When the Wind Comes Sweeping Down the Plain:

Embracing Atmospheric Interrelatedness

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Abstract

This paper expands the frame of psychoanalytic consideration to include the environment as a relational context and conceptualizes the potential psychological impact of natural disaster, in this case the devastating tornadoes that struck Central Oklahoma in May of 2013, as being a sudden sense of estrangement from one’s empathic atmosphere and the loss of any textured understanding of what will come next. By drawing from psychoanalytic complexity, intersubjective-systems, self-psychology, and Native American perspectives I articulate a deeply interrelated view of existence, inclusive of and emphasizing a total relational atmospheric context. I then demonstrate that therapeutic responsiveness at the community level serves powerfully reunifying psychological functions in the immediate aftermath of such catastrophes due to its experiential reassertion of an empathic (human) atmosphere, which underscores the value of actively embracing interrelatedness and of psychoanalytically-informed engagement at these and other frontiers beyond the usual treatment situation.

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There is no such thing as an Oklahoman.

While many theorists in recent decades have extended insights about early developmental experiences and essential lifelong intersubjective processes to the therapeutic situation, psychoanalysis has not often focused upon those aspects of one’s experience that are tied to and shaped by context at the broader concentric layers of community and natural environment. Recently, Coburn (2014) has extensively applied what has alternately been known as non-linear dynamic systems, chaos, or ‘complexity’ theory to articulate a framework that he has termed ‘Psychoanalytic Complexity,’ which has been argued to be the “logical extension of, and… the conceptual suprastructure for psychoanalytic paradigms…that center on an appreciation of the role of context in understanding emotional experience and meaning, of relational engagement, and of the unpredictability and fluidity of emotional development” (p. 53).

However, even such radical contextualist perspectives, which emphasize “relational systems” (Brothers, 2008) and affective experience over intrapsychic process, often do not adjust the frame (Coburn, 2002) of the complex system substantially enough to extend beyond the dyad. Consider, in contrast, the following statement with emphasis added: “In 1969, for the first time ever, people saw images of the Earth taken by astronauts orbiting the moon. This was the first time we could see the totality of our planet. Seen from space, we could see the Earth as one living system” (Nhat Hanh, 2013, p. 60). This makes clear that what we consider relevant and how we circumscribe what constitutes an entity worthy of observation depends entirely upon the perspective and
position of the observer (Coburn, 2002). Similarly, Coburn (2014, p.28) cites Ghent’s (2002) distinction, drawn from a complexity perspective, of a more inclusive meaning of the word relational, as the “relations among things… rather than it’s more superficial usage as the relations between people, that gives power and significance to the term relational psychoanalysis” (p.771, emphasis added). Rather than critiquing psychoanalysis’ typical domains of focus or ways of framing, in this paper, I will explicitly focus attention upon context at the level of interrelation within one’s physical environment and local community.

Thus, the aim of this paper is three-fold. First, by drawing upon Native American concepts of interrelatedness to enrich and extend those of psychoanalytic complexity, intersubjective-systems theory, and psychoanalytic self-psychology, I underscore our radical embeddedness within innumerable concentric “atmospheric” contexts and explicitly expand the psychoanalytic frame beyond the dyad to include the levels of community and natural environment. Second, by considering relevant psychoanalytic formulations of trauma, I briefly conceptualize a phenomenology of atmospheric estrangement. And third, based upon this expanded awareness of our irreducible atmospheric interrelatedness, and what is at stake when it becomes profoundly disrupted, I apply various understandings of what has been demonstrated to be especially ameliorative in the midst of such circumstances toward psychoanalytically-informed engagement within the immediate community response.
In what follows, I will lay the groundwork by emphasizing our atmospheric embeddedness and expanding upon how we might frame interrelatedness through the incorporation of psychoanalytic complexity and Native American perspectives. In subsequent sections—using the devastating tornadoes that struck Central Oklahoma in 2013 as a specific example—I explore the ways that experiences of natural disaster can be particularly psychologically destructive. Drawing upon Stolorow’s (2007) descriptions of trauma as unbearable affect that fails to find a relational home, and Lear’s (2006, 2007) explication of how an entire people (the Crow Indian nation) dealt with the loss of a coherent way of life, I argue that, for many people, experiences of natural disaster generate a sudden sense of estrangement from a formerly taken-for-granted, psychologically-sustaining atmosphere, leaving one without a textured understanding of how to go forward. Additionally, by exploring how communities respond to natural disasters, again using Oklahoma as a specific example, and based upon complexity-informed psychoanalytic understandings of therapeutic action, I identify the collective community itself as the healing agent in its experiential re-unification of those affected within the embrace of a responsive human atmosphere. Based upon these conclusions, I extend the typical purview of the conventional treatment situation to suggest ways that psychoanalytic practitioners might usefully employ a model known as Psychological First Aid (National Child Traumatic Stress Network and National Center for Posttraumatic Stress, 2006) to engage therapeutically in the community response to such situations, especially instances of natural disaster or mass violence.
Embracing Atmospheric Interrelatedness

