



WHEN CLIENTS FRIGHTEN YOU

A few years ago, I pulled into a petrol station to fill up my car. On the way to pay, I was accosted by a very well-built man who seemed to have an aggressive demeanour.

I had observed him talking to other customers who had avoided him and rushed to their vehicles.

As I walked to pay for my fuel, he approached me and with his face a few inches from mine, he asked in a booming and aggressive voice, "Can you give me a lift?"

To which I replied, "You're scaring me."

To my surprise, he took a step back and said, "I am not scary."

In the conversation that followed, we both learned something valuable.

He discovered that others perceived him as threatening, even though that was not his intent. I experienced him as an emotionally troubled person who thought that attack was the best form of defence.

He was trying to get to see some relatives in Sheffield by hitchhiking and was getting a bit desperate as it was getting dark.

I learned *again* never to judge a book by its cover and a bit of a nod to Carl Rogers who reminded us that all behaviour is goal-directed.

So how does this relate to client work?

We sometimes will meet clients who make us uncomfortable or even scare us. Working with this requires us to ask two fundamental questions:

1. How real is the risk? Is the client doing or saying anything which may give an indication we are at serious risk? If so, what do we need to put in place to make sure we are safe?
2. What questions do we have to ask ourselves about how we are experiencing the client?

Is there some form of countertransference? Are we taking feelings related to a past event or person in our lives and projecting them on to another? For example, seeing a client who looks like an abusive former partner may bring up frightening feelings, which are projected on to the client.

Is the client acting out, testing you to see, if like the other people in their life, you too will reject them?

The last question is to reflect on how emotionally robust you are. Sometimes life events can diminish one's capacity to be resilient in the face of angry or aggressive clients.

Sometimes like the man at the petrol station, just reflecting how you experience a person can be mighty helpful to someone who may be unaware of how they are coming across.

Supervision and personal therapy can be constructive when answering both of these questions.

And the man in the petrol station?

We parted on good terms, and no, I did not offer him a lift as I only live a mile down the road.

I sometimes wonder if, had I been on route to Sheffield, I would have taken him? It's a question I have asked myself a few times in the intervening years and I have never settled on a definitive answer.