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## Special issue – For Tod Sloan, Edited by David Fryer

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# Tod Sloan's Struggle

Dennis Fox

**SUMMARY:** Dennis Fox reflects on two decades of academic, political, and personal interactions with Tod Sloan

**KEYWORDS:** exploration; explanation; integration; bridging; personal-as-political.

In conversations during the months leading to his passing, Tod Sloan periodically expressed regret that he had not yet done enough to make a difference. That concern was not shared by those who spoke at a memorial in his honour two months after his death. Had he been able to hear their stories about his impact on their lives and on the broader arenas in which he lived and worked, struggled and learned, and played and loved, I suspect Tod would have been pleased by the affection even while still insisting he could have done more. Remembrances of Tod written since his death – accounts of his impact as well as of his wisdom, gentleness, and humility (eg. Toporek, 2018) – have similarly captured parts of Tod's essence that he resisted acknowledging for himself.

Skimming through our email correspondence going back to when we met more than two decades ago brings to mind Tod's shifting roles in my life as academic colleague, political comrade, and personal friend. His accomplishments have been inspiring. So, too, were his efforts to make sense of his own dissatisfactions and confusions in ways that pushed him to explore new directions and open himself to new possibilities as he navigated one major turning point after another. Tod's 1996 book *Life Choices: understanding dilemmas and decisions* impressed me, even more so with his rueful acknowledgment that writing about how to navigate those choices was easier than finding his own way through them. Our overlapping

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Dennis Fox, emeritus associate professor of legal studies and psychology at University of Illinois at Springfield, co-founded the Radical Psychology Network ([radpsynet.org](http://radpsynet.org)).

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uncertainties about what made sense in our academic, political, and personal lives became for both of us a central point of connection.

I first encountered Tod in 1994 when he paid his \$10 dues to join the Radical Psychology Network, which Isaac Prilleltensky and I had created a year earlier. We soon met at a community psychology conference and then began collaborating on ways to introduce critical psychology to a skeptical mainstream audience. Tod's chapter on *Theories of Personality* in the 1997 edition of *Critical Psychology: an introduction* was so clear and thought-provoking that it was the only chapter we retained in the completely re-configured 2009 edition, along with a new chapter Tod wrote on *Doing Theory*. One of his many gifts was his ability to make complex material understandable.

Tod's own edited book *Critical Psychology: voices for change* (2000) brought together personal accounts he solicited from critical psychologists about how their academic and theoretical work intersected with their personal lives – intersections central to Tod's concerns with what lies underneath our ideological commitments and activist struggles and with how our individual choices can actually make a difference in people's lives. In one of his early postings in 1995 on the Radical Psychology Network listserv, he wrote this:

Last semester I stumbled across a pedagogical strategy that was more effective than anything I had ever tried before in connection with radical teaching. In the midst of a course designed to show how we are affected psychologically by social systems, I had weekly visitors come to speak about their work in various types of social services ranging from parole and probation to substance abuse prevention to public administration. I specifically asked the speakers to speak briefly about what they do (career education for my students) and then to reflect on how society constructs or produces the sorts of problems they work to solve. Over and over again, they made exactly the point that my more academic analyses tried to get across and they did so with more impact since they linked a critical analysis to real problems in our local communities.

Two years ago, still focused on how the academic, the political, and the personal intersect, Tod went on sabbatical to follow up on *Voices for Change*, planning to travel widely to interview many of today's critical psychologists. His sudden diagnosis brought him back to the US for treatment, during which he continued to meet with students and activists to hear their ideas and suggest potential avenues to explore. He began planning a new website to bring together critical work in new ways, began new collaborations, and continued to ponder.

Tod's other 1996 book, *Damaged Life: the crisis of the modern psyche*, exemplified his comfort bridging the gap between what he saw as North American critical psychology's somewhat pragmatic approach and Europe's more theoretical strands. His ability to write about complex theory so clearly

and directly led me to forward to Tod many of the inquiries I received over the years about theoretical fine points that I knew Tod could answer more readily than I. Indeed, when I received an email in November 2018 asking me to write a chapter for a book produced in Turkey, I sent it along to Tod; he wrote back to say, 'I'd like to write a whole book about the topic' and then, 'thanks. sounds feasible.' He mentioned travel plans a month or two down the road. Only when I asked directly how he was feeling did he acknowledge, 'Health: overdid it in Chile (wine), now have more digestion issues, and fatigue. sleeping a lot, not well.' A few days later, when I sent him a notice about a planned colloquium in South Africa on decolonialism, he just wrote 'wish I could go.' Less than a month later he died.

Tod's academic efforts always paralleled his political work – for him they were parts of a whole. Such integration is basic to critical psychology, but Tod extended this well beyond academic abstraction. Leaving a secure academic job to look for something more meaningful, he ended up in Washington, DC co-coordinating Psychologists for Social Responsibility. An eventual return to academic life in Portland, Oregon led him to innumerable connections with local activists and, years later, to focusing on how radical psychologists might help contribute to the Occupy movement, and after that to roles in the Portland left-politics world. For some time we had been exchanging links and articles, and Tod took my own explorations in everything from anarchism to intentional community to relationship alternatives seriously enough to explore on his own. As he increasingly ventured out of academia into activist and community settings, he more often used the name Theo, seemingly bringing alive a different persona with newer ways of integrating the different parts of his life. Looking through our emails today I see that it was in 2010 that his academic email signature began identifying him as 'Tod Sloan (aka Theo).'

Coincidentally, in 2017 I began spending significant time in Portland. It was a pleasure having Tod there to help me settle in. He brought me to events, introduced me to a friend who rented me her apartment in an eco-village when she went out of town, made a point of showing me different neighborhoods one after another – we'd meet for lunch or coffee or Happy Hour, and then he'd walk me down the street pointing out places to check out. Later, when he was back home after his diagnosis, we'd sit together in his house, watching a video or listening to music while talking about our overlapping explorations and figuring out what to do next. Today, Tod comes to mind especially when I wander through Portland, where everywhere I turn I'm reminded of Tod making sure I'd find my way not just to books and ideas but to food and wine and excitement in the ordinary. I appreciate very much that our connection moved well beyond academic colleague and political comrade to deeper friendship.

Looking at Tod's books on Amazon, I see that the page for *Life Choices* has a short 'From the Author' note:

I wrote this book because I felt that most psychologies of decision making were very mechanical and neglected the contexts of dilemmas that make choices feel so meaningful. Of course, I didn't figure out everything about living life, but I hope the framework I develop here is useful in sorting out why certain decisions are so hard to make and why others are easy but simultaneously feel wrong!

Tod's determination to forge ahead despite his own uncertainties seems to me his most impressive gift.

I also see that the photo on the Amazon page is one I took of Tod many years ago. That pleases me greatly. I miss him.

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