In the modern world, we tend to go about our day to day lives as if we have subdued nature, perhaps to deny the uncertain (Brothers, 2008) contingency of our existence upon forces that can be so massively out of our control. Stolorow (2012) refers to such assumptions as reflecting what he has called “apocalyptic anxiety.” Whatever the reasons, the awareness and psychological relevance of one’s tie to such surrounding atmospheres seem to remain outside our everyday awareness; that is, until our dependence upon the atmosphere becomes an issue. However, this was not always so. Given the increasing instability of the natural world, it is becoming more and more evident that we would benefit from looking to alternative or preexisting paradigms to regain the awareness of our reliance upon nature.

Safran (2003), who defines both Psychoanalysis and Buddhism as “cultural institutions,” (p. 2) and “systems of healing” (p. 3), describes how premodern cultures regarded the world differently, stating that “…in these cultures the distinctions between internal and external reality and between subject and object were less clear-cut than in modern culture” (p. 25). Quoting sociologist Morris Berman, Safran’s explication continues:

> The view of nature which predominated in the West down to the eve of the Scientific Revolution was that of an enchanted world. Rocks, trees, rivers, and clouds were all seen as wondrous, alive, and human beings felt at home in this environment. The cosmos, in short, was a place of belonging. A member of this cosmos was not an alienated observer in it but a direct participant in its drama. His personal destiny was bound up with its
destiny, and this relationship gave meaning to his life. (2003, p.25, emphasis added)

Similarly, Joseph Epes Brown, scholar of Native American traditions, states that “an intense interaction necessarily takes place between the people of a nomadic hunting culture and… their habitat,” citing that prior to the reservation era in the U.S., the Lakota people “…of the North American Plains were an example of such a culture” (1997, p.xiii). Brown explains further that

A dominant theme of [Lakota] culture is that of relationship. A series of relationships reaches further and further out from the individual to the immediate family, the extended family, the band, the clan, and the tribal group. Relationships do not stop with the human realm, but extend out to embrace the environment: the land, the animals, the plants, the elements, the sky, the wind, the clouds, the heavens, and the stars. Ultimately, relationships extend to embrace the entire universe. This sense of interrelatedness reveals a type of thinking, an attitude of mind, which is vastly different from the non-Indian. (p.xiii, emphasis added)\(^1\)

In keeping with the current thesis, and Ghent’s inclusive definition of ‘relational’ noted above, the Lakota cultural system offers a conceptually rich means to aid members of

\(^1\)In the spirit of the work already done by Lear (2006, 2007), Orange (2008), and Coburn (2014), and rather than making a more extensive explication here, I have emphasized only one of the many ways Native American worldviews and attitudes can integrate with and substantially enrich psychoanalytic engagement. Instead, for the sake of brevity and continuity, I have borrowed the bridges already built by those similarly exploring the interface of psychoanalysis and Buddhist thought. These works include, in addition to what is noted above, the publications of Magid (2002), who explicitly integrates self-psychology, intersubjective-systems theory and complexity theory with Buddhism, and Kulka (2011, 2012) who compares Kohut’s selfobject concept with Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1998, 2010) philosophy of Interbeing.
both psychoanalysis and contemporary society toward meaningfully embracing the implications of our irreducible atmospheric interrelatedness, something our field has begun to do only relatively recently and our society could stand to do a great deal more of.

**A Legacy of Atmospheric Instability**

Expanding interrelatedness to encompass one’s entire universe has relevance for all people, no matter their location, with many implications beyond the subject matter of this paper. Still, contingency within one’s physical environment, and especially its ongoing psychological influence, rarely garner serious attention until it is demanded in the form of hurricanes, blizzards, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, avalanches, volcanic eruptions, wildfires, or even human-generated aspects of an area’s ‘climate,’ such as traffic, pollution, acts of mass violence, or ongoing states of armed conflict. But in Tornado Alley, there’s no such thing as an Oklahoman without reference to what’s going on in the sky. In *We Love and Fear the Oklahoma Skies*, Nathan Gunter (2013), editor of *Oklahoma Today Magazine*, wrote the following after a devastating Tornado struck the community of Moore, OK on May 20th, 2013:

Oklahomans have a special relationship with the sky… On the prairies of western Oklahoma, the skies are so big, and so full, it is easy to feel you may begin to fall upward, or even fly. To live underneath this unbroken expanse of heaven can be at once inspiring and terrifying… Every Ok[lahoman] has seen those skies turn scary, and… accepts that
atmospheric instability is a part of our legacy. In school, and from our trusted local meteorologists, we learn from an early age what to look for in a sky, in a radar map and in a safe place...

