

Three Hot Potatoes, or Nick Totton's Courage in Inconveniencing the Field of Psychotherapy

ASAF ROLEF BEN-SHAHAR, Tel-Aviv, Israel

ABSTRACT *Nick Totton has over a number of years written vigorously about paradoxical, conflict-laden and otherwise inconvenient topics and, in doing so, has contributed significantly to various psychotherapeutic milieux. This paper focuses on three “hot potatoes” that Totton has written about, areas that presented uncomfortable conflicts in and into psychotherapy, namely: body, relationality, and politics. Being aware of and working with the body compels us to confront our aggressive and erotic drives, our wounds and yearnings, and as therapists often reveals us to our clients more than we intend. Being relational also entails the therapist revealing more of themselves and challenges the traditional analytic assumption (let alone the reality or usefulness of) a neutral, “blank-slate” position. Thirdly, I argue that taking an explicit political stance challenges the clinician’s comfortable, clinic-bound practice, and discomforts the psychotherapist’s habitual position regarding social involvement. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: Nick Totton; body psychotherapy; relationality; politics

SETTING THE BONFIRE

Many countries have celebrations or commemorations which involve bonfires. In Israel our “bonfire night” is celebrated in Lag BaOmer (on the 18th day of the Hebrew month of Iyar), and celebrates Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who, on that day in the 2nd century (Common Era [CE]) revealed the deepest secrets of Jewish mystical Kabbalah (the Zohar). During the evening of the 18th Iyar, bonfires are lit as a symbol of the Zohar (or Luminous). This celebration of what was the mystical has now been adopted as a holiday by secular Jews too; the Zionist movement connected the holiday to Bar Kokhba’s revolt (132–136 CE) against the Roman Empire; now bonfire night is celebrated throughout Israel, often with little knowledge of the mystical origins and connotation. On the evening of Lag BaOmer, children and youths (mostly) gather in their own community and light bonfires, often without adults present, and play with fire, roast hot potatoes and sing songs. In this paper I have drawn on this metaphor as the memories of the

Correspondence to: Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar, Relational Body Psychotherapy Programme, The Israeli Centre for Body-Mind Medicine, 103b Shivtey Israel, Ramat Hasharon, Israel.
E-mail: asaf@imt.co.il

communal bonfires, the gathering and songs, and the social connectedness and sense of wildness and rebellion – not only have a cultural resonance for me but also fit my experience of Nick Totton’s work. This metaphor also allows me to speak about what I identify as three “hot potatoes” in this particular celebratory fire.

For many decades body psychotherapists suffered from the disreputable name associated with the eccentricities of Reich (1948/1998). The reactions to Reich’s person, his political stance and his radical theoretical and clinical practices have frequently prevented other professionals from seriously considering the contribution of body psychotherapy to the larger field of psychotherapy. Thankfully, this is no longer the case. As Andrew Samuels (2012) recently noted, this battle has now been won. However, the attempts to be accepted and recognised have somehow sweetened and tamed some of the important edges of the field. As Samuels (*ibid.*) also observed: “On the one hand body psychotherapy is respected, acceptable and recognised nowadays as part of the relational mainstream of psychotherapy. On the other hand, where has its particular edge gone?” That the “wilder” aspects of body psychotherapy, including its political edge, could be incorporated within an ethically sound practice I have no doubt, but could both aspects, i.e. needing to belong to a wider community, and expression, remain in the context of registration, quality-control, and governmental accountability?

It is no coincidence that it was a Jungian analyst (Samuels) who marked the potential Shadow of body psychotherapy. Psychotherapy in general, and specifically a form that directly attends to and often touches the body, is prone to power struggles, aggressive behaviours and erotic tensions. This paper demonstrates how Nick Totton’s writing keeps the edge that Samuels speaks about, by continuously illuminating the Shadow of body psychotherapy – and of other disciplines. In this paper I discuss this edge with reference to three “hot potatoes” that represent uncomfortable conflicts in psychotherapy: the body, relationality, and politics.

One of the most painful insults in Yiddish or Hebrew is *parve*. In Jewish Kosher tradition, food is divided into *dairy* or *meat*, as it is forbidden to mix the two. Some foods (like fish, vegetables, lentils, margarine, etc.) belong in neither category – these are *parve*. As a result, to say about a person that he or she is *parve* is to indicate that they have no spark, nothing interesting or alive about them or that they have no edge.

A recurring complaint I hear from people about us psychotherapists is that we are, in general, quite *parve*. I believe that this wounding comment points towards a tendency that psychotherapists can easily – and have frequently – perfected: we become too tame and lose our fire, sublimated ad infinitum. Being so preoccupied with trauma work on the one hand and attempting to be medically and politically accepted on the other hand, we frequently lose our edge: we might compromise our wild courage to speak out; to challenge ourselves; to stand out; and to surrender to life, to love, and to embrace our sexuality and aggression more fully.

