

The Baby and the Bathwater: An Unreserved Appreciation of Nick Totton's Critique of the Professionalisation of Psychotherapy

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ABSTRACT *Nick Totton's observations and reflections on the landscape of psychotherapy in his article "The Baby and the Bathwater" remind us that as a "cottage industry" psychotherapy has much in common with traditional, small-scale farming practices. In both psychotherapy and farming, in-depth understanding and indigenous knowledge are only possible through love for and an intimate familiarity with the local landscape. By contrast, the modern, technocratic "one size fits all" approach to productivity that characterises agri-business can also be found in the relentless drive to professionalise psychotherapy, a form of hubris that is ultimately destructive of both culture and agriculture. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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PROLOGUE

In 1998 my wife Margaret and I purchased a 400-acre sheep and cattle farm in the foothills of the Ruahine ranges of Hawke's Bay and moved her (then) 80-year-old father Les into the small farm cottage on the property. Helping my father-in-law to get the neglected farm up and running was from the very beginning a salutary experience. In marked contrast to the standard, big-farm agribusiness model of Hawke's Bay sheep and cattle farming, his was a very pragmatic, labour-intensive, low-cost, small-scale operation. Every three months we would join Les for two weeks in the age-old rhythm of agricultural life: sunrise breaking over the breakfast table, out early enough to greet the new day, four two-hour blocks of hard work punctuated by morning tea, lunch, and afternoon tea, then chores, baths, dinner, a bit of rugby or some other sport on the telly, washed down with a glass of red wine and the odd chocolate and then falling into bed. To be repeated the following day. Never in a hurry and resourced with an entire lifetime of farming experience, Les worked slowly but tirelessly to improve pasture, repair fences, and rotate stock, building up the herd and flock from scratch. We

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learned the subtle differences among the various paddocks: which were best for sheep and which for cattle; which areas were sheltered from the weather where calving and lambing would likely be successful; which grass could fatten a skinny ewe and which would favour a new lamb. We planted hundreds of trees for shelter and erosion control and put in dams and gravity-fed troughs to supply water in every paddock. In preference to buying new, machinery and materials were recycled wherever possible to ensure maximum use and minimum cost.

Les's down-to-earth pioneer values and our somewhat idealistic, green aesthetic learned to mix it up and get along. Every day, another leaflet or pamphlet would arrive in our mailbox advertising state-of-the-art farming technology, chemical and biological plant and animal treatments, expensive equipment of all sorts: everything the modern farm and farmer might need and should therefore never be without. We unflinchingly did without. Yesterday's newspaper usually made the best firestarter, but the glossy brochures made their carbon contribution as well. We followed our neighbours' movements further down the valley through binoculars, watched them regularly poisoning or burning their pastures in order to reseed with the latest high-yield composite grass, and watched the helicopters and small fixed-wing planes pass over our heads top dressing and spraying pesticides. We heard the almighty commotion from the big teams of dogs barking at mustering time, and we noted the animal carcasses lying by the roadside: the old, the weak and the sick, the tail end – all those unable to keep up with the pace of modern farming. Make no mistake, Les was never one for sentimentality. He understood death as an integral part of nature and slaughter as an integral part of raising animals for meat, but he prided himself on practicing ethical, old-fashioned animal husbandry. "Animals are just like people", he would declare, "the leaders will always do well, even in adverse conditions, but unless you can recognise and give special attention to the tail-enders, they will suffer the most and often fail." Four years later, in 2002, several of our neighbours had got out of the farming business altogether. Meanwhile, our spring lambs and weaner calves, bright and healthy specimens raised in steep hill country without the use of chemical fertilisers or animal antibiotics, were attracting the highest prices in the local area and beginning to build a reputation for quality.

MEETING NICK TOTTON IN PRINT

2002 was the same year I first came across Nick Totton's article: "The baby and the bathwater", three years after its publication in 1999. The article immediately struck a profound chord within me. I resonated to this man's thinking.

I had spent the better part of the decade 1992–2002 helping to professionalise psychotherapy in Aotearoa New Zealand, serving on the Executive Council of the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists (NZAP), first as chair of its National Supervision Committee and later as Chair of Ethics and Professional Standards. However, by 2002, I was becoming conscious of some serious misgivings about the whole thrust of professionalism.

Professionalisation had indeed succeeded in making our profession stronger. It had raised our collective self-esteem as practitioners of the art and science of psychotherapy, though unfortunately this had failed to translate into a robust public psychotherapy. It was looking increasingly less likely that professional psychotherapy would diversify and reach out to include those who most needed and could least afford therapy. Instead, the emphasis on

getting psychotherapy seated at the grown-ups' table with more established healthcare providers like medics and psychologists was strongly orienting psychotherapy to more narrow concerns about its own privilege and power. The much-vaunted potential of multidisciplinary teamwork remained out of reach, a tantalising abstraction frequently referenced but given surprisingly little serious consideration at a political and practical level. And, despite the lip service that was being paid to the need for public accountability and public safety, the effort to get psychotherapists established as registered health practitioners seemed principally motivated by status seeking and protection of market share. Increasingly, the professionals appeared to be an excessively inward-looking and self-interested group.