Meteorology, the interdisciplinary scientific study of the atmosphere, is one domain that has contributed to the development of theories of complex systems (Lorenz, 1963). The most basic definition of atmosphere is ‘the whole mass of air surrounding the earth;’ however, a more useful definition for our purposes is ‘a surrounding influence or environment.’ Here, atmosphere may speak to the experience of interrelatedness, the fact of one’s actual embeddedness within an interrelated natural world, or atmosphere may encompass all of the above depending on how the discussion is framed. Going forward I will draw upon this conceptually “thick” meaning of atmosphere, with the implication that our state of being is one of embeddedness throughout all of our concentric interrelated atmospheres, and our experiencing and very existence are contingent upon and within them, whether we are aware of it or not at any given time.

Anyone living in Oklahoma for more than one spring season quickly realizes the likelihood that tornadoes will emerge from severe thunderstorms. Live weather coverage on the news has taken on many of the qualities of a reality TV show, and storm-chasing has become an adrenaline sport (for both professional ‘weather-scientists’ and amateurs with camera-phones). On a given stormy evening in the spring, one can tune in to any number of local stations to find storm-chasers driving specially outfitted vehicles with names like ‘Dominator’ into the path of forming storm systems, yelling into their phones
to relay eye-witness accounts and streaming live video of the unfolding drama to
meteorologists back at the station who make off-the-cuff predictions to viewers about
what will happen and recommendations about what they should do.\(^2\)

In springtime on the southern Great Plains, warm air drawn from the Gulf
of Mexico meets cold air riding the jet stream from Canada to create storm
cells of unbelievable power. The power to fling automobiles like toddler’s
(sic) toys, to vanish houses in an eye blink, to erase entire neighborhoods.
Yet for all their force, tornadoes are the most evanescent of storms. One
can grow from a fluffy white cloud into a deadly twister in under 90
minutes, and even then the terrible vortex might not touch the ground. It
lasts minutes, sometimes just seconds. It scours one block but skips the
next. It bulldozes irresistibly ahead until it dissolves in an instant, perhaps
to form again later. Perhaps not. (Von Drehle & Kluger, 2013, p.26)

A Liturgy of Weather Preparedness

One local weatherman often says that the Oklahoma populace is among the most
educated of viewers in the world when it comes to severe weather.

Green-tinted clouds are never a good sign; a hook echo on a radar—the telltale
swirl at the edge of a storm pattern indicating strong rotation—

\(^2\)For very illustrative descriptions of the important role played in Oklahoma by meteorologists and storm-
chasers, and compelling narratives of the specific tornadic events of May 2013, readers are encouraged to
reference *The Weather God of Oklahoma City* (Anderson, 2013), and *The Last Chase* (Draper, 2013).
means take cover. Underground is best, in a basement or storm shelter.

But a small, ground-floor room with no exterior walls will do if the
tornado isn’t too strong. Cover up with a mattress or thick blanket to avoid
debris; don’t open all the windows in the house, …don’t hide under an
overpass. If this liturgy of weather preparedness is part of the Oklahoma
psyche, so, unfortunately, is devastation. Fourteen years ago… one of the
worst tornadoes in history roared through Moore, Oklahoma, taking
dozens of lives and hundreds of homes. Long after the initial cleanup was
completed, the disaster was everywhere apparent… For those who lost
homes, it took months, sometimes years to become whole. For those who
lost loved ones, that never happened. (Gunter, 2013, emphasis added)

Even in the face of such historical events and ongoing conditions of atmospheric
instability (or likely as a means of managing the uncertainty [Brothers, 2008] evoked by
such instability), many manage to remain convinced that that won’t happen here, not in
MY neighborhood. Frequent admonitions to be ‘weather-aware’, combined with the fact
that these phenomena often do not end up doing significant damage, pose a real problem
for meteorologists because

[S]aying that the weather will be bad on a May afternoon in Tornado

Alley is not enough to grab attention… [they have to] …say how bad, and

where… say it as early as possible so people [can] get word and take
cover… [b]ut… be right, because every time the storm sirens sound and
no wolf appears, people grow a bit more complacent. (Von Drehle & Kluger, 2013, p.26, emphasis added)

