

The Quietly Ferocious Struggle: A Review of Nick Totton's Contribution to and Thinking about Training in Psychotherapy

ALLISON PRIESTMAN, Stroud, UK

ABSTRACT *This article explores Nick Totton's contribution to and thinking about psychotherapy training. Nick Totton has influenced training through his extensive contribution to psychotherapy literature, and directly through his own work as a trainer and course leader. It is suggested that his major contributions to the field are the development of a new modality: Embodied-Relational Therapy, and a model of training based on spaciousness, trust and authenticity. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: psychotherapy training; Embodied-Relational Therapy; wild mind; body psychotherapy; spontaneity; control; meta-skills

INTRODUCTION

There is a quietly ferocious struggle going on for the soul of psychotherapy and counselling, manifesting in many ways – regulation, training, evidence-based practice – but ultimately about the tension between spontaneity and control. (Totton, 2010, p. 11)

Nick Totton is a Cambridge University graduate who studied English, and was firstly a writer and poet. As a young man in the 1970s he was very influenced by the social movements and radical politics of the time. In his early thirties, and partly drawn by Reich's political anarchism, Nick was attracted to Reichian therapy. He undertook William West's first Energy Stream training in Reichian bodywork, starting in 1981. He went on to attend seminars in Process-Oriented Psychology (based on the work of Arnold and Amy Mindel), and complete an MA in Psychoanalytical Studies at Leeds Metropolitan University, and craniosacral bodywork training.

Nick's experiences with radical politics led him to a lack of concern about being at the edge, the fringe, of the world of therapy, rather than the mainstream. This has served him well and, I believe, deeply informs his approach to his work. Nick Totton is not a member of any of the major professional accrediting organisations in the United Kingdom. His affiliations are with the Independent Practitioners Network (<http://i-p-n.org/>) and the European Association for Body Psychotherapy (www.eabp.org.)

Correspondence to: Allison Priestman, Laurel Villa, Swellshill, Brimscombe, Stroud, GL5 2SW, UK.
E-mail: allisonpriestman@virginmedia.com

WOVEN THREADS

In this article I've chosen to not use an academic style. I have, for example, chosen to refer to Nick Totton as "Nick". This reflects the difference between Nick's work as a writer and his work as a trainer. The training courses he runs have always been experiential: giving priority and space to group and personal process. Nick is an academic, but his intellectualism, as distinct from his intellect, is left outside the training space. He has a deep commitment to making training open to different learning styles, and especially to those who feel academically unconfident. While he is highly skilled in his ability to inhale, comprehend and produce the written word, he has an unwavering commitment to training therapists without insisting on their reading or writing a single word. He has been known to refer to his academic writing as a hobby.

Great attention is paid to group process, since we believe that the kind of learning we are looking for can only take place in a safe space, where concerns can be expressed and behaviour challenged. We want participants to learn on an embodied level, which entails being open to deeply stirring experiences (Priestman, Tame, & Totton, 2012, p. 3).

Nick has written very little directly about training – a fact that perhaps in itself illustrates his approach to training. I have, therefore, drawn on his articles and books on therapy, from conversations with colleagues, and from my personal knowledge of and conversations with Nick.

I would like to introduce Nick as a man. He is someone who doesn't neaten the edges of things. He cooks vegetarian food quickly, as he does most tasks – with speed. He knows when enough is enough and, especially in the therapy context, is alert to the value of stepping back when enough has been said. He has a very big heart and a moving capacity to form deep, intimate bonds with people.

This account is my subjective overview of Nick's training work, and it may be illuminating for the reader to know more about where I am coming from: I'm a 44-year-old woman, and, although university educated, I feel underprivileged in the academic world. I'm a body psychotherapist and Embodied-Relational Therapist who has been working beside Nick running workshops and trainings for the past six years. I want to model some of Nick's thinking and approach in the way this article is written. I have been through a struggle in writing it: a struggle to validate non-linear ways of thinking, a struggle not to fall into a hierarchy about communication styles; a struggle to legitimise emotional and body responses; and a struggle to be myself and not feel inhibited and misshaped. This struggle feels very relevant and is one Nick has written about over the years in articles such as "Boundaries and boundlessness" (Totton, 2010) and, extensively, in his recent book, *Wild Therapy* (Totton, 2011). This struggle with writing and the resultant style also encapsulates much of what we are trying to support in and with trainees. In writing this article I have invited more unusual modes of communication and sources of information to inspire the work; inviting dreaming, creativity, bodily and emotional states, and wild mind to inform my process.

