and "those who did not," "those who were there" and "those who were not there," and "victim" and "victimizer." A person who is traumatized immediately gets busy identifying him or herself with a side.

I do not mean to suggest that a person who is not traumatized lives only in the nameless universe; he or she lives in the "human" world, with names and categories, as well. No one can fully escape from human preoccupations; no one avoids the temptation to organize the world by naming others, his environment, and him or herself. And yet, one is not *always naming*. A person who is not traumatized can, from time to time, give him or herself completely to the nameless universe. A traumatized person, by contrast, remains trapped in human division.

My late father was preoccupied with controlling history and society. He accused the Japanese people of crimes by describing those who were deeply wounded and bombarded by the atomic bombs. His confusing expression regarding the Second World War indicated that he was trapped between identifying with victims and victimizers, justice and injustice, and remained trapped in this oscillation through his entire lifetime. He positioned himself as a perpetrator; but behind the name which trapped him for his entire life, there was another name, *victim*, which remained unspoken. His discourse was always twisted, because he was a victimized perpetrator.

The minds of my entire family, including my late grandfather, were divided between events that could be spoken about and those which could not. The same can be said of Japanese society, culture, and our country. Japanese people often speak of their history as if it were separated into two different times—before and after the Great War—although they know that they make up one continuous history. Many people who were born before the Great War continued their lives during and after, yet they find it impossible to connect the two divided worlds. The names we use, "prewar" and "postwar," divide the universe and create a world in which the two can never be brought together. It is precisely in this sense that I can say that my grandfather, my father, and I have been traumatized; and my family and society—in fact, all Asian people, our countries and the times that we live in—have been traumatized, too.

How do we tell the victim from the victimizer, or tell who is on the side of justice or injustice? Picture a former Nazi who lives fifty years hidden away in a small town, certain that government or vigilante Nazi hunters are seeking him, jumping at shadows and fearing every knock on the door—is he a victim or victimizer?

Similarly, consider the Japanese medical officer who suffers chronic depression and nightmares and was never able to resume practicing medicine after the war because he participated in the production of biological weapons—victim or victimizer? Is the employee of the doomed nuclear plant in Fukushima during the Great East Japan Earthquake[1] a victim or a victimizer?

[1]The Great East Japan Earthquake struck the eastern half of Japan on March 11, 2011, and triggered a huge tsunami, which destroyed some of the emergency generating systems of the nuclear power plant located along the coast of Fukushima. From the 12th to the 15th of March, the plant underwent three nuclear meltdowns, hydrogen-air explosions, and the release of a great deal of radioactive material. By September 10, 2019, 15,898 people lost their lives, 2,531 people were missing, and 6,157 people were injured from the earthquake and tsunami (Emergency Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters of the National Police Agency, 2019). By November, 2019, in Fukushima Prefecture alone, 4,109 people had lost their lives, one person was missing, 183 people

We cannot answer these questions. None of these lives can be confined to such categorizations. It is coincidental that this person worked for the nuclear plant. Had he or she been born in a different place, or simply been rejected at a job interview, his or her life would have been completely different. The *Tao*, the nameless universe, makes no distinction between victim or victimizer, accuser or accused, perpetrator or sufferer. Such distinctions belong to the material world, and once traumatized, you are confined to one side or other of the divide.

In saying that trauma is human life itself, I mean that trauma is the *zero point* from which the state of our being is born and to which it is reduced (Togashi, 2017a, 2017b). Zero is neither the nameless universe nor emptiness, but it is the original touch point between a person and the world that has yet to be named, a world without categories. Although people are divided once they are traumatized, there are no divisions or categories *at the moment of traumatization*. Categories emerge *after* the trauma is visible and *named*. Before the trauma, a person might become anything: victim, victimizer, or non-participating bystander. They might survive or die.

Before the atomic bomb exploded over Hiroshima, no one could tell who would or would not be a survivor. Even regarding the pilot who dropped the bomb, it could not be said that his role was entirely of *his own choosing*; he might just as easily have been deployed in the European theater of war rather than the Asian, in the Navy rather than the Army Air Corps. Everything is subject to chance (Togashi, 2014a, 2014b).

I am not saying that a victim is a perpetrator. There is no question about the victimization of a person who is raped, abused, or tortured. I am saying that a victim could have been a perpetrator in another setting, just as a perpetrator could have been a victim in other circumstances. In the nameless universe, no one can say who might be a victim and who can be a perpetrator.

Nor am I saying that we are not responsible for what we do, but rather, paradoxically perhaps, I am claiming that we cannot deny our responsibility for any action because everything is coincidental. In other words, at the zero point of trauma, everyone is both player and witness. Like a "black hole/white hole" dyad, trauma is the origin point of the human world. It creates traumatization, of course, but also creates everything in the human world. Traumatized people, like my family, lose the infinite potential of the world by confining it to a certain form.