My own attitude on May 20th, 2013 illustrates this point. As a therapist, I have become accustomed to such environmental forecasts affecting my work schedule during tornado season. It’s typical for some of my patients to cancel late afternoon sessions at the last minute anytime the sky grows cloudy, while others tend to be laissez-faire even when conditions begin to look more serious. In my office about 15 miles from where the tornado was forming at the very same moment, my patient and I commented casually about the weather, even as the county-wide warning sirens started sounding. After briefly checking the live radar on my computer to see whether anything was coming our way, we went ahead with our session in mutual complacency, as if it were any other stormy day. I realized only afterward that, had I un-muted my computer’s audio, I would have received a play-by-play account of a massive tornado grinding though the community of Moore, destroying an elementary school still full of kids, a hospital, and any businesses or residences unfortunate enough to be in the way. “If you’ve never been through one, you don’t realize how quickly it happens… But when there are cars flying through the air, and trees and parts of houses, there’s only so much you can do to hide from it” (Von Drehle & Kluger, 2013, p. 30).

Crazily Meaningless Trajectories

[T]he scarred trail of the tornado, which was more than a mile wide in some places…had skidded across the south side of Oklahoma City for...
some 17 miles. On the Enhanced Fujita scale used to classify the strength of cyclones, the storm had rated a 5: as high as it goes, with peak winds topping 200m.p.h. and some buildings stripped to bare foundations. The cyclone was arbitrary…, [s]weeping up whole lives and dropping the shreds at random... (Von Drehle & Kluger, 2013, p. 30, emphasis added)

Like Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz, many residents of Moore emerged after the storm’s passing to find themselves, not only in a quite different state, but in an experientially unrecognizable world from the one they inhabited only minutes before. However, unlike Dorothy, who had a home to return to after waking from her dream, this nightmare came with none of the Technicolor-enhanced brilliance of her arrival to a new land of wonder, but very much the other way around—they hadn’t gone anywhere, everything was just ripped away from around them. Those affected had no yellow brick road laid out before them to follow, no great and powerful wizard to turn to, no ruby slippers with which to make a return trip to the way life was before. One man,

When he reached the place where his home used to be…, [stated] “I didn’t even really know it was my street…” What he found, in that dismal chaos, was the bedrock truth of the whole awful story, the one fact that every human response must bend to accommodate. “Tornadoes do whatever the hell they want...” (Von Drehle & Kluger, 2013, p. 30, emphasis added)

Several days after the tornado, I had occasion to drive through one of the hardest hit areas. With many properties already cleared of debris, and so little left standing above the
ground other than a few twisted and snapped off tree trunks, the combination of barren, empty space, with so much exposed red dirt, looked more like images from NASA’s *Mars Curiosity Rover* than any formerly inhabited residential neighborhood. My wondering what it might be like to emerge into such a vacuum, suddenly devoid of anything recognizably human, immediately called to mind the story Heinz Kohut told about the astronauts who, upon discovering they had lost control of their spacecraft during a lunar mission,

[H]ad felt one paramount wish: if they should have to perish, they wanted the capsule containing their bodies, however burned into dust, to return to earth. The greatest horror to them had been the thought that their remains would forever be circling in space, in crazily meaningless trajectories…

[T]heir ultimate deepest desire… [was] to be symbolically reunited with the *earth: the symbol of human meaning, human warmth, human contact,* [and] *human experience.* (Kohut, 1982, p. 397, emphasis added)

**Toward a Phenomenology of Atmospheric Estrangement**

In Kohut’s view, to be separated from such a vitally necessary, sustaining interconnection within one’s atmosphere was unthinkable, such that even in death, becoming enveloped again within such a context became the paramount concern. He believed that “…the fear of death and the fear of psychosis are, in many instances, the expression of the fear of the loss of the empathic milieu that, in responding to the self keeps it *psychologically alive*” (1982, p. 397).
In a final attempt to articulate the dimensions of empathy, just before his death, he asserted

that the presence of empathy in the surrounding milieu, … is still an admixture of something positive… [But,] there is a step beyond an empathy-informed hatred that wants to destroy you; …an empathyless environment that just brushes you off the face of the earth. (Kohut, et al., 1991, p.530, emphasis added)

Ever since my sobering drive through Moore, I have been attempting to formulate a psychoanalytic understanding of the following question: If our deep interrelation within the living system that is the Earth serves as such a psychologically sustaining and essential “symbol of human meaning, human warmth, human contact, [and] human experience,” what must it be like for that very atmosphere, in sudden, arbitrary and catastrophic form, to ‘do whatever the hell it wants’ and become “an empathyless environment that just brushes you off the face of the earth?”

Since I am not drawing from the experience of any one specific person, it is worth noting explicitly that everything that follows is based upon vicarious introspection about how such things might be experienced by anyone, though they will certainly not be experienced by everyone in exactly the ways that I describe. Still, I believe that by taking something akin to Thelen and Smith’s (1994) “view from above” and drawing from recent psychoanalytic formulations of sudden traumatic experience, we can begin to form an understanding of the potential psychological impact of natural disaster, which may
also inform responsive action. Also, my intention any time the word *trauma* is used, is to invoke the intersubjective-systems, “pain is not pathology” (Stolorow, 2007) usage, focusing not on whatever event is in question, but the potentially “unbearable affect,” as subjectively experienced, that might be associated with it.

