

Book Review

Embodied Relating: The Ground of Psychotherapy

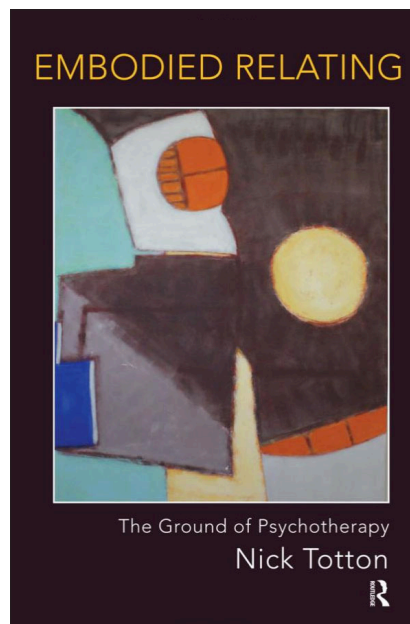
By Nick Totton, Karnac, London, 2015, 272pp,
£24.64 (paperback), ISBN: 9781782202936

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Originally trained as a Reichian body psychotherapist, Nick Totton also holds a Master's degree in Psychoanalytic Studies and has completed training in craniosacral therapy. His work has become broad-based and open to the unexpected. He has authored or edited 15 books – mostly in psychotherapy-related topics – in addition to writing numerous articles published in a range of academic journals.

Totton describes this book, *Embodied Relating: The Ground of Psychotherapy*, as 'a contribution to a collective project which has been underway for some years now' (p. xiv). It brings historical perspectives of body psychotherapy into dialogue with contemporary thinking and research. *Embodied Relating* is an exploration into a moving away from body psychotherapy's reliance on learning from relational verbal therapy. Instead, it invites psychotherapists who rely primarily upon verbal communication to consider how embodiment is, in fact, central to what they are trying to do. This book is not just for body psychotherapists, nor just for verbal practitioners, but inclusive to learning as a whole. Totton is transparent in his understanding that not every aspect of the book will either be something new or innovative to all practitioners all of the time, but will hopefully hold something interesting for all along the way.

Totton's intention is to demonstrate that embodiment and relationship are inseparable, not only in psychotherapy but in our everyday existence. As he describes, 'disconnection from our own embodiment both *protects* and *deepens* our wounds'



(p. xvi). Therefore, our embodiment is a relational resource and worthy of exploration and understanding. *Embodied Relating* traverses through areas that have been written about previously – for example, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and its uncovering of what it means to exist, non-verbal communication as expressed via the felt sense that informs Gendlin's focusing technique, as well as countless other theories that Totton enquires into and reflects upon, as he strives to answer questions and elucidate the term we know as 'embodiment'.

The book is divided into parts, although without being labelled as such, with 'The story so far' helpfully reminding readers of key points every few chapters, and suggesting what to take into the forthcoming chapters, as Totton continues

to explore the main theme of embodiment expressed through different arenas, such as social context, trauma and therapeutic practice. As his introduction suggests, depending upon readers' areas of interest or understanding there are parts within the book that appear to flow with free thoughts, and other sections which feel weighted in theory and a search for some form of clarity and understanding. It is both challenging to read in its depth of theoretical analysis – although the word 'challenge' does not mean unenjoyable in this context – as well as free flowing and exciting in parts, as if being in conversation with Totton on a topic where his excitement is informed and charged with deep experience.

As the book draws to a close, Totton reflects upon his understanding of the psychotherapeutic project, which, in his view, 'is to help us tolerate the existence of the unconscious – not just as a theoretical entity, but as co-inhabitor, co-owner, of our bodies, our minds, our decisions and self-presentations' (p. 199). He extends this position to also include our connectedness through the bodily unconscious – including with other people – to make us aware that through this connectedness we need to endure the possibility that our experiences are not always in our control, which, for many in today's society, can feel deeply uncomfortable. He writes,

What I want to avoid here is erecting a fence at any point along the spectrum from weak metaphor to strong metaphor to imagination to direct perception, and saying that on one side of this resides the normal and on the other side – the weird stuff, the mystical, the paranormal. The whole thrust of this book is that such a line can never be drawn, such a barrier can never be raised. (p. 200)

This he does extremely effectively in what feels like a breaking down of fences between the verbal and the felt, the mind and the

body. At times, perhaps, he may lose the reader in a cognitive grappling with theory, but if this is the case, what does it matter? – as he is reaching towards expanding readers' experience and, if he has managed to connect even in part to opening the mind and/or body of the reader in some way, the book will have achieved its purpose.

Embodied Relating would be of interest to any practitioner of any discipline – particularly therapeutic – who endeavours to have a more nuanced understanding of their client. Time and again, Totton reminds us that to be in relationship, in whatever context, is to experience embodiment. However, this book challenges the traditions of psychotherapy (as well as both body and verbal psychotherapists), in particular in his discussion around the use of touch. Again, here he is accepting that some of the areas of discussion within the book may be difficult for people to embrace, or even comprehend. The book's title, *Embodied Relating: The Ground of Psychotherapy*, reflects what I believe Totton is saying; that at the base of our practice, of who we are as therapists and as human beings existing in the world with others, where our feet touch the earth and support us, is where embodied relating is to be found – the essence of all relationship.