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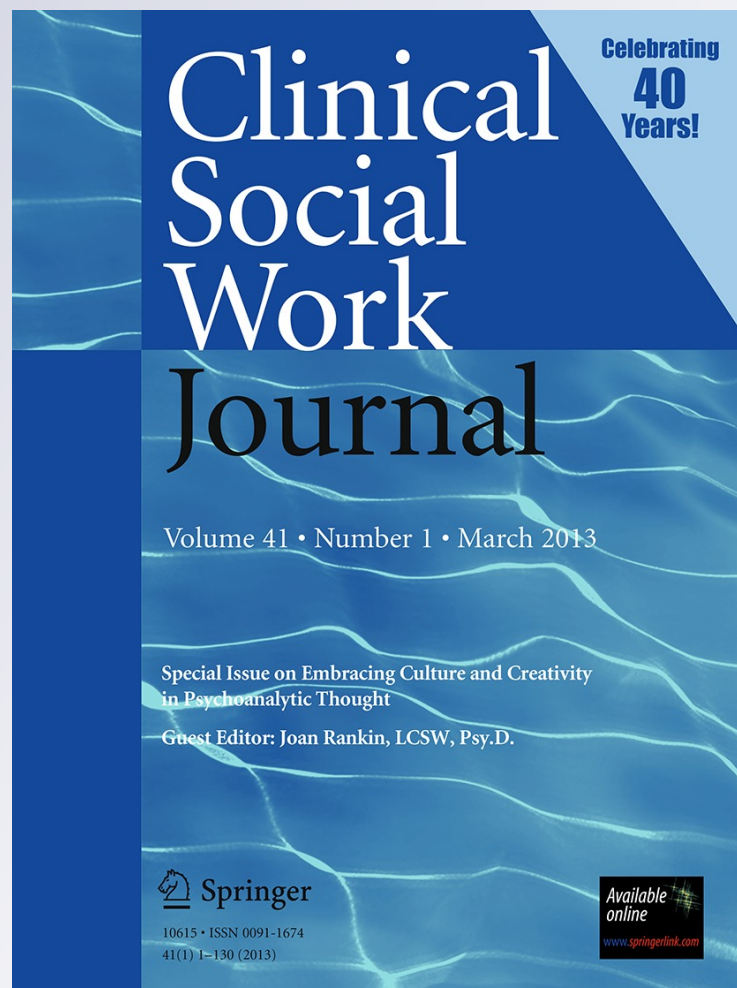
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Blues and Emotional Trauma

Robert D. Stolorow · Benjamin A. Stolorow

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Abstract The process of bringing the visceral, bodily aspect of emotional experience into language plays a vital role in the working through of painful emotional states. Such visceral-linguistic unities are achieved in a dialogue of emotional understanding, and it is in such dialogue that experiences of emotional trauma can be held and transformed into enduring and namable painful feelings. The blues is a wonderful example of such dialogue. In the unifying experience of the blues, songwriter, performers, and listeners are joined in a visceral-linguistic conversation in which universally traumatizing aspects of human existence can be communally held and borne.

Keywords Blues · Emotional trauma · Emotional understanding · Existential vulnerability · Slavery

Music as Schopenhauer conceived it [speaks] ... directly out of the 'abyss' as its most authentic, elemental, nonderivative revelation.—Friedrich Nietzsche

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I can't stand living, but I'm scared of dying, but Old Man River, he just keeps rolling along.—Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II

With roots in African music, the blues was born in the Mississippi delta as a distinctively African American musical genre in response to the de-humanizing traumas of slavery and its aftermath. It has origins in spirituals, work songs, field hollers, etc., all of which are types of music associated with enslaved people attempting to deal with their painful situation. Although blues is a uniquely African American music, it has a uniquely universal appeal. There is something in the blues, and in music with qualities that derive from the blues, that people can relate to. What are these qualities? Irrespective of whether people who relate to the blues are truly able to relate to the collective historical trauma of African Americans, there seems to be something expressed in the music that strikes an emotional chord in people from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. What is this something? And why is the blues universally compelling? That is the mystery—that people of many different cultures respond to the blues and to the “bluesy feeling” prevalent in other music.