**Natural Disaster and Human Existence**

When a person says to a friend, ‘I'll see you later’ or a parent says to a child at bedtime, ‘I'll see you in the morning,’ these are statements whose validity is not open for discussion. Such absolutisms are the basis for a kind of naïve realism and optimism that allow one to function in the world, experienced as stable and predictable. It is in the essence of emotional trauma that it shatters these absolutisms, a catastrophic loss of innocence that permanently alters one's sense of being-in-the-world.

*Massive deconstruction of the absolutisms of everyday life exposes the inescapable contingency of existence on a universe that is random and unpredictable and in which no safety or continuity of being can be assured.* (Stolorow, 2007, p. 16, emphasis added)

About 36 hours after the storm, with my own absolutisms soundly rattled, and despite the fact that I felt like I was abandoning my community by doing so, I reluctantly peeled myself away from the constant live news coverage to attend a weekend of classes for my psychoanalytic coursework in Los Angeles. I had just read Russell Carr’s paper *Combat*
and Human Existence: Toward an Intersubjective Approach to Combat-Related PTSD (2011) in which he expressed frustration with psychodynamic accounts of post-traumatic suffering that, in his view, often seek to identify “developmental causes for adult problems” (2011, p.473). Carr argued that many soldiers’ “experience of the world and themselves had been shattered,” and that “[t]hey frequently did not seem to be in the same world as the rest of us” (Carr, 2011, p.473), resonating with Stolorow’s claim that “painful emotional experiences become enduringly traumatic—that is, unendurable—in the absence of a relational context in which they can be held and integrated” (Stolorow, 2009, p. 206) [emphasis added]. Carr developed a short-term therapeutic model for work with soldiers in the combat zone dealing with adult-onset trauma, drawing primarily from Stolorow’s (2007) book Trauma and Human Existence. His application of psychoanalytic theory to conceptualization and treatment under circumstances so far beyond the typical analytic setting provided a way to think about the unique impact of natural disaster and the possibilities for therapeutic intervention.

The shattering of one’s sustaining absolutisms, whether through experiences in combat, natural disaster, or other intensely distressing events, has the potential to generate states of extreme estrangement from others, especially in the absence of a relational home. Perhaps this profound alienation, the sudden and massive sense of being very much an isolated individual in the face of an indifferent atmosphere, is so powerfully disruptive due to this experiential de-contextualization. Such disruptions of a sense of self-as-embedded, a sudden, forced singularity (from any or all of one’s potentially sustaining
interrelated atmospheres), has the potential, or even likelihood, to create what can be called a state of atmospheric estrangement.

The Collapse of a Way of Life

[F]or the people of Moore, what happened on May 20th feels impossible. It is impossible that this happened here again. It is impossible to reduce the suffering to a number: lives lost, homes destroyed, damage expressed in dollars. For many, it must feel impossible to know where to begin to carry on. (Gunter, 2013, emphasis added)

The tornado struck during an unusually early time of day, finding people still at work, kids in school, families separated and spread out all over town and then unable to make phone contact due to downed cell towers, let alone to reconnect physically (in some cases for hours) due to rescue efforts. In addition to the uncertainty generated by physical threats to loved ones and property, many no longer had a means through which to resume anything resembling the routines of daily life.

According to Kohut, “Disintegration anxiety means the loss of empathy, the loss of an empathic milieu, the loss of an understanding milieu, …the loss of any understanding” (Kohut, 1991, p.531, emphasis added). In a brief few moments, not only individuals and their families, but a whole community experienced a sudden confrontation with what Jonathan Lear (2007) calls the “threat of civilizational collapse” (p.291), or what Brothers (2008) calls “exile from our relational homeland” (pg. 51). Lear (2006, 2007), who
explores how the Crow, another people native to the plains, dealt with the devastation of their entire *way of life* following the mass extermination of the Bison and the onslaught of Western “civilization,” asserts that

> Psychoanalysis needs to recognize that destruction can occur at the level of the culture while the individuals are not physically harmed. The psychological states of these individuals can be various and complex and not summed up under the category of trauma... a collapse of a way of life makes a variety of psychological states impossible. (Lear, 2007, p. 291)


> A violent uprooting, which takes away all normal props, breaks up our world, snatches us forever from places that are saturated in memories crucial to our identity, and plunges us permanently in an alien environment, can make us feel that our very existence has been jeopardized. (p. 370)

Lear’s work demonstrates how a particular people facing such loss had to find a way to survive when their traditional ways of making sense of what was meaningful were suddenly no longer valid and they had no “textured understanding” (2007, p. 300) of what would come next. For the Crow, this required the development of a new form of
courage, which Lear calls “Radical Hope,” that gave “the tribe the psychological resources it needed to face the changes that history would bring without falling into despair. It also encouraged a resourceful attitude toward making the best choices they could in the evolving circumstances” (2007, p. 301).