In an age of accountability, therapists have become subject to the scrutiny of governing agencies that are invested in measurable, neutral, non-engaging and professionalised (rather than intimate) contact. The clinical decision to remain present and authentic to the therapeutic relationship when threats of litigation hang over our heads is no small matter (Mowbray, 1995; Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2007). Nick Totton’s commitment to his own fire and to that of his clients and students stands out as a rare and clear voice in the field of psychotherapy, particularly in body psychotherapy. In a recent keynote panel speech, introducing relational body psychotherapy (Asheri, Carroll, Rolef Ben-Shahar, Soth, & Totton, 2012), Nick said:

Our body bathes in and soaks up the embodied presence of the other; we catch fire from them; we breathe them in and metabolise them; we reverberate to their rhythms, and our own rhythms shift to echo them. Out of this meeting of realities, a third, shared reality is born.

This – his – language is sometimes raw and not fully processed, mostly poetic and oftentimes erotic; when Nick speaks, his alive trembling, his passion and fears and hopes seem to ooze from every pore of his body: both his language and his body reflect the urgency of his message. In that particular inspiring talk, Nick continued:

We arrive in this world eager and expectant to form intense relationships, with a huge capacity to do so which we hurl recklessly into action, like a gambler or a lover staking everything on one throw of the dice. Our bodies tremble and vibrate with urgency to connect, soaring and swooping between peaks of bliss and troughs of agony and despair, visibly expanding and contracting with the responses we receive. These earliest relationships literally form and shape us and all our future relationships; throughout our lives we can experience the deepest wounding and the deepest healing in relationship.

Without losing his academic rigour, his ethical stance or professionalism, Nick has nevertheless continued to be an inspiration of wildness and a beacon of hope for untamed bodies and souls. For this reason, this paper does not simply review his work about the body. I have no capacity, or wish, to write objectively about this man. Nick is a personal and professional role model for me, and I hope to do him justice in sharing his unique capacity to insist on naming and embodying “hot potatoes” while remaining in contact with himself, the other, and the culture within which we live. It is a privilege to be given an opportunity to express gratitude to a person that, mostly unbeknownst to him, has deeply shaped my professional, and my personal, identity. This paper is thus about a man who fights diligently against *parve* psychotherapy and *parve* living.

BRINGING THE FIREWOOD

A client of mine attempted to describe her ambivalence towards our psychotherapeutic work, which is highly influenced by Nick Totton and emphasises both embodiment and relationality. She explained:

Every time I left the clinic room of my previous psychotherapist, I felt like a slot-machine with lots of pennies dropping. I could really understand connections between my history and my present, but the relationship didn't matter that much. Here, our relationship really matters, and I am looking forward to coming here; I am deeply touched and things are changing in my life and my relationships. But I never know what to expect, and I don't always understand what's going on. It's not as clean.

She smiled, and after a while continued:

When I was a very little girl, every time after I finished a pooh, I'd call my Mom or Dad to come and wipe my bottom. When my mother arrived, she would wipe it really well: it felt meticulous and systematic; I never loved her though. I would much prefer my Dad to come and wipe my bottom; we had a lovely connection, but somehow it felt like he never wiped my bottom properly: it always remained a bit messy.

Her story left me smiling. For me, relationships are not “clean”: they are a messy business, with emotional involvement, aggression and erotic impulses, hurt and hope, mutual interests colliding, political aspects interacting, love and hate interchanging. Similarly, and at best, the therapeutic relationship manages, within safe and asymmetrical boundaries, to foster the creation and maintenance of intersubjective involvement. Such intersubjectivity is characterised by mutual creation – and, (metaphorical), destruction – of one another and our joint presence with the view of letting life flow more freely in each of us and between us. My client and I both noted the potential confusion between regressive and adult sexuality, and the incestuous tones, which we later had time to address and with which to work. “If we want to get somewhere,” I replied to her, “we’ll need to get our hands dirty.” I note here that, as a father to two young girls, wiping bottoms is a daily act, and getting my hands dirty with poo is not that uncommon, so the first associations to my client’s story were paternal and neutral; and my countertransference was predominantly paternal and non-erotic.

In the field of body psychotherapy, there is no better role model for getting his hands dirty than Nick Totton. He does so professionally, ethically, and safely – but in the most unyielding and relentless fashion. “We become embodied, it seems,” wrote Totton (2005), “in order to temper our being, as a sword is tempered by plunging it red-hot into water. The plunge into matter *defines* us” (p. 170). This *plunge into matter* involves a willingness to be forged by relationships – and not only the therapist forging the client. This might challenge our preconceived ideas and fantasies as therapists about remaining disconnected from the subject of our research or as having immunity from deep change within the therapeutic engagement.