HISTORY: ENERGY STREAM, SELFHEAL, AND EMBODIED-RELATIONAL THERAPY TRAINING

Shortly after he completed the Energy Stream course, Nick became one of its trainers. He and his then partner Em Edmondson contributed to the next training cohort, and co-led the

following two. Nick was involved with Energy Stream training from 1981 to 1992. This has been described as a “wild and fertile time” in that Nick and Em, William West, Pete Armstrong, Sean Doherty, and others were intensely talking, reading, and arguing about, experimenting with, learning about, and living therapy (S. Tame, personal communication, August 2012).

In 1988 Nick and Em went on to initiate a new synthesis, which they called Selfheal, which ran between 1988 and 1997. Selfheal integrated more relational work into the original Reichian core of Energy Stream: there was a greater emphasis on transference and counter-transference, and on boundaries; and an expanded reworking of character theory. Thus the groundwork was laid for the unique integration of embodiment, relationship and process, which is now known as Embodied-Relational Therapy. As Stephen Tame (personal communication, August 2012) put it:

My experience of the Selfheal training was of a clear core container for safe and powerful work – much more a way of being with clients than a set of skills to use. It was a life changing experience for me personally: rich, demanding and painful, from which I emerged both younger and older, and certainly more alive. It was the best thing I'd ever done in my life.

In 2001, after Em and Nick separated, Nick launched the postgraduate training in Embodied-Relational Therapy (ERT), a two-year part-time programme which has run successfully for the past 11 years. With the addition of the Wild Therapy year, the ERT training is now a three-year, part-time, modular course, run on a residential basis.

I believe that Nick's development of ERT constitutes a major contribution to psychotherapy training. ERT developed alongside but independently of other relational body psychotherapy modalities in the UK. In the past 20 years, body psychotherapy has gone through a major re-evaluation of its practical and theoretical base (Totton, 1998, 2003, 2005a; Soth, 2006, 2009). The inclusion of psychodynamic insight about unconscious process has greatly strengthened and deepened the body psychotherapy tradition and Nick's has been a seminal voice in this evolution.

ERT has drawn from many streams – psychodynamic psychotherapy, Hakomi, movement practices, process-oriented psychology, and Earth-based spirituality – and continues to develop through the input of the principal trainers: Nick Totton and myself, and of the trainees and clients. While ERT overlaps with other psychotherapies, it has a distinct flavour and is a unique synthesis.

Nick has brought his clarity of thinking to the development of ERT, as a result of which the theoretical basis and integration of its different streams is well grounded and thought through. I know that Nick feels that integrative training courses can have theory simply bolted together. In ERT, there is a coherence and rich complexity in its theoretical underpinnings. For a good introduction to ERT, see Totton and Priestman (2012).

NICK'S APPROACH TO TRAINING IN THE CONTEXT AND CLIMATE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY AND COUNSELLING

In focusing on Nick's contribution to psychotherapy training, it feels important and relevant to consider the psychotherapy field in which Nick's training work is placed.

Throughout Nick's therapy career he has been directly involved in a political struggle within his field of work, which he has evocatively described as for the soul of psychotherapy and counselling: over power, livelihood, access to resources, definition and meaning. He has been active in this struggle in a number of contexts: as a founder member of the IPN (<http://i-p-n.org/>); founding this journal; as an active member and now Chair of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility (www.pcsr-uk.ning.com/); in his involvement with the anti-regulation movement; through numerous conference presentations; and his published writings, including some 16 books. Nick has consistently written articles and books that challenge the culture and beliefs behind therapy (Totton, 2000, 2002, 2005b, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011). He has argued that aspects of the training and culture of therapy actually undermine practitioners' capacity to work with clients (Totton, 2010). His critique is both challenging and confronting, and offers us a different paradigm: "By treating therapists as social technicians on a par with lawyers and accountants the proponents of professionalisation are in one sense aggrandising; but in a deeper sense, they are grievously underestimating the significance of what we try to do" (Totton, 1997, p. 139).

