



AN IMAGINATIVE TURN IN PSYCHOANALYSIS: COMMENTARY ON PETER MADURO'S "IN DEFENSE OF ILLUSION: CREATIVE AGENCY, OR THE IMAGINATION, IN THE TOLERANCE OF EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY AND GRIEF"

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This commentary of Maduro's "In Defense of Illusion: Creative Agency, or the Imagination, in the Tolerance of Existential Anxiety and Grief" underscores the role of creative imagination in confronting enduring traumatic loss. It argues for the possibility of achieving the paradox of holding and living in simultaneously a kind of hope and dread in which one's life, and perhaps one's culture, has been destroyed, on one hand, and in which one's sense of one's future life might be reimbued with purpose, value, and a wish to live, on the other hand.

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It wasn't easy to raise myself from the dead—it's an expensive pastime. — Magda Szabo

Everything you can imagine is real. — Pablo Picasso

How is one to face the reality that a way of facing reality is coming to an end? — Jonathan Lear

*M*aduro traverses a wide swath of psychoanalytic and philosophical ground, the crown jewel of which, in my view, is his underscoring the role of creative imagination in the potential refashioning and rebuilding of one's

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life in the aftermath of fracturing trauma and the resulting decimation of one's emotional world and, at times, even one's community and culture. Many of us have witnessed our patients' lives traumatically uprooted, disassembled, and/or otherwise desiccated into a granularity hardly recognizable. And we have witnessed, through history, communities and civilizations similarly pummeled into hardly recognizable simulacra of their original and robust forms of life. The indigenous people and civilizations of North America are one such example of tragic personal and cultural devastation at the hands of settler colonization. In this discussion, I aim to highlight Maduro's main arguments that provide essential scaffolding for his essential thesis: that "human creative agency," arising out of the ashes of abject trauma and loss of one's life as one once knew it, implies "illusion-crafting" or imagination—a kind of resurrective imagination that is exceptionally developmental, as opposed to antidotal, defensive, or evasive of the "truth-bearers," anxiety and grief—the truth-bearers that necessarily emerge from what, when authentically confronted, Jonathan Lear called our "ontological vulnerability" (p. 50).

In this commentary, I first briefly review Maduro's several main ideas and questions and then highlight and elaborate upon what I think is, as I said, the crown jewel of his argument today—human creative agency. There is much for us to learn from his extending his ideas about the vicissitudes of annihilating trauma and relationally derived affect tolerance into realms of what Lear (2006) referred to as "radical hope": "It is basically the hope for *revival*: for coming back to life in a form that is not yet intelligible" (p. 95). I also wish to examine some of the clinical implications of his main thesis—the role and employment of creative imagination in clinical psychoanalysis.

TRUTH-BEARERS AND EXISTENTIAL VULNERABILITY

Maduro avers that anxiety and grief are truth-bearers, that they disclose central truths about the human condition, included in which, Maduro says, is our involuntary embeddedness in our personal, relational, and world situatedness—what Heidegger (1962), whom he cites, referred to as *thrownness*. Indeed we are thrown into life situations for which we are largely not responsible and yet for which we must assume responsibility and thereby only then enjoy some margin of what Heidegger referred to as *finite freedom*, else suffer the consequences of dissociation, emotional numbness, or the quagmire of "why oh why do bad things always happen to me—I have no say." As a complexity theory enthusiast, this rings true to me. Indeed, each of us can be understood as an emergent property and product of larger bio-social-cultural-relational systems of which each of us remains a constituent and in which each of us is embedded and uniquely situated. And one cornerstone of a contemporary psychoanalysis is indeed the acknowledgment of such situatedness—being open to how our lives *feel* to us, what they might *mean* for us, where and how we *find* ourselves, and generally speaking, to paraphrase Levenson (1989), to think about what the hell is going on around here. Maduro tells us, "psychoanalysis is centrally interested in how, and whether, people

bear and affectively embody their existential truths” (p. XX). And I would add, vis-à-vis Maduro’s invocation of “human creative agency” (p. XX) that psychoanalysis is also centrally concerned with fostering new lives in the wake of emotional dismemberment, marginalization, and the dissolution of what once may have been a relatively sustainable, generative, and fulfilled life and culture. To quote Ken Corbett (2001) quoting Prior Walter, we all want “more life!” including our patients and us psychoanalysts. How might “more life” emerge from a life destroyed?

In that regard, Maduro poses two principal questions. First, the more explicit one: “What are the conditions that facilitate, or obstruct, the ownership of existential anxiety and grief, and the truths they encode?” (p. XX). And the second, perhaps more implicit one: What might serve as an essential conduit through which we might not only bear and survive such anxiety and grief, but refashion a life, heretofore unimagined in the face of crushing emotional trauma, “radical disillusionment” (as Maduro says), and personal and/or community annihilation?

