Ubuntu is an African philosophy that goes back to the roots of many indigenous cultures. At the heart is the idea that ‘I am because you are’. For much of history, as a species we have known that in many respects our identities are created by the social sphere within which we exist. Without the community around us, this sense of self that we walk round with would not exist as it does. Where we start to fall into difficulty, however, is when we start to believe that this sense of ‘me’ is an entirely individualised construct. In fact, in the modern world, we usually hold on to a sense of self that we feel, at a visceral level, is self-generated, autonomous and isolated. And then we cling closely to it. We build an ego out of ‘me’ versus ‘not me’ constructs. A certain amount of clothing for one’s individual sense of self is, of course, inevitable; however at the same time, this sense of ‘me in here and the world out there’ creates a layer of fear that sits within us all and in all of us it leaks out in a variety of ways.

It is through my mindfulness practice that I have discovered these things in myself. I didn’t objectively study them in others, or in text books for that matter, but instead I found myself observing them subjectively within. Over the years of practice, I noticed my sense of self shifting towards a realisation that the idea of ‘myself’ is constructed of a series of thoughts, patterns and stories all strung together; but as I begun to excavate these layers, I was left with the question; what remains? I sat with the fear and anxiety that this generated - as well as all the other thoughts and emotions that pass through, moment to moment - and the more I did, the more I started to touch a reality that felt more fundamental than any other, yet one that could not really be put into words.

Over the millennia, such experiences have been described in many different ways by many spiritual traditions but often, what works best me is no words at all. It might sound pretentious to talk in this way - and I was self-conscious about doing so for a while - but then I started to realise that almost everyone who has meditated for several years starts to experience a similar shift. It is not so much that one ‘transcends’ the sense of self, but that one sits with it and is able to
appreciate it for what it is – a social construct, a beautiful dance in the intersubjective space that we call reality – and yet, at the same time, one can feel that it is not the whole of who we are. The whole of who we are is much bigger, yet less describable in words.

The more I explored myself in this way, the more I started to see common ground with what my patients were experiencing. They too seemed to be breaking through the traditionally-held notions of self. As is often written about psychosis, it is a perishing of the usual boundaries between self and non-self. Self-referent ideas, a sense of deeper connection to others and the environment around them, even hearing voices, started to have a whole new meaning to me when reported by my patients. To be sure, their glimpses were admixed with their pain, past traumas and consequent fragmentation of the ego, but maybe these people were also waking up at the same time as breaking down.

The world of spirituality and mysticism has, in fact, explored this in great diversity and depth. Contemplative traditions in all religions have spoken of such experiences, from ‘the dark night of the soul’ to ‘enlightenment’, and yet in our own work, we appear to have avoided such references. But now, the frontier of science is connecting these same dots. Quantum physics explicitly understands reality as a product of a shared consciousness. An object only exists in the form it does if and when it is observed to be so. Einstein, who had problems with this at first, put this seeming impossibility - from our everyday perspective - succinctly when he said to Neils Bohr (one of the originators of quantum theory) ‘do you mean that when no one is looking at the moon, it’s not really there?’ And Bohr responded, ‘There is no way you can prove that that is not true.’ Subsequently, through many decades of rigorous experimentation, the fundamental tenets of quantum physics have been upheld, and are now fully accepted within the scientific community.

The more I read around and discussed these subjects, the more it seemed clear to me that it was important that someone in my position – working in the world of frontline psychiatry – talks openly about these links. That’s when I started to put pen to paper, to write my book, ‘Breaking Down Is Waking Up.’

In the first part of the book I outline my own mindfulness journey and the parallels between that and what, on a number of levels, my patients at work were experiencing. The main difference between us was that those engaging in spiritual practices of this nature were moving towards these experiences in a voluntary way – dismantling the ego step by step, as it were – while people
suffering mental health difficulties were experiencing a destruction of the ego as a result of stress, trauma and drugs. As a result, their experience is often one of with substantial pain and distress, and sometimes risk too, which is why conventional treatments – medication and hospitalisation when necessary - will always have an important place in the provision of care.

The second and third parts of the book aim to put this into context in terms of exploring understandings of reality, as described both in quantum physics and in many ancient spiritual texts. This helps us appreciate how there could be some real authenticity to the experiences that we psychiatrists traditionally define as pathological. This kind of understanding, however, also places upon us a new responsibility as clinicians, in being more open to what we are hearing from patients about their experiences rather than automatically or reflexively labelling them. Just being told by a professional that there could be some real value and meaning in their experience (without necessarily advocating any particular perspective), can itself have powerful therapeutic value, and I discuss such new approaches to care, such as Open Dialogue, at the end of the book.

Since publishing the book several months ago, I can now attest personally to the value of this approach – having more focus on acceptance and validation – due to the number of people who have contacted me with heartfelt thanks, to tell me that ‘the first time someone in your position has said what I had always thought about my experience’ and ‘I always believed that despite all the pain and hardship, there was something of real value in it.’

For me, it’s an exciting time to be a psychiatrist. The number of clinicians open to a more holistic approach to care seems to be growing all the time. I run regular mindfulness retreats for colleagues – with over 50 consultants having attended to date – and there is a genuine openess, indeed hunger, for the idea of working on one’s own self as a means of connecting more deeply to our patients. I feel that a shift of some sort is under way, and that this time it will benefit not only the people we look after but also all of us working in the mental health services.

Reference:
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