It is interesting to note that at one point Nick and Em Edmondson explored Selfheal joining the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy as an organisational member, thereby giving its graduates access to professional registration. They decided not to join, as it would not have been congruent with the values and ethos of the training course.

Nick Totton has argued that therapy is not a profession. It does not treat illness but rather struggles with distress and meaning. He argues that a more accurate description of therapy is as an enlightenment practice; by attending closely to one's spontaneous process and that of one's clients, without trying to change it (Totton, 1997).

Nick argues that therapy can stand out against the dominant cultural message: "be in control of yourself and your environment". A major way that therapy helps clients is to find a way to tolerate profound uncertainty about the future; to tolerate not being in control of feelings, thoughts, and our bodies (Totton, 2011). In society as a whole there is a huge cultural shift which emphasises the importance of control, and the therapy world is now largely embracing this cultural shift. Nick writes about the resulting conflict within our field as a tussle between control and spontaneity. In his recent book, *Wild Therapy* (Totton, 2011), he details and expands his arguments, looking at the roots of this conflict in terms of domestication and wildness.

Nick has argued extensively that therapy is inherently a risky business and cannot be made wholly safe, and that attempts to do so through regulation and enforcement of universal rules of behaviour are counter-productive and at times dangerous. He believes that our role is not simply to help people overcome their symptoms, but that therapy is most effective when we can allow ourselves to have no goals for the work (Totton, 2007).

Nick suggests that there is the potential for huge freedom when we can relax and let go. Eco-systemic thinking, backed up by recent neuroscience evidence, has shown that decisions are made in the brain microseconds before we think they are (Totton, 2011). Our bodies and our minds, therefore, do not need conscious intervention in order to function. Things happen of their own accord, and we don't have to bring conscious intention to bear on them. He challenges practitioners to not hide behind the status of our role, behind defensive practices, and to risk, at times, dancing outside the frame of our work.

Nick has offered practical support for practitioners who find themselves on the edge and, specifically, he offers training or supervision to therapists who find themselves outside conventional accreditation routes. Nick has repeatedly said on training courses that being a therapist does us good. We are modelling different ways of being for our clients, for example, openness, an un-defensive approach, trust in our own embodiment and spontaneous process, and relaxation. If therapy is viewed as an enlightenment practice it can lift many of the pressures in our work: pressure to be professional, to do it the right way, and to cure our clients. We can have the possibility of relaxing into not being perfect, or the expert, or the one who knows it all; and forgiving ourselves when, inevitably, we don't do our job as well as we would like. This is the attitude and approach which Nick himself models when working as a trainer.

TRAINING: THOUGHTS AND VALUES

Nick is deeply engaged in the quietly ferocious struggle within his training work – the struggle between spontaneity and control. He challenges us to trust therapists' educated instincts. For the past 30 years Nick has consistently offered a model of non-defensive training. Nick has written that therapy – and, I would argue, by extension, that training – is “based on authenticity [which] may reasonably be characterized as un-defensive practice” (Totton, 2010, p. 14). In an anxious professional environment where trainings have progressively increased in length and in the requirements of their trainees, he has maintained his commitment to supporting embodied learning and embodied practice, valuing the importance of the unknown and staying with unconscious process, modelling competent and effective practice, supporting authenticity, and supporting empowerment through internal validation.

How can we best prepare practitioners to work with clients? Nick believes that the qualities of an effective therapist are not primarily intellectual. My guess at his list of qualities are: an ability to recognise and hold one's own material; an ability to make contact with other people; an openness and willingness to share and work on one's own process, and that of one's clients; and an ability to meet across difference. Therapists emerge primarily through their honest and courageous struggle with their material, rather than by acquiring the required skills and understanding on a training course. Nick once said to me that training is what he does to distract people until they have done enough work on themselves to be effective therapists.