Lear (2006) took up this latter question in his investigation of the decimation, by settler colonists, of the Crow tribe (among many others) and the last remaining tribe leader, Chief Plenty Coups. Plenty Coups’ narrative is as chilling as it was illuminating of the aftermath of a kind of traumatic disillusionment that dismantles one’s way of life and one’s values such that they are no longer recognizable. “When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this, *nothing happened*” (p. 2). The “after this, nothing happened” speaks to lives frozen between living lives, as Maduro phrases it, within “decontextualizing illusions” of absolutized invulnerability, illusions of solidity and certainty, *and* communal values and rituals that make sense, on the one hand, and the conflagration of having such “illusions” stripped to the bone, leaving only ashes and caricatured remnants, on the other hand. How does one now go on, as a Crow? How does one now go on as a radically disillusioned person, anxiety- and grief-stricken, if one’s sense of going-on-ness, in which *things happened*, had been rooted in previous, now destroyed, developmentally robust ways of living? For Lear, and most certainly for Plenty Coups, if planting coup sticks (a nonviolent, ritualistic form of claiming victory over one’s enemies) is no longer an option, where and how now will a sense of self-esteem, integrity, honor, and value emerge for members of one’s tribe? Most certainly, after devastating, traumatic injury to the soul, *nothing happens*. How might we, and/or our traumatized patients, move on, or move through and into a different, dare I say, renewed life? Herein Lear posits some wisdom—or perhaps it was Plenty Coups, who conveyed it to him. Lear writes,

For if the death is not acknowledged there will most likely be all sorts of empty ways of going on “as a Crow.” Only if one acknowledges that there is no longer a genuine way of going on *like that* might there arise new genuine ways of going on *like that*. (p. 51)

This includes the nonevasive anxiety-, grief-, and disillusionment-tolerance of which Maduro speaks. Perhaps alternatively phrased, if we can’t make sense of a life

destroyed, how can we envision and refashion a life that makes sense? I think this is the core and essence of what Maduro is getting at, and what he is telling us about what we might do with our patients, how we might *be* with our patients. To begin to answer these questions, if with enormous caution at the risk of delusion-fabrication, involves living in, experiencing, and tolerating two intensely discrepant, if not incommensurable worlds. To explore this, I want to share first a little background about incommensurable worlds, individuality, and the value in tolerating a paradox.

INDIVIDUALIZED SELFHOOD AND AN EMERGING PARADOX

Maduro liberally draws from Stolorow (2014) and his well-known conceptualizations of human life situatedness and his premise that to have the courage to dwell within the collapsed and desiccated emotional world of another is, first, to help foster a sense of ownership of said world and, vitally, to offer a relational bridge, one that effectively signals, you are not alone in this darkness, indeed, we *are* “siblings in the same darkness” (Stolorow, 2009), and I am here with you. Maduro highlights Stolorow’s focus on how, exactly, a sense of ownership and hence true individuality, or “individualized selfhood,” emerges out of the context of trauma. Following Stolorow, I have elsewhere taken this question up: How *does* one’s sense of individuality emerge and continue to grow? I certainly agree with Maduro and with Stolorow that an experiential selfhood emerges through understanding and validating the person’s distinctive affectivity, the truth-bearers, rendering that precious sense of mineness or ownership of one’s experiential world, however traumatized and/or destroyed it may be. What has been handed me, that into which I have been thrown, is indeed mine, or, with much emotional tolerance, self-reflection, and hard work at self integration, *becomes* mine, over time. I want to add that experiential selfhood comes to light through examining, grasping, and articulating one’s sense of self and world contexts and our relentless embeddedness in them, in other words, through owning, as Maduro says, our *thrown relationality*. Just as Brandchaft, Doctors, and Sorter (2010) asserted that early authority figures can hijack a felt sense of mineness of one’s life, equally so can they subvert an otherwise developing sense of being a contextualizing and contextualized individual (Maduro, 2008).