I was recently asked to review a big book about body psychotherapy. Without thinking, the first thing I did was to open the reference section in the end and look for references to “Totton”. Finding none, my initial response was one of bewilderment and anger. How can a serious book about body psychotherapy omit one of the most seminal contemporary contributors to the field? Retrospectively, however, I can certainly understand the author’s reluctance to include Nick’s work. Nick doesn’t let go of hot potatoes. He insists on bringing up the unpalatable, challenging convenient resting-points, brewing and stirring our waters. Nick is what we need as a community, but not always what we want. Nick rigorously challenges dogmas – personal ones, professional ones, political ones – and he does so without giving up his loving presence.

Upon entering New York harbour for his first American presentation, Freud had famously warned Jung against zealous excitement: “They don’t realise we’re bringing them the plague,” he said (quoted in Kirsner, 1990, p. 196). The plague was, of course, Freud’s conceptualisation about sexuality – and the inconvenient arguments he made for the centrality of our sexual urges and drives in our lives, beginning with our infancy. This was one of Freud’s most important hot potatoes.

Moreover, Freud was right. As a political man, Freud was much more cautious than the father of body psychotherapy, Wilhelm Reich, in presenting his theories. Freud was more politically astute in recognising that, if he wanted his central thesis regarding sexuality and our unconscious motivations (drive theory) to be widely accepted, some ideas would have to go. It was so important for him to present his sexual theories that he was willing to let go of other controversial methodologies and ideas that he held, at least at the beginning. Examples include: his early stance that psychoanalysis was cure by love; and his use of hypnosis – and touch. He prioritised his interventions and contributions and remained “clean”

in many other fields, and managed to deliver the hot potato message about human sexuality deep into society (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2010).

Being an anarchist is not difficult. What makes Nick Totton's contribution valuable is not merely his attending to hot potatoes, but rather his ability to do so without compromising his integrity, while still remaining connected to others and communicating in ways that can be openly heard and considered by a wide-enough audience.

In the next three sections I shall review three major hot potatoes that Nick keeps touching, inconveniencing us psychotherapists, while still (mostly) engaging us in a relationship. The first hot potato is bringing the body into psychotherapy, and this topic will receive special attention here. The two other hot potatoes, of relationality and politics, I discuss only briefly in this paper.

THE FIRST HOT POTATO: BRINGING THE BODY INTO PSYCHOTHERAPY

In his recommendations on the technique of psychoanalysis, Freud (1915/1957, 1913/1958) explained his reasoning for the psychoanalytic positioning of the analyst behind the analysand. He wrote:

I hold to the plan of getting the patient to lie on a sofa while I sit behind him out of his sight. This arrangement has a historical basis; it is the remnant of the hypnotic method out of which psycho-analysis was evolved. But it deserves to be maintained for many reasons. The first is a personal motive, but one which others may share with me. I cannot put up with being stared at by other people for eight hours a day (or more). Since, while I am listening to the patient, I, too, give myself over to the current of my unconscious thoughts, I do not wish my expressions of face to give the patient material for interpretations or to influence him in what he tells me. (Freud, 1913/1958, pp. 133–134)

In this paragraph, Freud clearly demonstrated his commitment to his patient's autonomy and, moreover, he allowed us a glimpse into his own apprehension about his embodied presence. Certainly, the client's subjectivity also manifested in his body, and his unconscious stream of thoughts was expressed as somatic reality. Freud clearly recognised it, alongside the more unpalatable recognition that the therapist was as exposed and potentially seen by the client – inasmuch as his body was present in the room. Nick Totton (1998) related to this inconvenient position by arguing that: “*subjectivity is a bodily function*, not primarily a linguistic one. Subjectivity is also a relational function, but relating occurs first of all through the body” (p. 152).

Freud's attempts to conceal his body from his patient's gaze might have resulted from his own personal body-shame and his dislike of his own appearance (Freud, 1955; Reis, 2004) and not only from his theoretical stance. I consider the reintroduction of body into therapy as a hot potato since being a body involves exactly what Freud feared: being seen by the other as a body. After all, we smell, we sweat; our autonomic nervous system exposes us to the other in our arousal and fear, our desire and disgust, our boredom and needs.