In his article Nick (Totton, 1999) wrote eloquently of the Shadow motivations of the drive to professionalise: "The opponents of headlong professionalisation have largely dominated the argument; but its proponents' strategy of what in German is called *Totschweigen* (deathly silence), combined with remorseless organisational advance, meets with continued success" (p. 314).

Bureaucratic self-interest weds economic self-interest in a marriage of convenience:

To speak bluntly, counselling and psychotherapy training in the UK is close to being a bubble: a pyramid selling scheme, in which individuals or organisations near the top of the food chain skim off large profits, and those near the bottom starve or eat each other. Far more practitioners are being trained than there are clients available for them; and a series of emergency measures are being used to stave off the collapse of the system by lengthening the food chain further, inserting more roles and jobs. (p. 315)

Of course all this has happened before as professionalisation brings practice and practitioner, as Reich (1942/1973, p. 125) put it, and cited by Totton, "into line with the world". Introspection and curiosity give way to ambitious haste, concern for the work gives way to concern with the job.

Once "the occupation of psychotherapy and counselling has shifted to a more central and acceptable cultural position" (Totton, 1999, p. 316), the conservatising influence of professional status-seeking and State regulation begins to show itself more clearly:

unhappiness or a desire to change are not illnesses. The drive to professionalisation, the enormous expansion of training, demands a huge increase in clients. The only way to get enough therapy and counselling paid for, it appears, is to get the state and other institutions to pay for it. For this to happen, psychotherapy and counselling must present themselves as somehow *medical*. (p. 316)

As a clinical psychologist who worked as a psychiatric inpatient unit chief in the USA in the 1980s, I was all too familiar with the consequences of the re-mediatisation of psychotherapy in a managed care environment. I had been hoping I would never have to witness this particular form of "progress" in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Now we come to what is for me the most startling and creative contribution of the entire article – Nick's application of Van der Ploeg's seminal 1993 paper "Potatoes and knowledge" to the "fields" of counselling and psychotherapy. Van der Ploeg studied the interplay between agrarian science and local farmers in the Andes. His paper, as Nick (Totton, 1999) summarised it:

describes how, from the scientists' point of view, it is "only logical" to model the needs and procedures of agriculture in a standardised way, with so much nitrogen required equalling such and such a dose of

chemical fertiliser, and so on. The practical reality of farming, for someone who knows the intricacies of their environment and works by what van der Ploeg calls “*art de la localité*”, is very different. (p. 318)

Nick went on to quote from van der Ploeg (1993):

However, the outcome of such methods cannot be exactly predicted. Nor can the necessary methods . . . be prescribed in detail. . . . Local knowledge . . . is, under these conditions, rapidly becoming not just a marginal, but more than anything, a superfluous or even a counter-productive element. (pp. 219–220)

Imagine how alive I felt reading this paragraph through the lens of my four-year apprenticeship to Les! It was an exciting and memorable moment!

Nick also quoted Wynne (1995), who characterised local knowledges (which are always necessarily plural) as:

interwoven with *practices* . . . highly dynamic systems of knowledge involving continuous negotiation between “mental” and “manual” [for our purposes, practical] labour, and continual interpretation of production experiences . . . However because it is so multidimensional and adaptive, experience is rarely expressed in a univocal, clear form. This is frequently mistaken for lack of theoretical content . . . [But] there is indeed systematic theory, even though this is in a syntax linked to the local labour process and does not presuppose a universal and impersonal world. (p. 67, Totton’s emphasis)

The difference between evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence is subtle but profound. Like farming, counselling and psychotherapy are forms of skilfulness that develop experientially through a continuous dialectic of action and reflection. Clinical practice combines manual labour (participatory action) and mental labour (observation and reflection). Once synthesised, the sum total of clinical experiences helps to develop a practitioner’s “feel” for the domain characteristics of client condition, situation, and need; as Nick (*ibid.*) puts it: “What *does* make therapy effective is precisely “local knowledge” – the “therapeutic bond” and all the imponderables on which it depends.” (p. 319) Psychotherapy is also “a matter of experience, intuition and human sensitivity-wisdom, rather than of technique and expertise” (p. 319) – all of which derive from “the crucial role of self-knowledge (the self being a large part of the *localité* for this particular art), and the real appropriateness of the apprenticeship model” (p. 319).