How can we heal our traumatization and make the confined and limited world open again for infinite growth potential? My answer is, if traumatization is based on naming and categorization, and naming and categorization creates suffering and destroys human potential, it is our responsibility to surrender ourselves to the nameless or category-less world—to become *player-witnesses* (*toji-sha*, in Japanese) in this traumatic world and take responsibility for our being. The player-witness is not a person who simply witnesses an event, but a person who knows that, under other circumstances, he or she could have taken any role, in that event or any other. When we stay in the divided world, we objectify and abstract ourselves and those belonging to not-our-side: "They are people who perpetrated war-crimes, but I am not;" "They were killed in the earthquake, but I was not;" and "They are unjust, but I am just." We may claim that we could not be a Hitler, that we are different from him, and disavow the part of ourselves which might have been a Hitler. But that part still exists and, under other circumstances, in another universe, we could be Hitler.

Human life is tragic. No one can resist the world's contingency. But if we allow ourselves to see that contingency, we can recognize that people are not categories, and everyone contains the potential to be victim, victimizer or bystander. In the potential field, there are no sides and we are all player-witnesses of the world.

In the psychoanalytic space, it is through this recognition that an analyst and patient can experience themselves on a shared path, and may find a space for human connection in the divided world. I refer to this space as "*the zero*." Only by surrendering ourselves to the nameless universe can

were injured, and 41,916 people were still evacuated due to the accident in the nuclear plant (Disaster Prevention Headquarter of Fukushima Prefecture, 2019).

human beings move beyond the differences between self and the other, between perpetrator, victim, and bystander.

Chiemi's Vignette

Chiemi, an elegant and intelligent female patient in her early sixties, came to see me in an attempt to understand her own life and her emotional conflicts with her mother. At the beginning of our therapeutic work, she expressed a fear of becoming crazy, as her mother had predicted, as well as anger against her mother, who was judgmental and disparaging.

Chiemi was the second child of three. She and her two brothers were born in Nagasaki, like her father, and grew up in Hiroshima, her mother's home. Chiemi said that she had idealized her father, who had passed away several years before she began working with me. For her, her father represented intelligence while her mother was a symbol of anti-intellectualism.

Chiemi's father, a famous professor of natural science, was taciturn and silent at home. Although Chiemi idolized him, she had few recollections of conversations with him. To her, her father was a silent person whose life was consumed by work. He supported many younger students, not only in their academic pursuits but also in their private lives. Chiemi's mother, on the other hand, was not an intellectual. She was a housekeeper whose only pride was in her personal appearance. She was high-maintenance, status-conscious, critical, and discriminatory towards anyone without a prominent academic career or wealthy background. Chiemi remembers her mother judging Chiemi's friends, and even humiliating them on many occasions.

Chiemi and I have worked together for almost ten years on a once a week basis, face to face. We've discussed many issues, including her relational patterns and their profound effects on her social life, her hatred and love for her mother, her expectations for her husband, and for me, and her disappointments in her friends, and me, and so on. Through this analytic process, she came to understand herself and her conflict with her mother, as well as improve her social relations and personal life. About four years into her treatment, she first asked a question that was to come up again and again, "what do people live for in this world?" She told me, "probably this was the real reason why I originally decided to come to see you. This question has been in my mind since childhood, but I was not able to speak of it when I first saw you."

At first, I considered this query to be an expression of her depression, powerlessness, and helplessness. Chiemi often complained about her close friends, saying "I have always worked for their benefit, but I no longer want to sacrifice myself. Time is precious, and I don't want to lose it for them anymore." I told her that this question indicated her profound disappointment in her relationships and her deep sense of loneliness. She agreed with my understanding, but kept raising the question, "what do people live for?"

During the course of our therapeutic journey, many traumatic events occurred in our community and our own lives. The Great East Japan Earthquake took place in 2011, and my parents in Fukushima were forced to move to another town. At that time, I was in a city far away from them. I did not go to help them immediately after the earthquake, and I criticized myself for being merely a bystander.

A few years later, I began a research project, interviewing survivors of the 9/11 attacks, the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake[2] and the Great East Japan Earthquake. I myself witnessed the 9/11 attacks while living in New York City, but I had refused to address the event. I never spoke about the attacks and never watched television programs about them. I behaved as if it had never happened until I embarked on this research. Soon after I began the project, my father passed away. Since I was forced to skip some of Chiemi's sessions to attend the funeral and related events, she knew that my father had died.

[2]The Great Hanshin Earthquake occurred on January 17, 1995, in Hyogo Prefecture, Japan. It measured 7.3 on the Richter scale. By May 19, 2006, 6,434 people lost their lives, three people were missing, and 40,092 people were injured (The Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake Memorial Disaster Reduction and Human Renovation Institution, 2016).

A few years later, Chiemi's mother died after several months of self-sacrificing care by Chiemi. A year after that, her town suffered a pair of natural disasters. Although Chiemi did not lose anything of importance, many friends and colleagues lost houses, cars, and other personal belongings. Some even died. One friend, who lived in the same region as Chiemi, lost her house and her husband—everything. In session, Chiemi related her shock at seeing such a random assignment of life and death, such a thin line between survivor and victim.