In this section we have seen that when a community of people’s understanding of what consists in their ‘way of life’ suddenly loses textured coherence, and they find themselves in a “landscape of exile” (Brothers, 2008, p.54), “forced to live in a world that is no longer recognizable” (pg. 46), they must find a way to “tolerate hopefully a period in which they [lack] the concepts to know what to hope for” (Lear, 2007, p. 303).

**We Know We Belong to the Land and the Land We Belong to Is Grand**

In the previous sections, I described how and why experiences of natural disaster might be especially psychologically destructive. Now, drawing from many of the same systems-oriented concepts, I offer suggestions about what might be most helpful in the midst of such devastation in order to guide responsive action on the part of psychoanalytically-informed therapists.

Doris Brothers (2008), in articulating a “relational systems perspective,” cites Kossman and Bullrich, who state “It could be argued that only one system truly exists, the universal system, with all other systems representing subsystems embedded within this larger contextual field” (1997, p.202). Brothers extends these insights to describe “how
widely shared experiences such as [natural disasters] might distribute traumatic reverberations throughout the systemic universe” (2008, p. 51). Such a view is consistent with the conceptualization of atmospheric interrelatedness and traumatic estrangement described throughout this paper, and can aid in taking a systemic view of change.

Similarly, Coburn (2014) describes the concept of “Autocatalysm and Recurrence,” which

[A]llows for the likelihood that the agent of change emerges as a product and property of the relational system itself…, …that the very components of a system produce their own agent of change and that what emerges from within a system can feed back upon itself, altering its previous state… [as opposed to being limited solely to the] …notion that one person acting upon another is what effects change.” (p. 10)

By drawing upon what communities seem to already do in responding to such catastrophes, and applying psychoanalytic understandings of what is ameliorative in the face of potentially traumatic experience, we expand our understanding of therapeutic action—the idea of one person acting upon another (i.e. therapist-patient)—while also challenging the idea that help must come from one person, or a known person at all. Gunter (2013) asks

How does a community make sense of destruction on the level carried out by [May 2013’s] storm[s]? In Moore, it began almost as soon as the tornado touched down. Teachers…threw their bodies over their students to
protect them from debris. Survivors flooded the streets helping to dig their neighbors out from under collapsed homes. Trucks filled with supplies raced to the scene…

There’s No Place Like Home

Gunter has already explicitly identified several aspects of the ‘Oklahoma psyche,’ including ongoing states of “atmospheric instability,” a “liturgy of weather preparedness,” and a legacy of “devastation.” The pragmatic state motto Labor Omnia Vincit (‘labor conquers all’), warrants inclusion as another, implicit regional attitude, evident in much of his continuing answer to his own question,

We help. That is how we begin. It’s what we know how to do… For Ok[lahomans], this is what home is about.” The “Oklahoma Standard,” exhibited to the world after the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal building in downtown Oklahoma City, after the May 3, 1999, tornado, and today, is who we are. What is on display before the world’s eyes is not only a community’s response to a disaster but an exhibition of something essential to the Oklahoma character… We make sense of disaster by showing up and doing what we can. We find meaning in a bottle of water, a rescued pet, a family reunited, an act of selflessness. These things—and not disasters—are what define home for us. Home… is not only where, but who we are. (emphasis added)
Gunter’s many evocative references to *home* and the “Oklahoma Standard,” can be understood in at least two ways. The first, as an intentional shift of avowed identity from that of an individual to an emphasis on collectivity, or in Magid’s (2002) terms, from “*self*-centeredness,” which he defines as “the perspective of the myth of the isolated mind, the perspective of someone who believes his or her self to be essentially private, interior, autonomous, and separate,” to something akin to the Buddhist concept of no-self.

When *self*-centeredness comes to an end, we discover not that our “self” has ceased to exist but that the self is not what we thought. The self is no longer an inner sanctum of private experience or a narrow set of personal needs or expectations. *Our world is our self, rather than our self being our world…* (p. 83, emphasis added)

Or, in the present case, ‘our *community* is our self,’ consonant with Lakota and relational systems views of kinship and universal interrelatedness which I have emphasized. This idea is also beautifully depicted by Kulka in his description of “man’s existential condition as a permanent oscillation between *emergence* states of the individual self and the state of *dissolving* into a transcendental selfhood” (2012a, p.264).