Totton (1998) phrased it beautifully:

I propose to give (relatively) rigorous form to the popular notion of the “bodymind” . . . of mind as necessarily manifest in and through body, and to suggest that the concept and experience of mind as disembodied, actually or potentially, is in fact dysfunctional. (p. 151)

This position is particularly “hot” or messy when it comes to transference dynamics, where the therapist’s bodily responses inevitably enter the dialogue (whether explicitly or implicitly), thus influencing the client’s processes, as well as they are influenced by the client. Nick, together with Allison Priestman (Totton & Priestman, 2012), openly acknowledged the inconvenience of having two bodies in the room:

Bodywork draws attention to what is always the case, that there are two bodies in the room, so that relationship issues are likely to be “hotter” – not that feelings will be different, or stronger exactly, but they will be rather more in the here-and-now, more accessible to consciousness. (p. 49)

When transference phenomena are viewed as embodied, they imply a very active participation on the therapist’s part: our bodies communicate with each other unconsciously, and the two of us, bewildered and sometimes lost, attempt to unravel these dynamics. “Transference”, argued Nick Totton and Allison Priestman (*ibid.*), “is thus not only a psychological but also a *bodily* process, a function of implicit procedural memories of childhood relationships, learnt complexes of physical response held outside consciousness and in part repressed from consciousness (p. 39). Freud (1915/1957) acknowledged the same phenomenon of unmediated unconscious communication: “It is a very remarkable thing that the unconscious can react upon another, without passing through consciousness” (p. 126).

Reich (1972) through his character analysis attempted to shed light on this mysterious phenomenon and, in the spirit of Freud, to demystify it. Totton (1998) illustrated it thus:

Reich believes that he has – in very Freudian style – seen through, pierced through faulty representations to the bodily heart of the matter. There is an uncomfortable triumphalism in all of this, reminiscent of Freud’s and Breuer’s “Preliminary Communication”; perhaps it always seems so simple at the start! But Reich’s involvement with the body-as-psyche is not simple-minded – despite his single minded approach. (p. 96)

Indeed, psychoanalysis in general and relational psychoanalysis in particular has been revisiting and reconsidering the place of the body in psychotherapy. The central contributions to this of authors such as Anzieu (1989) and McDougall (1989) have been taught in psychoanalytic trainings, but their writing, as that of others, consistently ignored that the body was being rigorously explored, theoretically and clinically, in the field of body psychotherapy.

Nick Totton has managed to rectify that. His writing on the body has appeared in psychoanalytic books, like his important chapter on touch (Totton, 2006a) in Graeme Galton’s (2006) *Touch Papers*; and his exploration of the body in psychoanalysis (Totton, 1998), which was written in an analytic and dynamic language. Today, thanks to the relational body psychotherapy movement and to Nick Totton’s contribution, body psychotherapy as a modality, and within it Reich’s contributions, are being considered and dialogued within relational and analytic milieus (Anderson, 2008; Aron & Anderson, 1998; Corrigan, Payne, & Wilkinson, 2006; Orbach, 2003, 2004, 2004). Writers and clinicians like Shoshi Asheri (2004, 2009), Michael Soth (2005, 2009), Roz Carroll (2009), Julianne Appel-Opper (2010), and others have also been part of the relational turn in body psychotherapy, which attempts to integrate contemporary analytic thinking with the rich history and knowledge gained in body psychotherapy.

Reich's contribution reclaimed lost aspects of the body, character sexuality and politics within analysis, but his extremism alienated those who wished to remain within mainstream psychoanalysis. His Marxist political views, his spiritual writing and his countercultural practices at times prevented serious consideration of his work. Even if we put aside Reich's anachronistic dogmatism and relate to body psychotherapy as a mainstream therapeutic practice, it continuously positions the therapeutic dyad at its uncomfortable, inconvenient edge. We are called to note our lust and envy, our disgust and neediness, our aggression and violence, our erections and wetness in their immediate and unprocessed somatic form. Here, we are no better than our clients, we are not "sorted" or "fixed" but, instead, share with them the same human struggles – to connect and disconnect, to embody and disembody, to belong and to separate and individuate, to merge and to destroy.

Perhaps the attempt body psychotherapy is making to blend in fully with the larger psychotherapeutic community is bound to fail. Perhaps our role as body psychotherapists is to follow the example of Reich (1946) and Totton and to maintain an outside edge, which is not compatible with legislation, regulation and/or hierarchical accountability. Totton (2003a) formulated it more succinctly: "Body psychotherapy, as we have seen, has often been explicitly countercultural in tone and content; its theories, however complex and subtle, are often not compatible with conventional academic wisdom" (p. 136).

Historically speaking, when, in 1934 Reich was expelled from the International Psychoanalytic Association (Sharaf, 1984), body psychotherapy was adopted by humanistic psychology and the counter-movements of the 1950s and '60s. While allowing the ideas and practices of body psychotherapy to develop and prosper, and to maintain their political edge, one unfortunate consequence of this alliance was a split from psychoanalytic thinking, and particularly from psychoanalytic rigour. For example, some Reichian ideas were incorporated by Osho and Richard Price, both prominent in the human potential movement, and practised at times insensitively and with little therapeutic facilitation or care (Young, 2011a). Some body-psychotherapeutic modalities, as noted by Young (2011b), disconnected from psychodynamic and psychoanalytic thinking and, consequently, their practitioners fell into seductive traps of inflated positive transference dynamics.