In this article, we try to show that there is something about the blues that allows us to come face to face with universally traumatizing dimensions of human existence. Indeed, the music itself may be seen as a process of working through such trauma (musicians use the phrase “working it out”). How does the blues put us in touch with the universally traumatizing aspects of the human condition? We will look for answers both in the blues' lyrical aspects (such as themes of irony, the absurdity and burdensomeness of existence, hopelessness with hope) and musical qualities (rhythm, pitch-bending, the bluesy sound produced by shifts and ambiguities between major and

minor keys). First, however, we must explore the nature of emotional trauma itself.

Emotional Trauma

Emotional trauma is an experience of unendurable emotional pain. Robert Stolorow (2007) in his book *Trauma and Human Existence* has claimed that the unbearability of emotional suffering cannot be explained solely, or even primarily, on the basis of the intensity of the painful feelings evoked by an injurious event. Emotional pain is not pathology—it is inherent to the human condition (we will have more to say about this in later paragraphs). Painful emotional states become unbearable when they cannot find a “relational home”—that is, a context of human understanding—in which they can be shared and held. Severe emotional pain that has to be experienced alone becomes lastingly traumatic and usually succumbs to some form of emotional numbing. This numbing flight from unendurable emotional pain is vividly illustrated by some verses of a bluesy song, “Numb,” written by Stephanie Stolorow and performed by her and her brother Benjamin Stolorow under the name “Stoli Rose”:

How do I get numb?
 How do I get numb?
 How do I get numb?
 How do I get numb?
 Because I can't stand all this feeling
 anymore

Lord hand me a gun
 Lord hand me a gun
 Lord hand me a gun
 Lord hand me a gun
 Because I can't stand all this feeling
 anymore

In contrast, painful feelings that are held in a context of human understanding gradually become more bearable and can eventually be included in one's sense of whom one experiences oneself as being.

Consider the following clinical illustration—a fictionalized composite. A young woman who had been repeatedly sexually abused by her father when she was a child began an analysis with a female analyst-in-training whom Robert Stolorow was supervising. Early in the treatment, whenever the patient began to remember and describe the sexual abuse, she would display emotional reactions that consisted of two distinct parts, both of which were entirely bodily. One was a trembling in her arms and upper torso, which sometimes escalated into violent shaking. The other was an intense flushing of her face. On these occasions, the

analyst was quite alarmed by her patient's shaking and was concerned to find some way to calm her.

Robert had a hunch that the shaking was a bodily manifestation of a traumatized state and that the flushing was a bodily form of the patient's shame about exposing this state to her analyst, so he suggested to his supervisee that she focus her inquiries on the flushing rather than the shaking. As a result of this shift in focus, the patient began to speak about how she believed her analyst viewed her when she was trembling or shaking: Surely her analyst must be secretly regarding her with disdain, seeing her as a damaged mess of a human being. As this belief was repeatedly disconfirmed by her analyst's responding with understanding rather than contempt, both the flushing and the shaking diminished in intensity. The traumatized states actually underwent a process of transformation from being exclusively bodily states into ones in which the bodily sensations came to be united with words. Instead of only shaking, the patient began to speak about her terror of annihilating intrusion.

The one and only time the patient had attempted to speak to her mother about the sexual abuse, her mother shamed her severely, declaring her to be a wicked little girl for making up such lies about her father. Both the flushing of the patient's face and the restriction of her experience of terror to its nameless bodily aspect were heir to her mother's shaming. Only with a shift in her perception of her analyst from one in which her analyst was potentially shaming like the mother had been to one in which the analyst was accepting and understanding could the patient's emotional experience of her traumatized states shift from an exclusively bodily form to an experience that could be felt and named as terror.

How the process of bringing bodily forms of emotional pain into linguistic dialogue is crucial to the working through of emotional trauma, and how this process is uniquely facilitated by the blues, are the focus of later sections.

The Therapeutic Power of the Blues

Having discussed emotional trauma in terms of its context-embeddedness, we turn now to its existential significance—how it is implicated in the human condition in general. Robert Stolorow (2007) has proposed in his book that the existential meaning of emotional trauma lies in the shattering of what he calls the “absolutisms of everyday life” (p. 13)—the system of illusory beliefs that allow us to function in the world, experienced as stable, predictable, and safe. Such shattering is a massive loss of innocence, exposing the inescapable dependence of our existence on a universe that is unstable and unpredictable and in which no

safety or continuity of being can be assured. Emotional trauma brings us face-to-face with our existential vulnerability—our vulnerability to suffering, injury, illness, death, and loss—possibilities that define our existence and that loom as constant threats. Because we are limited, finite, mortal beings, trauma is a necessary and universal feature of our all-too-human condition.

