**Know It All**

Mark Gunn had seen it all before: neurosis, emotional problems, depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies, homicidal tendencies, genocidal tendencies, confusion, illusion, delusion, disassociation, split personality, multi-personality, broken personality, no personality. It was not that he was cynical, nor even a little blasé when faced with a new client. He was just comfortable. He knew his way around, he knew what to say, he knew what to do when the other person was talking. He could be attentive, he could *resonate* with the client, he could understand them, and even more importantly he could get them to believe he understood them. He was able to give them what was known as unconditional positive regard, or he could at least seem to be doing this. He was at ease with his clients, like a surgeon faced with another case of what he had been cutting into for years. You opened them up, and there it was, just as the books said, and you cut it out, and you sewed them up again. It was like this, figuratively speaking, in therapy. You listened to their problems, you talked about them, over and over, until they saw them differently and they went away, not always happy, but happi*er*, just a little, than when they had begun.

Of course, he was not a *psychiatrist*, so if someone turned up who was clearly insane, then it was a matter of somehow shifting them on, if you could, to colleagues who dealt with that kind of thing, like . The trick was spotting them early, and he had also become very good at this, so that he hadn’t have to spend weeks with someone before it became clear that their problem was that they thought they were being controlled by plants in their garden, or men in the moon. He had met psychotics, two in fact. At first, you don’t know they are psychotic, for they are good at appearing normal. But after a few minutes, or an hour, you sense something, or you sense a lack of something. Normal clients, or normal therapy clients, want to talk. They want to tell you something. But psychotics have nothing to tell you and you spot them by the way they are trying hard to work out the fact that they have nothing to tell you even while giving you a reason to think they are about to tell you something.

Mark Gunn was interested in how the mind worked. He always had been, even before he did his Psychology degree. He had done a Psychology degree precisely because he wanted to know how the mind worked. He thought that the human mind was the most interesting thing in the universe, more interesting in a way than the universe itself. After all, the universe was mostly nothingness, with odd blobs of burning gas, billions of miles apart. You could describe it all with a few scrawls of mathematics. But the human mind was incomprehensible. It would never be understood. He realised this after a few months of studying Psychology. But he wasn’t discouraged. He was pleased that he had learned that the human mind was incomprehensible.

Matthew Harris, his newest client, who was now sitting in Gunn’s office, seemed very reticent. This was common. It took time for trust to develop. When they shook hands, Gunn had offered eye contact, but none was returned. Harris looked down. He seemed anxious. But Gunn was used to that. He placed Harris in a comfortable chair and offered him a tea or coffee, or water. But Harris declined. It was clear that he was not sure that he should be there. Gunn was used to that sceptical look, the ‘I doubt you can offer me anything’ look. This was often part of the problem. His clients had become convinced that whatever was wrong was them was an essential part of their identity. They needed to have a problem, so were prepared to be resentful of the prospect that you might solve it for them.

Gunn sat looking kindly at Harris but did not speak for a few moments. It was a good idea to be silent, to wait for the client to speak. Once you spoke yourself, this sort of determined the client in a particular direction, and it was important to let the client lead. After a while, Harris said, a little suddenly, ‘The thing is .. I *know everything’*. There was a strong emphasis on ‘know’ and on ‘everything’ and his face became pinched as he stressed these two words. Then he paused for a little while, and added, ‘and I’m getting to the point where I can’t *stand* it. I think something very odd is happening to me.’

So far, so good, though Gunn, resonating with the man’s obvious unhappiness. Harris was a youthful looking man, in his early fifties, slim, casually but expensively dressed in a light, linen suit and, strikingly in a way, what seemed like a soft, denim waistcoat. His hair was neat, a little grey but fashionably cut and combed. He wore rimless glasses; he seemed intelligent, almost professorial, though not in the fuddy-duddy way, more the ‘bright young thing’ way. Gunn was starting to think that he might be some kind of academic and he could understand how, in such a life, one might lose perspective on what one knew, because one knew too much, so that it seemed that one knew everything, because one was bored with what one knew. Even so, he had never met anyone with this kind of problem before, and had never heard of such a thing. At least it would be boring.

After all, Gunn was almost familiar with such feelings himself. A few years before, for some unknown reason, he had become slightly bored with his work, if only briefly. Each client seemed a copy of a previous client. He was no longer as interested in what they had to say. He had heard it before, many times. When you are bored with a client, it is difficult to show them sufficient regard, *unconditional* regard. But it is hard to be interested in a bore. Most of his clients were either depressed or anxious, or anxious and depressed, or thought they were. So many of them seemed clear about what their own problems were. They described themselves as anxious, or depressed, when they clearly weren’t. Gunn blamed the Internet. The Internet made everything available. Clients increasingly came armed with a little knowledge, which was such a dangerous thing as who was it said. Was it Dryden? Maybe not.

‘Do you mind if I ask you what you do for a living,’ Gunn asked. He spoke evenly, calmly, warmly, in a voice practised by years of talking in such a way, of sounding *engaged* and *interested.* It was not glib, it was *professional* and, in its way, it was quite sincere. Of course, he did not *care* for these people, for that would not have helped, but he had a practical concern for them. There was a difference, and an important one.

Harris seemed to find this question difficult. ‘At the moment, I do nothing … I can’t do anything … my head is too …. Too ….. *full*’. The last word was stretched, a little despairingly it seemed to Gunn.