When therapy focuses on the body, and particularly when touch is employed as part of the therapeutic work, three main transference dynamics are invoked. Totton and Priestman (2012) illustrate it thus:

Intimate physical contact, in our culture, generally implies one or more of the following: a sexual relationship, an adult-child relationship, a "making better" relationship (doctor, nurse, dentist, etc.). Hence bodywork can be enormously confusing for both parties, especially if they cannot bring awareness to it: a mutual trance develops where both people fantasise about their relationship in one or more of the ways outlined, without owning those fantasies. (This is, of course, also true of verbal therapy, perhaps especially when the client lies down.) The fantasies are actually very useful in exploring core beliefs and patterns of relationship – but only if we can study them openly. (p. 49)

In his bold, analytically informed and politically minded thinking, Totton is a professional trickster. Not only has he pointed to the impossibility and dysfunctionality of disembodied therapy, but he has similarly challenged body psychotherapy to own up to its Shadow side. It is hard to maintain an all sweet, transference position after reading Totton's arguments.

Totton is one of the most astute critics of the field of body psychotherapy as a distinct therapeutic modality. In his important book *Body Psychotherapy: An Introduction* Totton (2003a) wrote:

I have already suggested that one possibly unfortunate effect of the regulation process is the choice of name for our ensemble of practices: “body psychotherapy” unites us around our most controversial shared characteristic; it does little to describe what we are really about – a holistic approach to the entire human being. In that sense, it actually reinstates the mind–body split which this group of therapies are concerned to overcome, by identifying them with one side of the same tired old polarity. On the one hand, the name “body psychotherapy” is a bold claiming of territory; on the other, it is the sign at the entrance to a ghetto. (p. 136)

To summarise: once the therapist considers the body of the client, and her or his own body in therapy, there is no going back. He or she inevitably connects to a myriad of inconvenient, yet highly meaningful facets of relating. Nick Totton’s writing – the sheer volume of his writing, the quality of it, and his dissatisfaction with simply preaching to the converted – has changed the face of body psychotherapy in the world, and I believe has also impacted and will continue to influence the fields of political psychotherapy, relational psychotherapy and eco-psychotherapy.

Finally, I cannot speak about Nick’s writing about body without relating to Nick’s body: a beautiful man, tall and proudly held, nobody can mistake Nick for being tame, or *parve*. His earrings and necklace, his untrimmed beard and fiercely loving gaze, his soft voice and insane choice of clothing: all mark connection with earth, and with spirit – with wildness and wilderness both internal and external.

THE SECOND HOT POTATO: RELATIONALITY

While relational psychoanalysis and psychotherapy are a blossoming trend in the psychoanalytic milieu, relationalists also attract great criticism. Relational psychotherapy is inconvenient for those who wish to remain “clean”. One of the forefathers of relational psychoanalysis, Hans Loewald (1986), wrote:

I believe it is ill-advised, indeed impossible, to treat transference and countertransference as separate issues. They are the two faces of the same dynamic, rooted in the inextricable intertwining with others in which individual life originates and remains throughout the life of the individual in numberless elaborations, derivatives, and transformations. (p. 276)

Psychoanalyst Barbara Pizer (2006) has boldly expanded on the same notion:

There can be no analysis of the person in the patient’s place without concurrent scrutiny of what’s going on inside the person sitting in the analyst’s place, and how she may be contributing to whatever occurs in the moment. Nobody says it is easy, or even fully possible, but that is the relational effort. (p. 34)

If Nick Totton introduced the hot potato of the body into the field of relational psychoanalysis, then bringing relationality into body psychotherapy inconvenienced us just as much. In an

earlier paragraph, I quoted Totton's review of the three most common transference dynamics when working with touch: parent–child, expert–patient and sexual–erotic couple. The earlier forms of humanistic body psychotherapy tended to bathe unconsciously in the comfort of either the expert–patient dyad or, in some softer forms of body psychotherapy, to give in exclusively to positive maternal transference dynamic, i.e. the good parent who is engaged in reparative regression.