In our clinical vignette, we alluded to the role played by the process of bringing the visceral, bodily aspect of emotional experience into language in the working through of painful emotional states. Such visceral-linguistic unities—unities of bodily sensations with words, of “gut” feelings with names—are achieved in a dialogue of emotional understanding, and it is in such dialogue that experiences of emotional trauma can be held and transformed into endurable and namable painful feelings. The blues are a wonderful example of such dialogue. The lyrics, of course, provide the words that name the particular experience of trauma. The more formal aspects of the music seem universally to evoke the visceral dimension of emotional pain. In the unifying experience of the blues, songwriter, performers, and listeners are joined in a visceral-linguistic conversation in which universally traumatizing aspects of human existence can be communally held and borne. In experiencing the blues, we are joined together as “brothers and sisters in the same dark night” (Vogel 1994, p. 97).

Three “Clinical” Illustrations—the Role of Lyrics

We have claimed that emotional trauma puts us in touch with our mortality—we all know that we will die, but we don’t know when. These facts about our existence evoke conflicting feelings, and such ambivalence about our mortality often plays a central part in the lyrics of the blues. Consider the following illustration from an untitled song written by an unknown songwriter:

I’m goin’ to lay my head on some
lonesome railroad track
I’m goin’ to lay my head on some
lonesome railroad track
and when the train come along, I’ll
snatch my damn head back

A first impression might be that the songwriter/singer is expressing a conflict about escaping from suffering through suicide. But we think a deeper interpretation is also possible—that traumatic suffering has put the songwriter/singer in touch with his or her mortality and with the existential fact that he will certainly die, but at an unknown time. Suicide can be a way of ending the anguish of not knowing, by taking control of one’s death

and making it happen voluntarily. The agonizing uncertainty of when death will occur is thereby replaced by certainty. But the above lyrics reflect the songwriter’s/singer’s ambivalence about such a solution—he wants to end the dreadful uncertainty, but he does not really want to die! This ambivalence or paradox as it is expressed in the lyrics gives the song a quality of tragic irony, a quality often conveyed by the blues. Our existence is revealed as absurd—too painful for us to bear, but too precious to us to end.

Here is a more extensive illustration from a song by Louisiana Red, a.k.a. Iverson Minte called “Too Poor to Die.”

Last night I had a dream
I dream I died
The undertaker came
To carry me for the ride
I couldn’t afford a coffin
Embalmin’ kinda high
I jumped off my deathbed
Cause I too poor to die

I dream at the cemetery
I couldn’t afford enough
To pay the gravediggers
To cover me up
It cost a lot of money
Cause they was union men
I guess before I die
I better think again...
I’m too poor to go lay down and die

The absurdity of our finite, mortal existence is clearly captured in these lyrics. Louisiana Red, obviously traumatized by the suffering of poverty, anticipates his death in his dreams. But the poverty that traumatizes him renders him “too poor to go lay down and die”—he can’t afford a coffin, embalming, gravediggers, or (in a later verse) to grease the devil’s palm—so he jumps off his deathbed and evades death. In a twist of tragic irony, the very same poverty that puts him in touch with his mortality provides him with the means for escaping it, and simultaneously it becomes the focus of his lament.

The heavy burdensomeness of finite human existing is captured in a song written by Willie Dixon with the title, “One More Mile to Go.”

