

## Reflective Article

# Dark and Light – What Our Psychotherapy Heroes Reveal About Ourselves and Our Profession

By *Emma Redfern*



Developmental Transformations (DVT); and Robin Shohet founder of the seven-eyed model of supervision.

## Living and working through the pandemic

I count myself fortunate that when the UK went into lockdown in March 2020, I was already working online with both clients and supervisees, and I continued to be able to do so. Add editorial work and the usual CPD and I had plenty to keep me feeling productive, focused, and safe enough. This article is a product of that time.

I imagine I am not alone in having been bombarded since the beginning of Covid-19 with emails offering countless opportunities to learn new therapy skills, gain extra and specialist qualifications, while saving money on discounted deals. Without already having developed a sense of the people whose thoughts, skills and experience I value, I would probably have been 'at sea', feeling the pressure of grasping as many opportunities as possible, or feeling like a failure for letting countless opportunities pass me by. Thankfully, when it came to booking core CPD for 2021, I already knew what I value learning about and from whom, partly because I was already aware of my psychotherapy heroes.

## Introduction

In this article I introduce the concept of the psychotherapy hero. I touch on why we might have psychotherapy heroes and how having them can be helpful. I encourage the reader to reflect on who theirs might be and what those choices say about the chooser. I introduce four of my own current psychotherapy heroes, each of whom is a leading

professional working in the field of psychotherapy. Three of them are American, one British; one is a woman and three are men, all are white. They are: Byron Katie, developer of The Work; Richard Schwartz, founder of Internal Family Systems Therapy (IFS); David Read Johnson, trauma specialist, dramatherapist and founder of an embodied psychotherapy known as

Each of the four psychotherapy heroes I introduce has probably passed the standard UK retirement age. Even without the threat of Covid-19, they are not going to last forever (and neither am I). I want to expose myself to more of their wisdom while I can and while some of them take advantage of online delivery (due to physical challenges, I don't travel as well as I did). Also, through this article, I want to acknowledge to myself and to others my gratitude to, and appreciation for them.

### Who I am influences my choice of psychotherapy hero

I have had different psychotherapy heroes at different points in my journey. My top ten would include Maya Angelou, Brené Brown, and Alice Miller - all of whom have had a huge impact, from a distance, on my personal growth and/or professional development. (Note, my psychotherapy heroes are not all psychotherapists themselves.) However, my current psychotherapy heroes have all had a closer impact, not least in that I have completed in-person training with all but Byron Katie (though I did get to see her do *The Work* at a large event in London once).

Due to my history and personal demographics (white, cisgender female, Western, educated, English speaking and privileged), it makes sense to me that my current psychotherapy heroes are all white, Western professionals. In addition, I position myself as a 'wounded healer', having had a significant trauma history, and in my understanding, each of these people recognise, understand, welcome, and work with suffering, trauma, and the shadow within us. While my choice makes personal sense, it may also

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reflect how much society and I need healing.

### What is a psychotherapy hero?

As a psychotherapist, I believe that psychotherapy has great potential to benefit individuals and society. Perhaps every therapist who has kept working throughout the stresses and strains of the global pandemic is worthy of being considered a psychotherapy hero. However, I am thinking on the scale of those worthy of receiving a lifetime achievement award because their professional careers in therapy have conferred great benefit to humanity.

Over decades, these four professionals have made long-term, impactful contributions to mental health through therapeutic work with people; training of therapists; supervisors and ordinary people; writing of articles and books; and direct contact with the public in person, through their websites, recordings, and so on. Imagine, if you will, this article is my nomination, using my own criteria, for each of these people. These are my criteria: a pioneering spirit, outstanding achievements, admirable professional and personal qualities, and being real not

idealised.

### What a psychotherapy hero is not

My gratitude to these individuals is not that of a victim saved by a superhero such as SpiderMan or Wonder Woman in comic books or films. The individuals I introduce are not saints or saviours, each is a regular Joe, or Joanna. White and privileged, yes, yet also knowing shame, trauma, healing, and transformation from the inside and having faced trials and tribulations of their own. Each has feet of clay, and a shadow side just like the rest of us.

### Someone who is pioneering

Richard Schwartz has shown courage in embracing the unwelcome failure of a family therapy trial with young people with eating disorders which was not giving the results he hoped for (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020). Instead, Dick became curious about his clients' inner worlds which was largely *verboden* in his field at the time and, in response to what he learned, he rigorously and scientifically 'followed the data' to devise Internal Family Systems therapy. IFS is currently one of the most rapidly expanding and countercultural therapy trainings in the world.