EMBODIED-RELATIONAL THERAPY META-SKILLS

Meta-skills, a concept created by Amy Mindell (2001) within the field of Process-oriented Psychology, and developed in a particular way within ERT, describes the qualities of being that therapists bring to their work. In ERT this refers to: contact, awareness, trust, spontaneity, spaciousness, relaxation and wild mind. Nick isn't claiming ownership of these ways of being, but they are a useful vehicle to explore what is individual, unique and innovative about his training approach. Each of the meta-skills is interwoven with the others.

Nick Totton is a very contactful trainer. He turns up openly and honestly as himself and invites others to do so. One trainee recently said of Nick that he doesn't dress up. He doesn't

pretend to be anything that he isn't. He doesn't use his status within the profession to impress others or to hide behind.

Nick encourages trainees and practitioners to maintain an ongoing, moment-to-moment awareness of their own experience. He supports trainees to do their own personal work, to address that which is blocking their work with clients. He believes that the biggest single requirement to be an effective therapist is to know yourself, and to be working on your own process. His training is structured to support this, with groups kept small, with two trainers, and by working in a residential setting.

Nick models a deep trust in people and in the loving nature of the universe. He brings a minimum of planning to training. Stephen Tame (personal communication, September 2012) recalled Nick sharing at the start of a Wild Therapy residential in 2012: "I've managed to arrive here without planning anything at all, and I'm really pleased about that."

Nick gives priority to, and is inclined to trust the wisdom and processes of, the trainees and the training group. He trusts in his own spontaneity and creativity, and in his 30 years' experience, to meet the training needs in the moment. This brings an immediacy and aliveness to the training process.

Nick's thinking is deeply influenced by Reichian ideas about spontaneity (Totton & Edmondson, 2009). As a trainer Nick models spontaneity, and encourages trainees to likewise model spontaneity in their work. Nick actively supports spontaneity within his training, in the beliefs that no one can learn if they are emotionally distressed or distracted by something, and that deep learning occurs through group and individual process.

Like all courses there are demands on time within the ERT training, sometimes acutely so; but there is a deep commitment to providing space for personal and group process, for questions and for the unexpected. This means that important issues at therapists' growing edges are addressed in the moment. This is a different model of ensuring the rigour and robustness of a training. Nick prioritises spaciousness in his trainings, over set curriculum requirements. He trusts that the essential learning for each participant will come from the situational gestalt. To an extent, the taught course material is fluid: each year group will be interested in different aspects.

Nick is deeply relaxed as a trainer, as an animal can be: muscle soft but ready. Nick increasingly believes that a main aim of therapy is to encourage our clients to relax (Totton & Edmondson, 2009) about who we are, about our problems, and about the impossibility of fulfilling other people's expectations. Nick is relaxed about many of the issues around training. He is not interested in "hoop jumping" requirements in his trainings. The ERT training is a post-qualification course, partly because there is less pressure to conform to conventional ideas about entry requirements, assessment processes and external validation.

Wild mind, of which Nick writes at depth in *Wild Therapy*, is perhaps the most significant meta-skill, and the hardest to grasp. It is embodied awareness – a way of being in which we can draw from all aspects of ourselves. Wild mind gives value to experiences which are often dismissed, such as: slips of the tongue, body symptoms, conflicts, events in the world and other disturbances. Therapy can provide an important arena where this kind of liminal awareness can be supported. When we are able to be in wild mind as therapists, we can, I believe, be at our most competent and ethical. When we can bridge the world of dreaming, of embodied and intuitive information gathering and the world of more rational, conscious and verbal ways of being, we are at our most resourced. Nick is deeply committed to

providing training that offers an opportunity to integrate all of our resources, as human beings and practitioners.