It’s been a hard desert journey
And I don’t have to cry no mo’
Baby keep yo’ light a-burnin’
So your man will know the score

I did wrong when I took a gamble
You know I bet my money wrong

I was bettin' on my baby
And my baby wasn't at home

One mo' mile
One mo' mile to go

These lyrics contain a rich interweaving of the existential themes we have been discussing. First, there is a longing to find relief from the burdensomeness and painfulness of human existing—from the “hard desert journey.” “One mo' mile to go” is a line reminiscent of the similar mournful lament, “All my trials, Lord, soon be over,” from a well-known bluesy folk song. Second, the lyrics point to a basic aspect of our existential vulnerability—we need connections to other people—people who keep a “light a-burnin'” for us to help us find our way in life. But the others with whom we are deeply connected are also finite, mortal beings, and so we are constantly threatened with the possibilities of traumatic disappointments, rejections, and losses. And third, the lyrics point to a central dimension of our human limitedness—we can never forecast in advance the outcome of the life's decisions we make: “I was bettin' on my baby, and my baby wasn't at home.” Because of the limitedness of our ability to know and predict the future with certainty, human existing is always a “gamble”; we are always at risk.

Musical Characteristics of the Blues

The blues also has musical qualities that communicate the visceral aspects of emotional trauma. In music, one of the most important expressive devices is the use of tension and release. The tension and subsequent release can be melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic. Emotionally expressive music tends to have a greater degree of musical tension, which makes the release more effective. One of the ways in which tension is created in the blues is called “pitch-bending.”

The blues started out as a mainly vocal music. Thus, in instrumental blues the musician will try to imitate the sound of the human voice on his or her instrument. Pitch-bending is a technique that is used by both vocalists and instrumental musicians. It plays on our ear being accustomed to hearing melodies composed of pitches, or notes, that relate to a key. A key is comprised of a series of usually 7 adjacent notes (as in the major scale) that are fixed. Blues musicians will slide up or down in between pitches of a key, thus “bending” the notes and creating tension.

Pitch-bending gives rise to an ambiguity between major and minor keys. Traditional Western harmony has rules that provide clarity as to whether a piece or tune is in a major or minor key. This clarity is built on the certainty

that pitches will more or less be in tune. Blues musicians intentionally sing or play around the pitches of the key to create tension. Then, at just the right moment the musician will resolve the tension created by the pitch being out of tune by sliding up or down to the note that is in the “correct” key. It is easy to get a sense of pitch-bending by watching a great guitar player play the blues. The guitarist slides his or her finger up and down the fingerboard while keeping the vibrating string depressed. The shortening or lengthening of the vibrating portion of the string will alter the pitch. A skilled player can use this technique to approach the notes that are in the “correct” key by sliding into them. Tension is created, because, en route to the note that is in this key, the pitch that is actually heard is in between notes in the key. During this “in-between time,” there is a build-up of tension, which is then released when the target note is reached. Piano players, too, can create the feeling of pitch-bending by sliding from a black key to a white key. Pitch-bending can be an enormously effective expressive musical device.

Because of the ambiguity in the blues between major and minor keys, it can be said that the music is not really in either a major or minor key in the traditional sense. We suggest that this ambiguity is one of the elements of the music that gives it its power to capture viscerally the emotionally traumatizing quality of human existence. This is so because we typically associate music in a major key with happy or joyful emotions and music in a minor key with sad or painful feelings. Blues music gives us both at the same time, paralleling the way the lyrics can convey the tragic irony and absurdity of our existence, as we discussed earlier.

Blues musicians also use rhythm as an expressive tool. As with pitch-bending, timing of musical tension and release plays a key role. To create a bluesy feeling, the lead musician may sing or play something that is “out of time,” meaning that he or she will intentionally dance around the beat that is being kept steady by the band. The lead musician, the one who is playing with the rhythm, is also hearing where the beat is while playing out of time, and is probably also keeping an internal sense of the time as well. When the musician is ready to release the tension created by his or her rhythmic play, he or she will “snap” back to the beat and lock in with the band. The use of this rhythmic play helps to create a rhythmic looseness that is an essential component of the “bluesy feeling.” This rhythmic looseness has an emotional quality that parallels that of the ambiguity between major and minor keys, with both components being able viscerally to capture the paradoxical, enigmatic, traumatizing quality of finite human existing. Additionally, the out-of-time feature of blues rhythm points to the disturbing impact of trauma on our “normal” experience of lived time.

The classic blues is a twelve-measure form consisting of three four-measure phrases. For many blues songs the first phrase usually is sung in the major key. The second phrase is often the same as the first phrase but with a “minor third” instead of a “major third.” (The third is the note of the scale that determines whether the key will be major or minor). The last phrase is usually the “punchline,” in other words, some kind of ironic answer to the first two phrases. A great blues song will make a statement about the painful way things are; that statement will be repeated in the minor key; and then the punch line will usually be an ironic expression of resignation. Contradiction and irony are built into the structure of both the music and the lyrics of the blues, just as they are built into the structure of our existence. These are just a few of the essential, emotion-laden musical qualities of the blues. There are many other subtleties that can be felt and appreciated through repeated listening and exposure to the music.