David Read Johnson was a pioneer of dramatherapy with adults before the title dramatherapist even existed. Like Schwartz, this meant having the courage to go against prevailing cultural tides in society and the healthcare community. This is demonstrated by an experience earlier in his career as a dramatherapist when he found that the nursing home expected him and his dramatherapy group to share a room with a deceased resident being stored there temporarily

(Read Johnson, 1999). Like Schwartz, Johnson created a form of psychotherapy (DvT) which has transformation at its core. In DvT, the therapist becomes the client's physical and emotional 'play object', and all that arises in the therapeutic encounter is encouraged into the 'playspace' including our survival patterns, intimacy, power, race and trauma.

Byron Katie is not a trained psychotherapist. Yet, since hitting rock bottom and then experiencing her own 'awakening' in February of 1986, she devised a powerfully therapeutic practice she calls *The Work*. This arose out of her realisation that her own suffering was optional, and that her true nature is love and joy. *The Work* is a meditative enquiry consisting of a series of four questions and the 'turnaround'. As well as sharing these in her books, information, guidance, and live videos of Katie leading people through the process are available on her website.

Robin Shohet has been running supervision training courses since 1979 through the Centre for Supervision and Team Development (CSTD). He specialises in the subjects of love and fear in supervision, appreciative enquiry and supervision as spiritual practice. Such is his courage that, like Schwartz, Johnson, and Katie, he remains open to 'what is' no matter how potentially painful or risky, and trusts the process of doing that. (Robin has been deeply influenced by *The Work* of Byron Katie.)

### **Someone who has outstanding achievements**

I leave it up to the reader to research these four figures in terms of the numbers of books

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and articles written, any faculties they are linked to and charitable organisations and programmes their work supports. Here, I take a broader view. Schwartz, for example, due to his passion, drive, and sense of fulfilling his mission or personal calling has been a spokesperson for IFS and inner multiplicity for decades and is much sought after as a presenter.

David has for decades successfully run a trauma centre, which hangs on its walls artwork by trauma patients as well as displaying a piece of the Twin Towers in the reception area. He explains that for those who are traumatised it makes sense that the building itself makes certain statements obvious: 'We deal with trauma here', and 'When you are ready to go to the pain and do your healing, we'll be here for and with you.'

I echo Ben Fuchs (Shohet & Shohet, 2020) in suggesting that Robin Shohet has been instrumental in the cultural shifts in the UK that have taken place to enable self-aware, self-reflective, relational supervision (including relational feedback) to become more mainstream and to be taken seriously. Another of Robin's achievements is in acknowledging

the presence of fear in human relationships and that supervision offers '... a space where fear can be brought into consciousness and shared together.' (Shohet & Shohet, 2020, p 177).

Of the four, I have had the least direct contact with Byron Katie, having attended only one live, large event of hers some years ago, in addition to reading many of her books and watching the videos on her website. Despite not being a psychotherapist herself, *The Work* has influenced many mental health professionals and helped millions of laypeople to access their inner wholeness, truth, and love. Like Schwartz who followed the data presented by his clients and by his own internal enquiries, Katie's method was rigorously tested in the laboratory of her own experience. She has dedicated decades to her mission, she 'walks the talk' and I have seen her 'sit in the fire' with those who suffer during the course of everyday living and its bittersweetness. Perhaps part of what makes her a hero is that she has created an accessible and equitable way for people to do *The Work* wherever they live; no training fee or qualifications required.

### **Someone who possesses professional and personal qualities I value**

Inspired by my reading of *Principles and Techniques of Trauma-Centered Psychotherapy* (Johnson & Lubin, 2015), I have compiled the following list of some professional qualities, attributes, and skills possessed by each of these four. They are:

- capable of creating a safe relationship with another in distress by way of their honest, open communication about

the potential risk and pain involved in the therapeutic endeavour, while also holding and communicating the hope that said endeavour will be worthwhile;

- intentional and disciplined in therapeutic relationship and in their interventions (knowing why they do what they do and how it will be of service to the relationship and the distressed other);
- aware of and respectful of avoidance as a given of human existence while not letting it dominate;
- curious and welcoming toward fear and the whole gamut of human emotions;
- curious about what is not being said or shared; and
- skilled at differentiation and enabling others to differentiate at multiple levels (across time, between people/events/thoughts/feelings/behaviours).

As someone who enjoys quality training and CPD, I have completed all three levels of IFS training. I was fortunate to have a session as client with Schwartz as my therapist during two of those trainings. In each demonstration he negotiated with protectors for my healing Self-energy to be available so that an exile (in each case a wounded pre-verbal part of me) could be accompanied through the IFS steps of healing to transformation. Schwartz embodied Self-energy which enabled me to do the same. That Self-energy is characterised by the 8 Cs of curiosity, compassion, calm, connectedness, confidence,

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courage, clarity, creativity, and the 5 Ps of presence, patience, persistence, perspective, and playfulness.