To learn from Les how to farm the unique parcel of land we called Hinerua Farm, I had to be physically present, I had to repeatedly walk the land and gradually learn to see a small part of what Les sees when he walks the land. With 33 years of clinical experience under my belt, when I make a clinical appraisal I seem able to marshal the relevant data almost automatically. The experience resembles looking at a complex landscape and simply appreciating how all the details fit together into a coherent picture. However, learning to farm, I returned to being a beginner, and one of my most consistent and profound lessons was the lesson of my own not-knowing and not-seeing and learning to see. “You only see what you’re looking for”, was one of Les’s favourite phrases. I had to learn how to scan for any details that might be important before they could become visible and I could begin to see them – and I had to appreciate how parts and whole mutually influence and condition each other:

Generic psychotherapy and counselling have used a specious version of expert knowledge to colonise and weld into an empire many diverse local craft knowledges, hence distorting them, much as medical chemistry isolates a supposed “active ingredient” from a medicinal plant . . . The political impetus is so

strong that it has managed to ignore how “scientific research” itself – the system’s own borrowed expertise – finds repeatedly that, although therapy and counselling seem generally beneficial, *neither technique nor training significantly affect the benefits reported.* (Totton, 1999, p. 319, original emphasis)

The hegemonic demands of efficient, effective “clini-business” parallel the hegemonic demands of modern agribusiness. In both cases, expertise consists of the promulgation of a body of standardised and accredited knowledge deemed to have universal validity and universal application irrespective of locality and context. From a productivity and cost-containment standpoint, efficiency and effectiveness are undeniably appealing. From a political and humanitarian perspective, however, efficiency and effectiveness are siren songs of the modern age that tempt us onto the rocks of a repressive and oppressive economic and social order.

Many of us are determined not to see counselling and psychotherapy become a band-aid on the wound of our collective social isolation and alienation. So we might benefit from further meditation on that wonderful word Totschweigen, the “deathly silence” in which mechanical efficiency and effectiveness have become not only the means to human ends but ends in themselves. As ends in themselves, industrial relations, commercial exploitation, and technological prowess have become the tools of our own destruction. Nor will any regulatory regime serve to save us from ourselves, unless motivated by an entirely different set of values – values that serve *leben* (life) rather than *tod* (death), *Eros* rather than *Thanatos*. We live in an era of accelerating disruption and destruction, at a planetary level, of the spontaneous and unpredictable creative order that serves life. With military precision, efficiency and effectiveness, human beings have undertaken to unmake the commonwealth of life, the intricate and interdependent order of which we are but one part, one species. In place of the natural order, we have attempted to substitute an artificial, man-made order. Our “order” or ordering is, however, driven principally by selfishness and greed, the desire to get something for nothing. We have refused to subjugate ourselves to the natural order of give and take. We have held ourselves above and separate from the natural order. Taking with both hands simply because we can, we are destroying our habitat, debasing both Nature and ourselves.

It seems ontogeny does recapitulate phylogeny, but the reverse is also the case. Now it is the species which must tread the path of the individual life cycle. Somehow, our species must learn to grow up, learn to parent and care for others, learn to protect and preserve the habitat we all share. As a species, we might fairly be said to be in our adolescence (see Fay, 2009, 2010); humanity (not the whole of humanity but certainly the part of humanity to which we claim membership) has shifted from the overt dependence of the child on Mother Earth to the pseudo-independence of a bratty, self-centred teenager. While this goes by the name of progress, the cost is high. The prevalent attitude of modernity towards creation, towards the larger family to which we belong, is to ignore it as much as possible. Many of us prefer to retreat to an exclusively human-centred indoor environment where we can busy ourselves with the latest gadgets and devices, while continuing to exploit the Earth and drain its resources, seemingly without any expectation that we might need to reciprocate and give back to those who have given to us. Technologically speaking, we are teenagers in a fast car out for a joy ride who are low on gas with no realistic destination in mind. Our motto is: “Have fun and be free.” Meanwhile, who is looking after all the other creatures, the plants and animals with whom we share the planet and whose fate is now in our hands? We have indeed thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

CONCLUSION

I wish to conclude this appreciation by addressing the international community of counselling and psychotherapy practitioners in what I hope is the spirit of Nick Totton.