Concluding Remarks

We have tried to show that in the unities of its music and its lyrics, the blues provide a therapeutic, visceral-linguistic conversation in which universally traumatizing aspects of human existence can be communally held and lived through. Therein, we have suggested, lies the blues’ universal appeal. But, to grasp the profundity of the blues, we must return to its origins in African American history and in the traumas of slavery.

Why was the need for such a visceral-linguistic conversation especially powerful in *this* context—so powerful as to give rise to a musical genre with such universal appeal? LeRoi Jones (Jones 1963/1999) suggests in his book *Blues People* that the birth of the blues was linked to the circumstances of newly freed African slaves having to establish their identity as African Americans. Having endured generations of brutal enslavement, these former Africans were faced with having to figure out their identity in a land where they and their ancestors were forcibly brought to work, and to do so amid the bleak conditions of post-slavery and post-Civil-War America. They needed a form of dialogue through which the devastating nature of their experience in America could be conveyed and shared in *their* English and, at the same time, that could capture viscerally the traumatic suffering entailed in that experience. It was in this context, claims Jones, that the blues came into being.

In the blues there is a quality of acceptance of the way things are, however miserable. The conditions under which the creators of the blues brought this profound music into being show a remarkable resilience of spirit. These resilient and expressive people were forced to endure a dreadful

plight, and we think it was in part through their music that they tried to regain the human dignity that had been brutally stripped from them and sought to rebuild their traumatically shattered world. We owe an incalculable debt of gratitude to the creators of the blues, who endured unimaginable suffering while bringing forth this powerful music that continues to help people face, own up to, and cope with the human condition.

In his song, “Imagine,” John Lennon offered his vision of a Utopian future. We close our chapter with some similar musings. Imagine a world in which providing deep understanding of others’ existential vulnerability and pain—that is, of the potentially traumatizing emotional impact of our finiteness—has become a shared ethical principle. In such a world, human beings would be much more capable of living in their existential vulnerability, rather than having to revert to the defensive, destructive evasions of it that have been so characteristic of human history. A new form of individual identity would become possible, based on owning rather than covering up our existential vulnerability. Vulnerability that finds a hospitable and understanding home could be seamlessly woven into the fabric of whom we experience ourselves as being (Stolorow 2011). A new form of human solidarity would also become possible, rooted not in shared ideological illusion but in shared recognition of and respect for our common human limitedness. If we can help one another bear the darkness rather than evade it, perhaps one day we will be able to see the light—as finite human beings, finitely bonded to one another. We contend that the creators of the blues have brought us a significant step closer to the attainment of such a world.

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Author Biographies

Robert D. Stolorow is a psychoanalytic and philosophical author who holds doctorates in both clinical psychology and philosophy. Having loved the blues since he was a boy, he became even more drawn to it since his theoretical interest became focused on emotional trauma (eventuating in his book, *Trauma and Human Existence*) and,

especially, since his son, Ben's, music became more bluesy. Robert practices psychoanalysis in Santa Monica, California, where he also teaches philosophy and psychoanalysis to clinicians and trainees.

Benjamin A. Stolorow has been active as a pianist and teacher in the San Francisco Bay Area for over 10 years. After studying both classical and jazz music at UC Berkeley, the Manhattan School of Music, and with numerous private teachers, Ben has become one of the most sought-after jazz pianists in the Bay Area. He has always been attracted to highly emotionally charged music, and the blues has

become an integral aspect of his music making. The power of musical expression to transform emotions that cannot be expressed verbally into sounds that can be felt continues to draw him to the piano. In whatever music he plays he tries to understand the emotional meaning behind the music. The influence of the blues and other deeply expressive musical genres can be heard on Ben's first trio album, "I'll Be Over Here," which features seven original compositions and a fresh arrangement of the jazz standard, "Stella by Starlight." In addition to performing in the Bay Area, he has also performed extensively in Japan and other parts of Asia.