Like Schwartz, Byron Katie embodies these qualities, especially, courageousness, clarity, and presence. There is a phrase I have come across in horse riding and IFS which is 'to hold one's seat', i.e., not be unseated. Another phrase from IFS is that of being 'the 'I' in the storm' (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2021, p. 44). Byron Katie does the former and is the latter in the presence of intense suffering, though she does not use these phrases.

Around the same time as I came across IFS, I attended CSTD's group supervision module taught by Robin Shohet and Joan Wilmot (now Shohet). Since then, I have attended one-day workshops on topics close to Robin's heart, including a recent webinar (Shohet, 2021) in which he seemed to be talking, in his terms, of the IFS concept of Self-leadership. Shohet teaches that where we listen from, and the eye from which we view the other, has an impact. If we are not looking and listening from a place of love, the other with whom we interact may become defensive and hide. In IFS terms, Robin is describing either a Self-led openhearted relationship, or a parts-led protective or "defended"

relationship. What of Robin's playfulness and presence? Interestingly, he has a passion for improvisation and is part of an improv group for fun as well as using improv therapeutically.

David Read Johnson I know as a trauma-centered psychotherapist and DvT trainer. Here I share an excerpt from an individual demonstration session with David as part of a DvT training day in the Southwest of England. The playspace was delineated psychologically and physically (away from the audience, with the rest of the group down one end of the hall) and we joined each other in the centre. Two physical beings, me a 5ft 4in, small-boned female and him over 6ft of solid, confident, American male. Each willing and able to use the other's bodies, and the space to embody whatever emerges to be embodied. I find myself behind him (I recall not wanting him to see me) holding his hands behind his back by holding a thumb in each hand. We walk single file across the stage with me doing a funny walk and getting some laughs (which I loved). We near a wall and suddenly David flings himself against it as if I had thrust him violently into the wall. A laugh of delight erupts from me. "I thought you'd like that," he says, and we do it a few more times. Later, he leaves me, and sits alone in 'the witnessing circle' where the client cannot go. I wander around the space searching, and calling, "I can't find you." In time, I think he improvised a phone and called me from inside the witnessing circle. I experienced a playful, accepting, connected, curious, creative encounter, after which I felt more alive and present to myself and in the world.

### Being real, not idealised

My sense is that none of my four psychotherapy heroes would wish to be idealised, they do not seem to seek positive transference and they are not strangers to failure and messiness. For me, a psychotherapy hero is real and fallible, with little desire to 'play nice'. I do not seek to whitewash their shortcomings nor elevate them as being above the rest of humanity. It is important to me that they share something of their stories, for example, their failed marriages, their poor parenting, professional challenges, and mistakes, but not in the form of a boast or to gain status.

In a chapter entitled: 'The Beast from the East: an account of a challenging supervision training', Shohet shares details of his missteps, fallibility and breaking of boundaries which led to - perhaps enabled - shadow material being forcefully expressed in and by the group, which led to positive transformation for attendees. One of the group members, writes:

*Robin held fast, with much skill, determination, courage and balls. He held us in our unfurling of secrets, shadows, polarities, cruelty, compassion, love, death, and of each other. ... I had expressed things that had made me feel toxic, violent and cruel, and I had expressed wisdom, truths, love and compassion. ...*

*I came away a changed person from completing this supervision training.*

(Shohet & Shohet, 2021, p. 191)

### Why might I need a psychotherapy hero?

My sense is that some of us need

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role models like us who we can emulate as we train. Others of us can push against or reject such larger-than-life yet approachable figures, and grow and develop by doing so. Also, as my choices say as much about me as they do about those I have chosen, I can reflect on myself, my current style of being a therapist. Perhaps my style is more 'pragmatist' than 'mystical guru'; someone who welcomes the transcendent while having my feet firmly planted; someone who likes to be and to do. I could go on.

Something else I recognise is that by thinking of these individuals in this way, I allow myself some small portion of earned secure attachment. I feel I belong, have a place, a therapeutic lineage, if you will. This is a gift that many without the protection of white skin in the still white-dominated field of psychotherapy might find themselves denied. I wonder who my BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) colleagues around the world perceive to be their psychotherapy heroes? I imagine some might choose James Baldwin, Robin DiAngelo, Resmaa Menakem. But in reality, who might they choose? In time, as I become further acquainted

with BIPOC authors and speakers, trainers, and psychotherapists, and as the many worlds of psychotherapy address the inequity and lack of justice within their structures, memberships, and trainings, perhaps my psychotherapy heroes might not all be white.

I believe psychotherapists need psychotherapy heroes because we need storytellers, truth seekers, transformational leaders, somewhere to belong, reasons to be grateful, and mirrors within which to see ourselves reflected. ☺

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