

# Book Review for the Transactional Analyst

By Hayley Marshall MSc PTSTA

**Wild Therapy: Undomesticating inner and outer worlds**

Nick Totton

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*'Therapy is by nature wild; but a lot of it at the moment is rather tame. This book is intended to help shift the balance.'* (p1)

Thus begins Nick Totton's tour de force exploration of the vital nature of our re connection with what he terms, 'wild mind.' This ecological concept consisting of our embodied awareness of living within a complex ecosystem – ecological consciousness - forms the backbone of this book. Cultivation of this is viewed by the author as essential for both our own sanity and for the future of the planet. Therefore, the work here is well situated within the burgeoning fields of ecopsychology and ecotherapy, and amplifies ideas from relational and body psychotherapies. The writing springs from diverse, fertile contextual ground relating to a central theme - our desire for control over our internal and external worlds, and the impossibility and undesirability of this being achieved. Totton anchors his study in the radical social theoretical roots of psychotherapy and counselling; the domestication of human beings in the Neolithic era; and the recent push in the UK for regulation of therapy. This gives the reader a solid, albeit broad and intriguing base from which to set forth.

Along the way Totton encapsulates strands of thinking from, amongst others: ecology, geography, anthropology, literature and psychology, to build a case for the necessity of reconnecting with our wild inner and outer worlds, and then for us to reconsider the role of therapy within this process. He invites us to 'roam freely' whilst associating and relating with the rich and varied terrain. Beginning with 'Wild Roots', Totton reminds us of early radical thinking which emphasises 'the wild side of therapy', and which underpins many of the therapeutic modalities known to us today. This chapter of the book is certainly illuminating and I was heartened to be reminded of TA's contribution to the radical here; with references to Berne's idea of autonomy, and Claude Steiner's work on radical psychiatry (p 24).

Continuing on through the book we visit an exploration of the somewhat illusory concept of 'wilderness'; Totton's development of 'Wild Mind', investigate issues concerning human domestication and desire for control; and reflect on the possibility of 'Wild Therapy' as 'an attitude of mind' informed by wildness. All of this demonstrates thorough research, and is well referenced.

Despite the complexity of the landscape the author's intentions and aims are clearly expressed, and are signposted at fairly regular intervals. Totton even warns about the potential pitfalls of the next encounter with the material, as at the beginning of Chapter 5, concerning the negativity surrounding destructive aspects of human domestication. This aspect of his style provides clarity and therefore, an interesting sense of protection and security for the reader in what could be experienced as an overwhelming (bewildering!) array of information. Here Totton successfully achieves what I would describe as a 'held wildness' in his writing style. He offers a guiding presence, and I experienced a strong sense of being accompanied by him as we journeyed through the ideas. It was only at a few points that I actually felt really lost (as opposed to immersed) in the material at times, mostly in

Chapter 7 where he examines the human/wild boundary, involving more lengthy quotations from other sources and so possibly less from him! It occurs to me that intentionally or not, Totton's writing process generally models how to gain/provide support when encountering complex, unpredictable territory after leaving the security of domesticity.

However, despite this, with Totton's emphasis in the book placed firmly on shifting the balance towards wildness, there were points in the text where I missed some solid recognition of the human *need* for control. I am reminded of aspects of TA theory concerning psychobiological hungers discussed by Hargaden and Sills (2002), referring to the tension set up by the loss of the 'containing structures of the traditional P2' (Hargaden and Sills 2002:160), as against human beings' 'natural hunger to exercise control over their own lives and relationships' (Meredith (2000) in Hargaden and Sills 2002:184). In his lively discussions of defensive practice (Chapter's 6 & 9), Totton forthrightly challenges the practice of a rigidly held (by some in the profession) 'restrictive' therapeutic frame. His focus is especially on an unexamined notion of therapeutic boundaries and their 'codification in legal and quasi-legal structures' (P 134). This is certainly an important debate. But although he does offer a discussion of a more fluid approach to thinking about the relational use of boundaries in therapy, I personally, would have liked a more explicit emphasis on the holding element of the therapeutic frame in *supporting* wild mind process, and as an essential requirement in the focussing of therapeutic space. So, returning to the quotation above, whilst shifting the balance is in my view, very welcome, I think it important not to throw out the appropriately held baby with the over-domesticated bathwater!

Nevertheless it is precisely because of Totton's obvious passion for challenging dogma, and his experience at working with relational embodiment, that I found the sections featuring his thinking about therapy highly engaging. The culmination of this aspect is in Chapter 9 where the writing about wild therapy (drawn from his principles of wild mind) is eloquent, insightful and illuminating. Much of this is supported by some thought provoking case examples. Although, he says himself that wild therapy may involve nothing new in terms of therapeutic practice, Totton's writing certainly has a flush of originality flowing through it, with his more radical stance reflected in the connecting up of many pre-existing trends. His work on extending the concept of relationality to the more-than-human world is particularly interesting in this regard. A re-emphasised 'attitude of mind' (Wild Mind) is certainly an important element in developing newer forms of extensive relational thinking incorporating our natural environment, and Totton expresses this link very clearly.

I am already receptive to these ideas as a 'wild therapist', in that I already work with embodied relationality in the outdoors. As a reader I feel more than willing to meet Totton in his 'wild' territory, but there is a nagging question for me about the appeal of this book to those more mainstream thinkers/workers - the 'tamer' therapist. I have some doubts about the need to label therapy as 'wild' (P 203) in order to for it to reclaim a more radical position within our world. Largely as I believe this could potentially alienate the very practitioners that I think need to be engaged with.

In summary, Totton's writing provides us with the creative thinking required to infuse life back into therapeutic processes and redirect them back to a more radical role within the world. It inspires passion, invites debate and above all, offers a willingness to walk to the edge of therapeutic orthodoxy, and beyond. This book is a firm wakeup call from the narcotic effects of over-domestication for the human race and therapy in particular. Here is an important accomplishment to help us think about where we've come from and where we desperately need to go next. In this sense alone this is a book to be recommended to all practitioners.

## References

Hargaden, H., and Sills, C. 2002. Transactional Analysis - A Relational Perspective. Hove: Brunner-Routledge