

## We are human too

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‘Where do you stand on God?’ John asked me.

The question seemed to come out of the blue, both in terms of what he had shared with me during the previous 20 minutes and because he had never before in our meetings asked me about my personal beliefs or opinions.

It’s hard to put into words my instant reaction to this question; a heightened sense of interest and anticipation was part of it, quickly followed by a mental note to respond with care. I didn’t yet know the significance for John of what I might or might not think about God. In fact, I didn’t know what he was really asking me; was it something more subtle than whether I was a religious believer?

Part of my immediate heightened sense of engagement was, I’m sure, because he had asked me something personal. Was this an opportunity to bring more of my *self* into the relationship we had been developing and to feel more *in* relationship with him? If so, I welcomed this. However I would need to reflect carefully about self-disclosure and what may or may not be helpful to John to reveal. I recognise that there will be a range of views about self-disclosure within the psychotherapy profession, as there will be among more psychotherapy-minded psychiatrists, and I am writing here as the latter.

I would also need to consider the nature of my particular relationship with him as his psychiatrist, and my attitude to the common expectation within the profession that psychiatrists learn and practise the art of (relational) detachment. Received wisdom has it

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that we should keep our distance, either to prevent becoming overwhelmed by the depth and nature of the mental distress we encounter, or because of the risk of not attaining the scientific-like objectivity we are expected to cultivate in order to provide effective ‘management’ of people in distress.

There may at times indeed be great risk that we will lose our own emotional bearings, or simply feel crushed by the weight of mental suffering in the work we do, rendering decision-making impossible. Furthermore, the psychiatric profession, in my view, seems reluctant to recognise the need for reflective spaces and the form of supervision that facilitates an honest exploration and examination of the effects on us of the work we do and responsibilities we carry. This makes it even more risky work.

But in our fear of emotional involvement or – perhaps worse – a fear of being accused of over-involvement, what might we be denying to ourselves and to our patients or clients? Are we fearful of embodying and expressing our basic humanity and our care, and justifying our avoidance of relationship by asserting the value of ‘professional detachment’? I wonder how many

therapists would recognise this state of affairs.

Returning to John, he had asked me a personal question and I wanted to respond honestly and personally, and to feel more in relationship with him. However, questions about God are not straightforward and can uncover a multitude of concerns and issues.

It was quickly apparent that John was not asking me about my belief in God; what was actually on his mind was his fear that he was in some way an evil person, possibly possessed by the devil. To him, this would explain the violent fantasies he had been experiencing. What he really wanted to know, it turned out, was whether, based on what he had told me about his thoughts and fantasies, I thought he was ‘mad’.

It is interesting that the subjects of religion and madness continue to be closely associated today, in an age where reason and science are in the ascendance. It also reminds me of the powerful position ‘psych’ experts are placed in (or place themselves in) when it comes to understandings and explanations of madness.

I didn’t think John’s state of mind suggested he needed ‘locking up’ or a chemical response in the form of a psychiatric drug. But he was clearly checking this out and, in the process, checking whether it was safe to tell me about his most disturbing thoughts and feelings.

It’s easy to forget that, for some clients, the question they most want to ask us is: ‘If I tell you what is really on my mind, what are you going to do?’ ■

*Details have been changed to protect identities.*