While the place for reparative work is important, I believe that much of it was done to avoid the potential for aggression and erotic transference. In characteristic manner, Totton (2005) has challenged this position:

Embodiment directly implies relationship. Our characteristic style of embodiment, our willingness or otherwise to be embodied, expresses itself through our way of relating to the world and to people – our needs, our desires, our projections, our defences – sometimes creative, sometimes problematic. (p.171)

In writing this, Totton echoes Stephen Mitchell (2004), one of the most influential writers in relational psychoanalysis, who proposed that: “there is no way to filter out the analyst's impact on the process” (p. 540). Furthermore, Mitchell (2005) later emphasised that if the patient doesn't get “under the analyst's skin” (pp. 5–6), then the therapeutic process is limited in scope.

Such a position challenges the body psychotherapist to develop a deep understanding of, and practise an ongoing attending to his or her relational and biographical tendencies: not only to watch the client but to turn his or her rigorous examination inwardly too. Therapy ceased to exist – as body psychotherapy sometimes did – as neat sets of movement, or breath and touch exercises, and became a pulsating, messy and alive pool of mutual, embodied influences that could not be completely unravelled, that existed forever in tension. Totton's and others' rigour reintroduced complexity into body psychotherapy and, while inconveniencing us body psychotherapists, also allowed a more fertile, bilateral dialogue with other therapeutic modalities.

Totton's own system of therapy, *Embodied-Relational Therapy* (ERT), is highly committed to maintaining the pulsating tension of relationality and embodiment. As Totton (2005) has argued: “ERT finds it more helpful to think of ‘spirit’ and ‘matter’ as directions or polarities of energy: tendencies *between which* every being exists and moves” (p. 170).

THE THIRD HOT POTATO: MIXING PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH POLITICS

I am teaching a course on working relationally with embodied sexuality. During one of our last meetings, a hot debate started concerning dogma and cultural indoctrinations. One of the participating psychotherapists protested: “I am not interested in this political debate. I am not a political person in my clinic – just a person.” To my delight, one of the women therapists responded: “There is no such thing as a private psychotherapist. Everything we do is saturated with the political and the social. We are always political.”

For me, practising psychotherapy involves both bravery and cowardice. There is something brave in allowing deep and intimate relationships to unfold, to witness the stories of humanity, with the pains and hopes, suffering and injustice, and to face our limited capacity to do anything else but bear witness and offer our hearts. Philip Bromberg (1998) suggested that

psychotherapy is an opportunity to do something dangerous without leaving the office. Psychotherapy is also cowardice because we tend to stay in our small, secure clinics and not only use the boundaries to protect our clients but also as an excuse to avoid engaging with cultural, societal and political distress.

It is easy for us, psychotherapists, to define ourselves as “good doers” and dismiss any further need for impacting society and using the psychological understanding and the moral position we hold to speak up and speak out. Many of us, including me, take great comfort in not having to do any political activity (because I’m already helping people in distress); accepting, with certain self-righteousness, social dogmas, injustice, racism, capitalist manipulation, militant indoctrination or other prejudices and unfair governance; and remaining quiet.

Not so Totton. Nick founded this very journal, which is a rebellious call to speak up and to assume responsibility. His extensive political activity ranges from simply refusing to accept governmental regulation (Totton, 2003, 2006) to offering real alternatives to accountability (Totton, 1997b). In general, Totton calls us to remain at the edge of our comfortable couches and assume responsibility – not narcissistic omnipotent responsibility, but real communal and cultural responsibility – for the body to which we belong, for our surrounding, and the world in which we live.

This hot potato deserves a special place in the bonfire, both because of the journal that publishes this paper and because it goes against the grain of the psychotherapeutic character. In her book *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Alice Miller (1981) described something of our collective character:

It is often said that psychoanalysts suffer from a narcissistic disturbance. . . . His sensibility, his empathy, his intense and differentiated emotional responsiveness, and his unusually powerful “antennae” seem to predestine him as a child to be used – if not misused – by people with intense narcissistic needs. (p. 22)

I believe that many of us psychotherapists hide in our small rooms because we are guilt-bound, deeply influenced by the external world, and finding ourselves compelled to respond. Our biographies tend, so I believe, to make our narcissistic wounding too painful to bear in political and social situations. In the safety of our clinic, protected by strict boundaries of time, space and money, we can be open to do what we do naturally – to be impacted and be moved to respond. The individual psychotherapist is, and I am talking about myself here, using the clinic to protect his autistic over-stimulated centre from flooding.

. . . and Nick Totton, in his courageous, unyielding style, dares us to step outside to the sun, to find our breath among our brethren, to lean for support, and to offer support too. This last hot potato involves a call to stretch one of the most painful pathologies so many of us share – and take a more active position in society.

My fingers are slightly burned now, and I can smell the sweet fumes of the hot potatoes, cooking with onions in the embers of the bonfire.