Moreover, elsewhere (Coburn, *in press*) I addressed the complementarity (Aron, 2006) of shifting self states, each carrying emotional convictions that at times seem opposed. For example, one being that I am an individual, singular, and relatively context-free, someone with agency, personal freedom, and self ownership, and the other being that I am hopelessly and radically ensconced in a life context that is not of my own making and that has determined who I am and how I feel, how I experience self and world. Previously I stated,

Where are the agency, authorship, ownership, and free will in the contextualized person, with himself or herself, his/her experiential world, being a product and property of larger relational systems—complex systems that are not simply

originary but are ongoing and unrelenting as well? Are there ways to think about the notion of individuality and individual experience without falling back into a one-person (or even two-person) model of thinking and practicing? This is the complex paradox to which Harris (2013) referred in her comment: ... there is no single problem giving more worry, in every branch of psychoanalysis, than the question of how the system and the person co-mingle, co-construct, and evolve....theorists are trying to establish the site or purview or habitation of the individual while living and practicing and theorizing in the full absorption of the porousness and intersubjective experience of any living beings ... (p. 700).” (Coburn, [in press](#))

And by extension, given our inherent existential vulnerabilities and finitude, are there ways to think about achieving (or perhaps I should say, *regaining*) some sense of stability, going-on-ness, hope, and passion for life, in the face of trauma, without falling into a life of fraudulence and delusion (entirely void of having been traumatically disillusioned)?

In the context of the thrownness-and-agency dichotomy, I have argued, as alluded to earlier, that to hold both dimensions of experience—that of being radically contextualized, thrown, and intensely situated, on one hand, and that of being agentic, free, and self-owning, on the other hand—reflected an advance in one’s sense of experiential, individualized selfhood. And similarly, following that and highlighting what I believe Maduro envisions, I would propose that to live in trauma and personal and cultural devastation *and* simultaneously imagine that one can reenvision and refashion some sense of a new life means having to live in the paradox of destruction and restoration. I think to preemptively leap to restoration is to live in antidotes and illusions that are truly false and bound for more disaster. I think to remain quagmired in trauma alone, where that is all there is, is to remain in the realm of *after this, nothing happened*. I believe that the “human creative agency” of which Maduro speaks—the “illusion-crafting”—is not one of false illusions or temporary antidotes, the pabulum of “don’t worry, things will get better, just look on the bright side.” Rather, it is the use of honest imagination, “generative and life-expansive,” that allows for the potential for a “radical hope” as Lear (2006) described. By that I think Lear meant, in part, the courage to imagine a new life, with new personal and cultural values somehow emergent that cannot yet be specifically envisioned. This is not exactly restoration, in the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s sense of the term, but a sense that original values and dignity might materialize in a different form. And is this possible? Maduro thinks so, and I do as well. Perhaps it requires living with a different kind of complex paradox, one in which one’s life, and perhaps one’s culture, has been destroyed, and one in which one’s sense of one’s future life might be reimbued with purpose, value, and a wish to live. I think this is what psychoanalysts might strive to do, however unwittingly; that is, being willing to dwell within the darkness present, yes, but also being willing to look for signs of new life, or illusion-crafting, not too hastily discarding it as defensive or antidotal. As Maduro says, he has his eye on “the developmental function

of decontextualizing illusion” (p. XX), not one that is evasive of the truth-bearers and the truths they bear but rather one that perhaps affords us to hold both our life and our demise, our hope and our dread, simultaneously. Clinically this is a tricky affair, especially for less experienced clinicians, as the line between pabulum and true illusion-crafting can be ever so fine and hard to recognize.

FATHER-LOSS

Maduro refers to our irrevocable context-embeddedness as a *thrown relationality*, thereby emphasizing our human connections and relationships in our contextualist sensibilities, implicit in which is an existential vulnerability like no other—what he calls “embeddedness vulnerability,” coextensive I believe with Lear’s “ontological vulnerability” (p. 50). Each of us is quintessentially vulnerable: We are subject to harm, to death, and perhaps more horrific, to the loss of vital connections with loved ones. Indeed, the latter is Maduro’s early and continuing life experience of father-loss and is the fabric of our lives, however conscious we may or may not be of it. Derrida (2001) was onto this when he wrote,

To have a friend, to look at him, to follow him with your eyes, to admire him in friendship, is to know in a more intense way, already injured, always insistent, and more and more unforgettable, that one of the two of you will inevitable see the other die. One of us, each says to himself, the day will come when one of the two of us will see himself no longer seeing the other That is the ... infinitely small tear, which the mourning of friends passes through and endures even before death. (p. 207)

Maduro’s early father-loss, traumatic and radically disillusioning, brought into bold relief a “heartbreaking exposure to the vulnerabilities of love-bonds” (p. XX). He tells us,

I was struck not only with grief, but terrible anxiety about how to see the world going forward since both the agency and content of the way I had seen it to date had been crushed by the existential bomb that fell on my family’s head. (p. XX)