I love practicing psychotherapy. I do it well, and I get a lot of intellectual and emotional satisfaction from it; but I have come to believe that the worthy and worthwhile work of saving the planet “one person at a time” will no longer suffice in the 21st century (Fay, 2011b). We live in a troubled world – within the so-called “developed world”. “We The People” have allowed our democratic institutions to be compromised. We have ceded our collective authority to a plutocracy, an army of the privileged and the powerful drawn from the ranks of government elites and transnational corporate executives increasingly indistinguishable from one another. There is no shortage of autocrats and “abdicrats” vying for leadership roles while behaving more like children than responsible adults. Good authority is in short supply. Counselling and psychotherapy practitioners have both an opportunity and an obligation to develop our social leadership. This leadership is based on our ability to think developmentally about the human person and to link this to the evolutionary developmental potential of the human species. In this new century, we simply must extend our work further out into the world than we have been prone to do. This is the challenge and the opportunity of our time. Alongside the ethic of care with which we are so familiar we need an ethic of justice with which we are not so familiar. For it turns out that environmental sustainability, social justice and spiritual fulfilment are interdependent parts of a single whole. Dismantling the domination structures that continue to make our world unsafe and unsustainable will require a great deal of work by a great many people: real work in the real world. However, this work can only be accomplished by means of a process of consciousness-raising that will only occur in our minds. Now is a good time to integrate our deep understanding of personal identity and personal history with a broad understanding of the political, economic, social and cultural context of our own and our clients’ lives. Now is a good time to internationalise and decolonise our “profession”. Now is a good time for counselling and psychotherapy to include an appreciation for the natural and non-human world as the primary ground and context of all human life, and to become more alert to eco-systemic and eco-spiritual issues in our therapeutic work. Our psychotherapeutic principles have been extensively road-tested in our practice offices and shown to be effective with individuals. These principles can also be applied to progressively larger levels of social organisation, from the individual psyche to the psyche of the world. A “unified field theory of culture” (Fay, 2010, 2011b, 2012) includes:

1. Intrapsychic relations within the microculture within the self.
2. Interpersonal relations within the miniculture of face-to-face interaction.
3. Social relations within the cultural transactions between groups.
4. International relations within the macroculture that joins us at a planetary level as a species; the unitary non-tribal “superself” called humanity or human being.

This conceptual frame helps us transpose and translate psychological content and process across a variety of contexts and levels of analysis: individual process, group process, community relations and international relations. It also helps us overcome the conceptual separation and begin to heal the split between private and public life. In a unified social field, private and public

aspects reciprocally influence each other. Breaking down the barrier between private and public life helps us understand both the need for effective community action and the possibilities for working interpersonally at more than one social level at once.

Marshall Rosenberg (2004), the founder of non-violent communication, wrote:

Great religious leaders and teachers have always suggested that the new creation, the Kingdom of God, is within us. Self-development is where positive change begins. But this should not be confused with being nice, or neat, or calm or clean. Passive, private spirituality is part of the problem. It perpetuates the status quo and leaves unaltered an unjust and unsustainable civilisation. Active, communal spirituality, by contrast, is part of the solution. It serves life by actively working to create life-enriching systems. It is, to be sure, a daunting task to get the word out about an alternative, indigenous consciousness of human place and purpose, humanize oppressive social structures, relieve some of the suffering they are causing, and teach our children how to inhabit a new earth. Because there is so much to do, we have to invest ourselves with great care and skill. But we can celebrate and enjoy living our new story within existing domination structures while working for all the changes we know are so very needed. (p. 44)

It is unlikely that we can learn to care for the Earth without learning to care for one another at the same time. Here in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2012, psychotherapy practitioners are struggling with the consequences of having ceded our autonomy and self-determination to Government regulatory authority. Having loosed, much like the sorcerer's apprentice, the State registration of psychotherapists upon our own heads, we discover to our horror that the Psychotherapy Registration Board of Aotearoa New Zealand, the regulatory authority and registration body for psychotherapists, has proven itself exactly the sort of "thanatological" (science of death) project we had feared it would be (see Fay, 2011c; Tudor, 2011). Now we must reclaim our authority and self-responsibility (see Fay, 2011a). On the bright side, Nga Ao E Rua (the two worlds), a bicultural group of Māori and non-Māori psychotherapists, counsellors and health practitioners, celebrates its eighth birthday, an ongoing experiment in biculturalism and power-sharing based on Te Tiriti o Waitangi (see <http://www.waitangi-tribunal.govt.nz/treaty/>) that has powerfully influenced our national peer professional organisation, the NZAP; and the organisation of Independently Registered Psychotherapy Practitioners is the focus of resistance to the state's attempts to control psychotherapy. Many of us within NZAP continue to grow our diversity awareness and to explore the positive possibilities of partnership. We walk the line between regulatory and aspirational models of competent practice. We struggle to integrate culture, nature and Spirit into more traditional modes of psychological and psychotherapeutic practice, to imagine and then to realise the psychotherapies of the 21st century. We are grateful to Nick Totton for his inspiring leadership as well as for his ethical vision of a vocation to which psychotherapy might aspire – a vision that is neither unprofessional nor anti-profession, but rather alert to the long shadow cast by professionalism and professionalisation.

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