ENDING – FOR NOW: BLOWING ON THE EMBERS

“The fundamental assumption of ERT,” wrote Nick Totton (2005), “is that *we all do the best we possibly can*; the best that we know so far” (p. 168). The best that we possibly can,

however, is not static, it changes, and we have an important role in cultivating it and expanding it. Nick Totton seems not to let go of this tension between accepting that we are doing our best and aspiring for that best to expand, and to be more inclusive.

The three hot potatoes identified in this paper are, not surprisingly, not the only ones Nick Totton has engaged and played with. Some of the other hot potatoes he has handled include: his exploration of spiritual aspects of psychotherapy (Totton, 1997a); paranormal phenomena (Totton, 2003c) (see also Cameron, 2013, in this issue); and eco-psychology (Rust & Totton, 2012); and his engagement with sexual and gender orientation (Totton, 2003, 2003, 2006, 2006).

This paper presented three hot potatoes or levels of inconvenience, each of which challenges the psychotherapist to show up more, to dare and manifest their true calling: to express their consciousness and embodiment, as well as their dissociation and disembodiment. Totton writes, works and teaches with a kindness of spirit that reveals an important facet behind all these hot potatoes or inconvenient truths: faith in our possibility to be better and do better. He might be naïve, but his naïvety is what we all need in a world so full of suffering, because it calls us to step up, to do what we have come here for fully: to relate, to embody, and to manifest. Totton walks his talk, and leads the way through his own discomfort and challenges, without losing sight of his humanity – and this, in my opinion, is the work of a true spiritual leader.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wife, Tom, and Allison Priestman for their feedback and comments which helped shape this paper.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, F. S. (Ed.), (2008). *Bodies in treatment: The unspoken dimension*. Hove, UK: Analytic Press.
- Anzieu, D. (1989). *The skin ego*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Appel-Opper, J. (2010). Intercultural body-oriented psychotherapy: The culture in the body and the body in the culture. *British Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 7(2), 13–23.
- Aron, L., & Anderson, F. S. (Eds.), (1998). *Relational perspectives on the body*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.
- Asheri, S. (2004, 11 September). *Erotic desire in the therapy room. Dare we embody it? Can we afford not to?* Paper presented at the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy Conference, London, UK. Retrieved from <http://www.yobeely.f2s.com/articles/eroticdesire.html>
- Asheri, S. (2009). To touch or not to touch: A relational body psychotherapy perspective. In L. Hartley (Ed.), *Contemporary body psychotherapy: The Chiron approach* (pp. 106–120). Hove, UK: Routledge.
- Asheri, S., Carroll, R., Rolef Ben-Shahar, A., Soth, M., & Totton, N. (2012). *Relational body psychotherapy*. Panel presentation at the 13th International Congress of the European Association of Body Psychotherapy “The Body in the World, The World in the Body”, Cambridge, UK.
- Bromberg, P. M. (1998). *Standing in spaces*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.
- Cameron, R. (2013). The energy in the room: Bodies behaving weirdly. *Psychotherapy and Politics International* 10(1), 34–39.
- Carroll, R. (2009). Self-regulation: An evolving concept at the heart of body psychotherapy. In L. Hartley (Ed.), *Contemporary body psychotherapy* (pp. 89–105). Hove, UK: Routledge.
- Corrigall, J., Payne, H., & Wilkinson, H. (2006). *About a body: Working with the embodied mind in psychotherapy*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Freud, S. (1955). The “Uncanny”. In *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 17, pp. 217–256; J. Strachey, Ed.). London, UK: Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1919)