Recall: “... the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this, nothing happened” (Lear, 2006, p. 2). How to move forward? Next, Maduro was pummeled further by what is exponentially traumatic: the turning of a blind eye toward existential anxiety and grief that necessarily follows in the wake of such radical disillusionment. The truth-bearers were not welcome and had the door slammed in their face. As Maduro says, “My existential, physical, and emotional vulnerability could not find a home within this maternal life-world of invulnerable denial” (p. XX). And for Maduro, the repercussions were far-reaching: Identifying and needing to ensure a solid connection with one upon whom one must rely and who

slams the door in the face of the truth-bearers exact an enormous toll—what he came to see “as a form of madness”—one in which the truth-bearers of Angst and grief become relegated to the halls of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.), pathological disorders in need of fixing. Maduro’s personal psychoanalytic journey, however, indeed bore welcome fruit, as some sense of faith in his creative agency and imagination—his illusion-crafting capacity—returned. Here I think Maduro is getting at, and is able to experience, the capacity to entertain the paradox to which I referred earlier—that is, the capacity to hold and live in simultaneously a kind of hope and dread of enormous proportions. I deeply respect and admire Maduro’s courage in all of this.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

How might we not throw out the imagination baby with the disavowal bathwater? How might we think about our efforts, as psychoanalysts, to invite such paradoxical dimensions of experiencing into our therapeutic relationships? How might we locate that fine line, alluded to earlier, between emotional pabulum and the radical hope of genuine illusion-crafting? I cannot say I really know, but one recent clinical exchange comes to mind. My 50-year-old female patient, Marilyn, an exceptionally successful corporate executive and divorced 15 years ago, recently lost her 22-year-old son, Jason, who was headed for medical school. He was her only child. Tragically Jason was caught up in a bar fight, which was terminated quickly by the restaurant staff but then soon thereafter resumed on a dark street nearby. His attacker bludgeoned him to death with a tire iron and then mutilated his body. Marilyn remained in shock for a long time, dragging her ghostly self to her twice-weekly sessions with me, and not talking much. In addition to the trauma, the grief, and the tragedy of it all—which continue to haunt me—what emerged after a few weeks was a fact she had never before consciously conceptualized: that after her divorce years ago, her sole purpose of her high-pressured work life was to provide some sense of financial future and security for her son. In an unformulated way, she realized only now, this had been her purpose for working so hard. Now she had no purpose to return to work. Why? Why return to a work life the sole purpose of which, essentially, was to provide for her son’s future? Here was Marilyn: After this (the loss of her son), *nothing happened*, nothing was worth anything.

As we spoke in detail about her son, his accomplishments, his fears, his relationships, his warmth and kindness toward others, she began to express a concern for a best friend of his, John, whom Jason had left behind. He, too, was devastated and had become ghost-like. In the brief interludes between her sobbing, her guilt and self-recriminations for not being able to protect her son, her numbness, and her now utter lack of meaning, Marilyn would express deep concerns for John and began wondering what she might do for him. For brief moments, she brightened, but only for such brief moments. These fleeting moments caught my eye, and I tried to expand our conversations into those realms in which she imagined she could do

something for John, help him in *his* traumatic loss and grief. I commented eventually that, whereas she now had no sense of purpose in her work, or in her life really, her concern for John and her sense that perhaps she could do something to help him were entry points into some sense of purpose, of being able somehow to move ahead, a radical hope of sorts. In brief, she ultimately followed through with some of her ideas about helping John, including texting, calling, and visiting with him on a routine basis. She also considered providing financial support for him, as his parents struggled putting him through college, and for Marilyn, money was not an obstacle. I supported her in her considering that she may have a new, emerging purpose in her life, however fleeting it may be. But I wasn't optimistic, and I did not express optimism. I simply tried to stay with her experience and her personal sense of direction, when there was one. Herein, it seems to me, there was a hint of her beginning to live in a strange kind of paradox—one in which she was destroyed and had no purpose (she and her life would never be the same) and yet one in which she was beginning to envision an alternative purpose, one centered on Jason's best friend, at least for now. I dwelled, as best I could, within her traumatic grief but also tried to support any signs of hope and life that emerged during our sessions—in this instance, her concern and potential purpose vis-à-vis her son's friend, John. Obviously, this was a galaxy away from any sense of a restored or renewed life for Marilyn—how could that be otherwise?—but it was something other than just darkness and devastation. If Marilyn could hold both in her experiential world, might this be something worth living for? Something to counteract her otherwise likely suicide? She doesn't talk about wanting to die as much as she used to, but only time will tell. Radical hope, according to Lear (2006), "is a daunting form of commitment: to a goodness in the world that transcends one's current ability to grasp what it is" (p. 100).

CONCLUSION

Imagination need not be delusional, dissociative, or disavowing. It is arguably an integral part of living a finite, anxious, even grief-stricken, and always-vulnerable life that senses, paradoxically, the potential for a renewed future not yet envisioned.

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