I would like to give an example, from a recent course module, of Nick's openness to being questioned, and his support of the spontaneous. At the beginning of an afternoon session, a participant, Judy, asked Nick if she could check out something with him. She seemed anxious, and when encouraged by Nick said that she felt disturbed by a joke that he had made, and feared that he had been manipulative. Nick responded in an open and un-defensive way, and said that he often works with humour. Working in this way, he said, can be risky, and he doesn't always get it right. Judy was referring to the morning check-in, when a female group member had said how she felt angry that morning, but uncomfortable with being so. Nick had teasingly suggested that she could see one of the male group members as a role model for being comfortable with being angry. A discussion ensued between Judy and Nick, which opened out into the group. Some people said that they felt his comment was provocative and goading. A creative 10 minutes was spent exploring the use of humour in therapy, gender and power relations, and the therapeutic implications of the incident. Allowing time for someone's in-the-moment distress, then encouraging a group process, brought rich learning and insights, some of which were directly relevant to the training material on which Nick had planned to focus.

An aspect of the ferocious struggle is the question of how to maintain high standards and ensure ethical practice. A rigorous commitment to supporting reflective and ethical practice is integral to Nick's approach. On a recent training Nick expressed his practice as having no difference between ethics and technique. Ethical considerations for him are central, rather than bolted on. Nick's open, un-defensive practice supports practitioners to undertake rigorous self-reflection. Creating an open, enquiring, spacious, relaxed training environment allows trainees the confidence to explore their strengths and weaknesses.

CLEAR AND PRESENT TRAINING

Embodiment and relationship weave through Nick's training courses: they are at times inseparable. A key strand in the ERT training is the opportunity for trainees to experiment with being more embodied, to think and feel and dream, and to take the risk of bringing more of themselves into the room. Trainees are encouraged to use their embodiment as a source of information about the system they are in with their clients. By deeply knowing ourselves and our physical responses, we are better able to process complex non-verbal communication, in a way that our intellects alone struggle with (Totton & Priestman, 2012).

Many psychotherapy trainings integrate academic and clinical work, from the belief that to be a good clinician you have to be a good academic. Nick challenges this assumption throughout the ERT training, which is attempting a deeper integration of theory and practice.

The ERT training, guided by Nick's input, models a deep trust in present experience, giving support to therapists to risk going into the unknown with their clients and within themselves. A recent trainee describes the course as: "an exploration of more than how it is and what it is to be a therapist, but also – how it is and what it is to be a human being in relation with other human beings in this world" (Priestman, Tame & Totton, 2012, p. 7). The ERT training attempts to resource therapists for the reality of our work: that we spend a lot of our time flying by the seat of our pants (Totton, 2010).

Nick's creation of the Wild Therapy training year can be thought of as the leading edge of his training work. Technique increasingly comes second to being present in the moment. He exemplifies the "less is more" approach. There is a stillness and ease about him that he is able to draw deeply from. He is more willing than ever to take risks, and to show himself in his flawed humanity.

RELAX – NOTHING IS UNDER CONTROL

In writing this article I'm very aware that the ferocious struggle Nick talks about entails ongoing personal engagement with internal feelings of disempowerment and anxiety, both for myself and for fellow therapists.

In a culture of counselling and psychotherapy that emphasises accreditation, regulation, evidence-based practice and the need for an external locus of evaluation, it is difficult to maintain a feeling of competence, of being good enough. The most common concern that I hear from supervisees and trainees is about feeling unconfident and inadequate in their work, even from mature and experienced therapists. Nick has written that therapists can inhibit their own best judgment to act in line with what they believe is expected by the profession (Totton, 2010). Acting from our internalised expectations of what is acceptable behaviour is disempowering. Nick argues for and provides support for therapists to work from their educated instincts, and not to feel beholden to the rulebook. By running training based on authenticity and trust, which offers spaciousness, and prioritises spontaneity, he is offering a different paradigm for the therapy world.

CONCLUSION

Nick is a creative and prolific writer, psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer, whose thinking and ideas are innovative.