The second implication of Gunter’s assertions about ‘*who Oklahomans are,*’ is something we often see when whole communities are impacted by a catastrophe (e.g. the “Boston Strong” slogan that emerged after the Boston Marathon bombings). Such an emphasis upon, and identification with those shared qualities and values that play important selfobject (idealization, twinship) functions, for both survivors *and* those who are
responders—galvanize communities into action. Similarly, it’s worth noting that along her way, Dorothy accumulated a small troupe of companions who helped and were helped by one another in their shared quest to see the Wizard (who, it must be remembered, commented that he was a ‘Kansas man’ himself, thereby offering comfort through the familiarity of their shared locale).

**Atmospheric Reunification**

With the inclusion of one’s experiences of and identification within the broader community as a relational home, *itself* an active therapeutic agent, we need only go a slight further step to conceptualize how such experiences might potentially be impactful enough to mitigate atmospheric estrangement. Such a step is supported by Coburn’s (2014) explication of “Emergence, nonlinearity, and valuing the feeling of complexity, in the phenomenological sense… [which] refers to the nonlinearity of complex human systems: *that seemingly small events may lead to large and meaningful outcomes*” (p. 10-11, emphasis added).

During the aftermath, I began wondering how I, as a psychotherapist, could *make sense* of the destruction. What could I do in the midst of the unfolding experience? After all, what good is our training if we have nothing of substance to offer traumatized survivors in the days following a tragic and traumatizing event? Must they, and we, simply wait until they are able to claw their way far enough up Maslow’s hierarchy to make use of traditional outpatient psychotherapy?! I had wished there were some way to make use of
my specialized know-how in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, to provide a sort of therapeutic search-and-rescue, an emotional first-response. Certainly, there were traditional ways that I could volunteer or contribute like anyone else. But I grappled with how I might engage (Nhat Hanh, 1987, 1998) psychoanalysis in disaster response.

My initial answer to my questions came when I learned that the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and the American Red Cross were already making use of mental health professionals trained in a model known as Psychological First Aid (NCTSN/ NCPTSD, 2006). “(PFA) consists of a systematic set of helping actions aimed at reducing initial post-trauma distress and supporting short- and long-term adaptive functioning” (Ruzek, et al., 2007, p. 17), and is based on the following principles: “(a) promoting a [psychological] sense of safety, (b) promoting calming, (c) promoting sense of self- and community-efficacy, (d) promoting connectedness, and (e) instilling hope” (Ruzek, et al., 2007, p. 21-22). Grateful to discover a model already in existence, designed specifically to “establish a human connection in a non-intrusive, compassionate manner” (NCTSN/ NCPTSD, 2006, p. 6), and to offer “textured understanding” about how to move forward through psycho-education and the establishment of contact with a variety of ongoing supportive services, I eagerly volunteered and continue to consider ways that my contemporary psychoanalytic training might dovetail with their efforts. PFA emphasizes that

If survivors want to talk, be prepared to listen. When you listen, focus on hearing what they want to tell you, and how you can be of help… [But],

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[r]emember that the goal of Psychological First Aid is to reduce distress, assist with current needs, and promote adaptive functioning, not to elicit details of traumatic experiences and losses... Often, being physically present in a supportive and calm way helps affected people feel safer and more able to cope. (NCTSN/ NCPTSD, 2006, p. 8, emphasis added)

Since a more substantial introduction to PFA is beyond the scope of this paper, I have simply provided conceptual bridges to the utility of such forms of responsive engagement at this and other frontiers beyond the usual psychoanalytic treatment situation. 3

The goals of PFA are consonant with what Coburn (2014), drawing from Lear (2006, 2007), calls “Radical Hope”, which

…considers what courage there might be to envision something different and positive, despite our inability to picture it clearly in the current moment. This type of hope may be realized given our understanding that complex systems…are quite literally open to change in ways that we might not yet be able to imagine. (p. 12, emphasis added)

Clearly, the therapeutic possibilities highlighted by Coburn’s applications of complexity theory, combined with the vehicle PFA offers therapists to engage in

3 The PFA Field Operations Guide is available for free download http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/natural-disasters (NCTSN/ NCPTSD, 2006). For a particularly moving example of what PFA-informed intervention looks like, see Hagman’s (2013) description of his team’s work within the community of Newtown, CT, the week after the tragic shootings at Sandy-Hook elementary in December, 2012.
the immediate community response, offer psychoanalysts a way to play a powerful role in such efforts.

It is my contention that the most salient factor in mediating the potentially massive psychological impact of natural disaster so as to render it bearable is the relational home offered by one’s community (as represented by a legion of anonymous ‘strangers’).

