Resilience in the face of shattering trauma: On the road to authenticity

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Being human is not a once-and-for-all state but is rather a continuous-to-become process of choices made in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty. In a world that does not always make sense, existence is contingent and unpredictable, which makes any person's search for meaning puzzling and challenging. Trauma often multidimensionally shatters previously internalized structures of the self, distorting emotional, cognitive, somatic, and interpersonal functioning of the individual. This erodes an individual's perception of the world as being meaningful, manageable, and comprehensible. Freedom, responsibility, competency, continuity, control, growth, and actualization, get entangled, exacerbated, and distorted. An answer to the very fundamental and identity-related query of the "Who Am I" questions gets dramatically echoed. The more deprived a child is, the more intensely the child tends to fantasize about ideal parents and family, and thus the distortion of self image becomes more grave. Some seriously maltreated individuals caught between a desperate wish to be and at the same time to not be themselves, may slump into dissociative or depressive habitual states, or may construct self-related phantasms, i.e. a specific type of illusionary de-contextualization of the self; a structured fantasy that expresses the desire of another, better, safer, or more fulfilling life. Despite the fraught and difficult path outlined above, yearning to answer the "Who Am I" question is central to a person's ability to find the authentic human being, a yearning that most likely reflects that person's deepest anxiety: the anxiety of failure to encounter oneself in an authentic way, of not recognizing whom one really is, and of not nurturing the true self. The process of searching for oneself is based on the principle that the patient is a phenomenologist, proceeding in his or her own way and individual pace. Also, it implies that understanding takes place from within and cannot by imposed by anyone, therapist included. The process of searching for personal resilience for most clients resembles epiphany, which is often preceded by periods of neurotic anxiety, depression, and inner turmoil, as well as exacerbated by the crisis of meaninglessness and guilt related to closed possibilities. Gradually an individual may overcome and embrace some of the most dreadful aspects of the human existence such as aloneness, groundlessness, mortality, and freedom, but moreover one may learn little by little how to serve, to appreciate relationships, to enjoy simple moments, as well as to take responsibility for past decisions, their current ramifications, and future choices.

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