Nick demonstrates that it is possible to continue to work as trainers and practitioners at our own leading edges; to follow an uncertain path. He has remained open to developments in psychotherapy training, for example; learning from neuroscience, developments in trauma therapy, and greater emphasis on written work and accreditation, but he has continued to follow his own path with integrity. He discerns, with characteristic rigour, those developments which, he believes, enhance the work, and those which arise from contraction and fear, and acts accordingly. Nick trained at a time and place when therapy was less afraid. He shows that we can offer training that is heartfelt, courageous, and challenging; without strict teaching objectives, external assessment or official approval; we can make mistakes and our trainees will be the richer for them (S. Tame, personal communication, September 2012).

Nick brings passion, integrity and congruence to his work. His is an important voice that speaks from the diversity and richness of the edge. Contentious and challenging at times, his thinking is clear and radical, going to the root of things. His voice in arguing for a different paradigm to hold our work is visionary. The gift in his message is that to be the best therapist we can be we need only be ourselves, with openness, relaxation, and trust.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar for support and suggestions; to Stephen Tame for generous time put into research and editing, and for personal contributions to the text; to William West and Em Edmondson for recollections of Energy Stream and Selfheal, respectively; and to ERT trainees for permission to write about a recent training session.

REFERENCES

- Mindell, A. (2001). *Metaskills: The spiritual art of therapy*. Tempe, AZ: Lao Tse Press.
- Priestman, A., Tame, S., & Totton, N. (2012). *Embodied-Relational Therapy training* [promotional brochure]. Retrieved from <http://www.allisonpriestman.co.uk/page10.html>
- Soth, M. (2006). How “the wound” enters the room and the relationship. *Therapy Today*, 17(10), 38–42.
- Soth, M. (2009). From humanistic holism via the “integrative project” towards integral-relational body psychotherapy. In L. Hartley (Ed.), *Contemporary body psychotherapy: The Chiron approach* (pp. 64–88). London, UK: Routledge.
- Totton, N. (1997). Not just a job: Psychotherapy as a spiritual and political practice. In R. House & N. Totton (Eds.), *Implausible professions: Arguments for pluralism and autonomy in psychotherapy and counselling* (pp 129–140). Ross-on-Wye, UK: PCCS books.
- Totton, N. (1998). *The water in the glass: Body and mind in psychoanalysis*. London, UK: Karnac.
- Totton, N. (2000). *Psychotherapy and politics*. London, UK: Sage.
- Totton, N. (2002). The future for body psychotherapy. In T. Staunton (Ed.), *Body Psychotherapy* (pp. 202–224). London, UK: Brunner Routledge.
- Totton, N. (2003). *Body psychotherapy: An introduction*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Totton, N. (2005a). Can therapy help make a better future? *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 3(2), 83–95.
- Totton, N. (Ed.), (2005b). *New dimensions in body psychotherapy*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Totton, N. (2006). In defence of dependency. *Therapy Today*, 17(5), 18–21.
- Totton, N. (2007). Therapy has no goal: A radical model of practice. *Therapy Today*, 18(9), 24–26.
- Totton, N. (2009). Power in the therapy room. *Therapy Today*, 20(7), 16–19.
- Totton, N. (2010). Boundaries and boundlessness. *Therapy Today*, 21(8), 11–15.
- Totton, N. (2011). *Wild therapy: Undomesticating inner and outer worlds*. Ross-on-Wye, UK: PCCS Books.
- Totton, N., & Edmondson, E. (2009). *Reichian growth work: Melting the blocks to life and love* (2nd ed.). Ross-on-Wye, UK: PCCS Books.
- Totton, N., & Priestman, A. (2012). Embodiment and relationship: Two halves of one whole. In C. Young (Ed.), *About relational body psychotherapy* (pp. 35–55). Galashiels, UK: Body Psychotherapy Publications.



Allison Priestman is an experienced Embodied-Relational Psychotherapist, Supervisor and Trainer, working in private practice in Stroud, Gloucestershire. She has co-led the Embodied-Relational Therapy Training with Nick Totton for the past five years and is an invited trainer to psychotherapy and counselling organisations in Britain. She is a full member of the European Association of Body Psychotherapy and the Chiron Association for Body Psychotherapists. She is particularly interested in embodied counter-transference and how to use it creatively in therapeutic work. She loves gardening, nature and dance. Full details of her work can be found at www.allisonpriestman.co.uk