One day, Chiemi told me that she remembered, as a child, asking her father to tell her what he thought people lived for—the same question she repeatedly raised in her therapy. Her father, who usually did not express himself so explicitly, said, "People do not live *for* anything. They live for the sake of living. There is no more reason than this." Chiemi said she had not understood what he had meant at the time, but now she felt she did. Then she told me her father's history.

Chiemi's father was a teenager in Nagasaki when his town was struck by the atomic bomb in 1945. He was in the center of the city but, incredibly, was not severely injured. While escaping the damaged area, he was asked by a dying mother to take care of her baby. He carried the infant to a church, where a priest told him to leave the baby and take care of himself, which he did. Chiemi's father had never related this story to anyone, even his family, until the very moment of his death, almost sixty years later. On his deathbed he told his son that he would like to know if the baby lived, and if it had enrolled in a university to study. Although he did not express his regret verbally, this statement implicitly indicates that he had been living with a sense of guilt all through his life.

Chiemi heard the story a day before her father's death, but only now, through her therapeutic work, did she recognize how many areas of his life were organized around this experience: his devotion to his job and his students, his reticence, and his answer to Chiemi's question, "what do people live for in this world?" All emanated from the silence surrounding this episode in his childhood.

Chiemi and I discussed why she finally understood the importance of her father's story. She recognized that we were both player-witnesses of trauma across generations and times. Chiemi was no longer a simple observer of her father's life, but a person organized by, and in turn, organizing her father's life. The natural disasters she had experienced made her feel that human life is organized around contingency, and that anyone could become a victim, victimizer, or bystander. When Chiemi accepted being in such a world, she could finally live in the possibilities of her father's life.

A few sessions later, Chiemi told me a story about her mother, Fumie, who was also a survivor of the atom bomb. Toward the end of the war, almost all the students in Fumie's junior high school in Hiroshima were taken to the center of the city and ordered to help demolish buildings and houses to prevent fires in the wake of air raids. On the day before the bomb was dropped, a friend of Fumie's did not come to school because of a minor cold. Fumie told her teacher the reason for her friend's absence, and the teacher was very upset. He asked her to tell her friend to come to school next day, which she did. Fumie, however, got her period on that day, and her father kept her home. As a result, she witnessed the atomic cloud from her house, and a few days later learned that her friend had died in the blast. Fumie did not talk about this incident for a long time. It was when Chiemi was in her twenties that her mother told her the story.

One day, while they were out shopping, Fumie suddenly stopped and insisted that they take a different route on another street. Chiemi described her mother's face as sickly and pale as she gave vague explanations, saying that there was a person she did not want to see. Later, Chiemi learned that it was the street where Fumie's friend who was killed by the bomb had lived. Now, at last, Chiemi felt that she could make sense of her mother's judging and humiliating of Chiemi's friends. For Fumie, Chiemi's friendships must have reminded her of the guilt she had lived with since her childhood; and keeping Chiemi's friends away from her might have been Fumie's effort to proactively prevent Chiemi from traumatic regret. Chiemi had found another silence in her family.

Being a Player-Witness

Knowing her parents' experiences with the two atom bomb attacks, Chiemi was able to connect herself to the history of her family and the world. She no longer felt the strong emotional conflict toward her mother that she had experienced before. She felt that she had found the missing pieces, and no longer sensed strange shadows in her family.

What brought about this change? Was it that we had successfully analyzed Chiemi's past? Or that we had successfully reconstructed her life? You could say so, but I believe that our successes are less meaningful in creating this change than our *surrender*. What was required was for us to surrender ourselves to the original point of Chiemi's history, the *zero*.

All Chiemi's family members had been traumatized. Her father lived in a world organized around "a person who was abandoned and a person who abandoned. "Her mother lived in a world divided between "survivor and killed." It took all their energy throughout their lives to maintain silence about these divisions, yet still the traumatization was passed on to the next generation, a phenomenon described by Frie (2017). Their daughter did not know what human beings live for, but when she herself became a player-witness of trauma and the world's contingency, the divided worlds that had been trans-generated through her parents began to speak to each other. She was no longer a bystander or observer of her parents' lives because she recognized how she *could have been* them if she had been born in their time.

This change in Chiemi's perspective might not have occurred without my own experience of 9/11, the Great East Japan Earthquake, and my father's death. Without these experiences, I would have been merely an observer analyzing my patient's narratives, but through them I was also a player-witness of the traumatic world, a world in which all human beings are connected. Born in a different time, I could have been an a-bomb survivor, like the little girl in the photo of Hiroshima, who looked into the lens of the camera with empty eyes; Chiemi could have been a survivor of the Great East Japan Earthquake; her mother could have been killed by an a-bomb and her father also killed, together with the infant in his arms. No one knows how they might have lived or died in a different context, but everyone knows that there are alternate possibilities in their lives. At the point of zero, we can say that there are infinite possibilities, and that it is the only point in which all people can be connected to each other.

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