Certainty

When you’re absolutely certain about what a client should do or shouldn’t do, you best be cautious. Your certainty might be rooted in insecurity. You, alone, can’t change the course of your client’s life. It’s probably your countertransference that is dictating.

When you grasp for a clear-cut direction, you might be feeling powerless to change the course of your client’s life. A strange and disturbing paradox: you’re most likely to abuse the power in your role of therapist when you feel most powerless.

Certainty feels powerful. We know what to do, when to do it, how to do it. But can we reliably be certain when there are so many contingencies and possibilities? When circumstances dynamically shift and change? We’d like to rescue both our client and us from being tentative. Nail it rather than rock with it.

What really disturbs me is when certainty slams the door on new possibilities and deeper connection. When you clench for “the answer”, you’re least likely to alight upon it. When you’re able to pause and hold confusion a bit longer, you might find a more flexible and compassionate response.

Yes, there are times when we need to make definitive moves and make strong, at times, confrontative interventions. When a client has a gun and plans to pull the trigger, it’s time for decisive action. We are bound by our professional ethics and legal responsibility.

When there is no imminent danger and when the usual approaches are no longer working, I suggest you brave uncertainty. You might discover a portal into that which has never been tried. A new creative response rooted in experience but not yet fully known.

Does this perspective seem too harsh? I don’t mean to pull the ground out from under you. I am pointing towards another kind of ground that is much more reliable, the “middle path” that winds between utter certainty and no legs to stand upon.

Exploring moments of certainty can be an inroad into deeper understanding. I listen carefully to what I am certain about, curious about the deeper message that’s embedded. In search for a signal about what really matters to me, what’s fueling the certainty. Root around inside my inner world, in search for what I fear. What puts me too far out on a limb? Thankfully I have many supports for this inquiry—meditation, writing, reflection, conversations with trusted colleagues. I attempt to sift through my reactivity rather than avoid it or act out of it.

Sometimes my reactivity contains a window into my client’s emotional world, if I dare to feel what they feel, how they feel it. When I directly experience their
emotional world, things shift. A new sense of compassion for their pain and gridlock; a way to intervene that fits, a key to their inner world. Perhaps this is our gymnastics, feeling our clients’ angst; knowing it impacts us but does not belong to us.

I’ve watched client after client leave therapy doing better, feeling better. Truthfully, I’m not certain about what worked or why their life changed for the better. Though I need to orient myself with theoretical understanding. Maybe it was our healthy attachment? Or that she learned to meditate and make more creative and choices and decisions? Or that he became more aware of what was driving his angry outbursts and was less driven by them? Or more likely a bit of each and much more than I will ever know.

~ Nelly Kaufer