Moreover, the potency of such responsiveness is dependent not upon who the responsive person is, but upon the experience of reunification within an empathic human atmosphere of interrelatedness that such responsiveness re-asserts. Ed Neuenschwander, whose home was destroyed in Piedmont, OK in the Spring of 2011, poignantly captured the essence of this experience when he stated, “Some people call a tornado an act of God, but the act of God is when people come out to help, strangers. People…brought food, people we didn’t know asked us if we needed any heavy equipment” (Rolland, 2011, emphasis added).

Unfortunately, by the time I completed an abbreviated PFA training and was able to be utilized in volunteer efforts in Moore, the two week window during which this essential role can be played most helpfully had already ended. Although none of those with whom I came into contact spoke to me in any explicit detail about their tornado experience, as I handed out bottles of water and directed survivors to various resource stations I witnessed many individuals and families being enveloped by the winds of human compassion that swept in to fill the vacuum. That wind did not have the name or face of any one person, but was powerfully embodied by a collective atmospheric relational home.
Conclusion- “We Are All Related”

My hope is that what I have outlined above sensitizes the psychoanalytic community to broader possibilities for effective immediate intervention, and serves as a call to seek training in advance to prepare us to respond when disaster or violence strikes close to home. The fact that such disasters will strike is it is not a matter of *If*, but *When*. I, for one, plan to be ready the next time such misfortune hits my community.

Each of us dwells within an interconnected web of dynamically unstable atmospheres, whether or not we are aware of it at any given moment. We are all vulnerable to our own tornadoes, both actual and metaphorical, at any time. In addition to aiding in the recognition of and response to systemically-distributed traumatic experiences, such as natural disasters, I believe that meaningfully *embracing our interrelatedness* (by drawing upon our rich theoretical, philosophical, spiritual, healing, and wisdom traditions) creates reverberations throughout, not only our professional work, but our very *being* in the world. My conviction is increasingly supported by contemporary psychoanalytic knowledge, through what (Kulka, 2012b), Orange (2006) and others call an “ethical” psychoanalysis. Kulka (2011) urges us toward a “culture of compassion”, and Stolorow (2009) shares a similar vision when he refers to

a society in which the obligation to provide a relational home… has become a shared ethical principle… In such a societal context, a new form of identity would become possible, based on owning rather than covering up our existential vulnerability. Vulnerability that finds a hospitable
relational home could be seamlessly and constitutively integrated into whom we experience ourselves as being. A new form of human solidarity would also become possible rooted… in shared recognition and respect for our common human finitude. If we can help one another bear the darkness rather than evade it, perhaps one day we will be able to see the light. (2009, p. 208-209)

Whether one prefers to conceptualize such experiences in psychoanalytic, existential, or even spiritual terms, we are not limited to serving our communities only as analysts, or even in specifically therapeutic capacities, to be able to embrace one another in deeply fraternal, interrelated solidarity, or, in Stolorow’s (2009) words, as “Siblings in the Same Darkness” (p.208).

A Lakota concept which resonates closely with those articulated in the paragraphs above is *Mitakuye Oyas’ in*, which means “all my relatives” or “we are all related,” and is so central to their philosophy of life that the name of the Lakota people means “to acknowledge [or embrace as] a relative or family member” (White Hat, Sr., 2012).

One vivid example of this comprehensive sense of relationship is expressed with special force among the Plains peoples in rites involving communal smoking of the pipe. At the conclusion of the pipe ceremony among the [Lakota] the participants all exclaim “We are all related!” What is acknowledged here is not only the relatedness of the immediate participating group. There is also *an affirmation of the mysterious*
interrelatedness of all that is. The rites of the pipe specifically mention that each of the indefinite number of grains of tobacco placed in the bowl of the pipe represents ritually, or really is, some specific form or possibility of creation. The act of smoking then is a rite of communion. Through the agency of human breath the apparent multiplicity and separateness of phenomena (the tobacco) is absorbed within an ultimate unity (the fire). (Brown, 2007, p. 39-40, emphasis added)

The powers of the wind are many, as the earliest residents of the Great Plains knew well, and may give rise to incredible destruction and estrangement, or breathe equally powerful reunification through the embrace of embodied atmospheric interrelatedness.

Our identity is in softly rolling prairies giving way to forested hills, in long stretches of horizon that make you feel like you could see almost to eternity, and in big skies stretched tight above it all. We have learned to watch those skies—for blessings, for rain, for sunshine, for wind and for signs of danger. And we have learned to help. It’s in our bones, like red dirt and big skies. It’s what we will do now. (Gunter, 2013)

May our collective embrace of interrelatedness, conceptually and through our embodied being, in psychotherapy and in life, become a wind more powerful than any cyclone.
References