‘Full of what kind of thing?’ Gunn asked, interested in where this could go.

‘Of everything ….,’ said Harris, looking a little irritated.

Gunn was trying to think of the best way to proceed. In some ways, it was unusual for a client to present a problem so clearly and simply and so early. Often, the first meetings involved teasing things out. Occasionally, you never really knew what someone’s problem was. Of course, there were clients who were deluded about their own qualities. Not in the way that a truly insane person is. Gunn did not think Harris was insane. He was too neat. Insane people have a quality that you can sense almost immediately from their appearance. But someone might have an exaggerated sense of their own attributes, so that they might think of themselves as omniscient, when they were only well-read.

Harris began again. ‘Ask me something,’ said Harris, ‘anything’.

Gunn was unsure how to proceed. He did not want to play a game with Harris. He did not want to ask him a question he would know the answer to, as this would prove nothing. It would presumably endorse Harris’s view that he knew everything. He did not want to ask him a question he did not know the answer to, as this might humiliate him, too quickly puncture his sense of who he was, for his sense of who he was was presumably involved in his belief that he knew everything. One did not want to lose that so early.

Harris seemed alert to Gunn’s reservations. ‘Alright …,’ he said. ‘I know you don’t want to do that do you? You think you might humiliate me if I don’t know and if I do know, it will confirm my paranoia … isn’t that it?’. Gunn said nothing, and focussed on appearing extremely interested in what Harris said. But he quickly realised that Harris was very intelligent, intelligent enough to deduce his own manner of reasoning even before he had made it evident. Perhaps he was a mathematician? Could he even be a therapist? He had once treated a therapist without knowing. It had been an odd experience.

‘Well, let me tell *you* something then …..,’ Harris went on. He looked at Gunn with extraordinary weariness as if he was about to tell him something that he had already told him, and many others, a thousand times and that Gunn had not understood once. There was another pause. Harris took a breath, as if what he was about to say could or should not be said. Gunn was actually a little startled by this. Harris did have an ability to make one feel that one was a little slow. It was not that he was rude, or preemptive in any obvious way. But there were subtle signs, such as that hardly disguised weariness, the eyelids softly closed.

‘In your right hand trouser pocket,’ said Harris, again staring directly at Gunn, ‘is fifty seven pence … one fifty, one five pence piece and one two pence piece ….’. The effort of saying this seemed to exhaust Harris, as if he had indeed deduced some profound mathematical theorem. He had been sitting forward in his chair, his hands together, but on saying all this he fell back in the chair and rested his hands on the arms. He had a look of intolerable boredom. Gunn did not know what to do. He did not know how much change was in his right trouser pocket, and he did not want to know. He did not want to play this game with Harris. He needed to move the direction of their discussion a little, not forcefully, but gently, away from this emerging power dynamic.

‘Tell me something about yourself …, your background, your family ….,’ he said, as if Harris had not issued his challenge.

‘Why don’t you check your pocket?’ Harris asked, wearily, as if Gunn had not understood him. ‘If you do, this could be so much simpler. For then you will ask yourself, ‘How could he have known that?’, which is the same question I keep asking myself’.

‘I will,’ Gunn replied. ‘But we have only just met, and I would like to know something about you .. I know nothing about you ….’

‘I wish I could say the same,’ said Harris, ‘I know everything about you ….’. It was said without hostility. It was spoken almost with a note of fear. ‘You were born in 1975, in Solihull. You graduated from the University of Exeter with a degree in Psychology in 1995. You were once married, to a woman called Celia, but you are now divorced. You have no children. You support Manchester United’.

Of course, thought Gunn, he has looked me up before he came. Interesting. Although knowing about Celia and the divorce is curious. I wonder how he found that out. Social media perhaps. Everyone knows everything nowadays. The Internet.

‘When,’ Gunn replied, ‘did you begin to think that you knew everything?’.

The answer was blunt, almost gruff. ‘Two weeks ago, the 8th July 2028, at around 11.47 in the morning. Before then, I knew only what I had known until then. After that, I knew everything. But let’s not talk like this. Just check your pocket, the right one. After all, how could I know what money is in your right pocket. Surely, if I am right about that then you will believe me. And then perhaps we can get somewhere’.

‘But suppose I reach into my pocket,’ replied Gunn, ‘and there is not that amount of money. What would we do then?’. Gunn was aware, guiltily, of a note of frustration in his own words and almost immediately regretted the question.

‘Well, then,’ said Harris, unphased, ‘I would get up and leave, for it would be clear that I am mistaken and I would then have no need of you ….. But that is not what will happen’.

Possibly they shared a look of mutual acknowledgement that this did not quite follow, that if Harris was mistaken about this then perhaps he had more need of Gunn than if he had been correct.

‘Ah,’ said Harris, ‘you are thinking that if I am wrong, then I am insane and actually I would have more need of you than if it turned out that I was right …… But you and I both know that isn’t true, that if you thought I was insane you would not be able to help me, for that isn’t your area is it … madness?’.

‘OK, then’, Gunn said, a little flustered, and reached into his pocket, pulling out a small handful of change. He started to count it, with an overwhelming sense that he should not be doing this. Things were not going well. The first coin was a fifty pence.