- Freud, S. (1915/1957). The unconscious. In *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 14, pp. 159–215; J. Strachey, Ed.). London, UK: Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1915)
- Freud, S. (1913/1958). On beginning the treatment (Further recommendations on the technique of psychoanalysis). In *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 12, pp. 121–144; J. Strachey, Ed.). London, UK: Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1913)
- Galton, G. (Ed.) (2006). *Touch papers*. London, UK: Karnac Books.
- Kirsner, D. (1990). Is there a future for American psychoanalysis? *Psychoanalytic Review*, 77, 175–200.
- Loewald, H. W. (1986). Transference–countertransference. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 34, 275–287.
- McDougall, J. (1989). *Theatres of the body: A psychoanalytic approach to psychosomatic illness*. London, UK: Free Association.
- Miller, A. (1981). *The drama of the gifted child*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Mitchell, S. A. (2004). My psychoanalytic journey. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 24(4), 531–541.
- Mitchell, S. A. (2005). *Influence and autonomy in psychoanalysis*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.
- Mowbray, R. (1995). *The case against psychotherapy registration*. London, UK: Trans Marginal Press.
- Orbach, S. (2003). There is no such thing as a body. In K. White (Ed.), *Touch, attachment and the body* (pp. 17–34). London, UK: Karnac.
- Orbach, S. (2004a). The John Bowlby memorial lecture: The body in clinical practice, part two: When touch comes to therapy. In K. White (Ed.), *Touch, attachment and the body* (pp. 35–47). London, UK: Karnac.
- Orbach, S. (2004b). What can we learn from the therapist's body? *Attachment & Human Development*, 6(2), 141–150.
- Pizer, B. (2006). Risk and potential in analytic disclosure: Can the analyst make “the wrong thing” right? *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 42, 31–40.
- Reich, W. (1946). *The mass psychology of fascism*. New York, NY: Orgone Institute Press. (Original work published 1933.)
- Reich, W. (1972). *Character analysis*. New York, NY: Noonday Press. (Original work published 1933.)
- Reich, W. (1948/1998). The discovery of the orgone. Vol. 2: *The cancer biopathy*. London, UK: Banton Press. (Original work published 1948.)
- Reis, B. E. (2004). You are requested to close the eyes. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 14(3), 349–371.
- Rolef Ben-Shahar, A. (2007). Connecting in the age of accountability. *Self and Society* 34(4), 33–38.
- Rolef Ben-Shahar, A. (2010). Blanche Wittman's breasts. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 8(3), 213–226.
- Rust, M.-J., & Totton, N. (2012). *Vital signs: Psychological responses to ecological crisis*. London, UK: Karnac.
- Samuels, A. (2012). Keynote speech given at the 13th International Congress of the European Association of Body Psychotherapy. “The Body in the World, The World in the Body”, Cambridge, UK.
- Sharaf, M. (1984). *Fury on earth: Biography of Wilhelm Reich*. London, UK: Arrow Books.
- Soth, M. (2005). Embodied countertransference. In N. Totton (Ed.), *New dimensions in body psychotherapy* (pp. 40–55). Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- 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). Hove, UK: Routledge.
- Totton, N. (1997a). 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. (1997b). The Independent Practitioners Network: A new model of accountability. In R. House, & N. Totton (Eds.), *Implausible professions: Arguments for pluralism and autonomy in psychotherapy and counselling* (pp. 287–293). Ross-on-Wye, UK: PCCS Books.
- Totton, N. (1998). *The water in the glass: Body and mind in psychoanalysis*. London, UK: Rebus.
- Totton, N. (2003a). *Body psychotherapy: An introduction*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Totton, N. (2003b). The baby and the bathwater; “Professionalisation” in psychotherapy and counselling. In Y. Bates, & R. House (Eds.), *Ethically challenged professions: Enabling innovation and diversity in psychotherapy and counselling* (pp. 119–129). Ross-on-Wye, UK: PCCS Books.

- Totton, N. (Ed.). (2003c). *Psychoanalysis and the paranormal: Lands of darkness*. London: Karnac.
- Totton, N. (2005). Embodied relational therapy. In N. Totton (Ed.), *New dimensions in body psychotherapy* (pp. 168–181). Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Totton, N. (2006a). A body psychotherapist's approach to touch. In G. Galton (Ed.), *Touch papers* (pp. 145–162). London, UK: Karnac Books.
- Totton, N. (2006b). Birth, death, orgasm, and perversion: A Reichian view. In D. Nobus, & L. Downing (Eds.), *Perversion: Psychoanalytic perspectives* (pp. 127–146). London, UK: Karnac.
- Totton, N. (2006c). The institutions of psychotherapy. In N. Totton (Ed.), *The politics of psychotherapy: New perspectives* (pp. 108–120). Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Totton, N., & Priestman, A. (2012). Embodiment and relationship: Two halves of one whole. In C. Young (Ed.), *About relational body psychotherapy* (pp. 35–53). Stow, UK: Body Psychotherapy Publications.
- Young, C. (2011a). The history and development of body psychotherapy: European diversity. In C. Young (Ed.), *The historical basis of body psychotherapy* (pp. 107–123). Stow, UK: Body Psychotherapy Publications.
- Young, C. (Ed.). (2011b). *The historical basis of body psychotherapy*. Stow, UK: Body Psychotherapy Publications.



Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar is an Israeli-based relational body psychotherapist and the training director of the Relational Body Psychotherapy Programme at the Israeli Centre for Body-Mind Medicine. He also teaches in clinical and academic centres in Israel and Europe. He has published papers about body psychotherapy, politics, relational psychotherapy and hypnosis and a few book chapters in psychotherapy books. He is a member of the editorial board of *Body psychotherapy Publications*, as well as *Self and Society* and *Body, Dance and Movement in Psychotherapy*. His first book, *A Therapeutic Anatomy*, is a textbook on relational body psychotherapy and has

been published in Israel (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2013). He is married to Tom and is a father to two girls: Zohar and Shuy Grace. He loves wildlife (particularly birds), dancing, music and tattoos.