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Dr. Duggins-Warf is a graduate of Eastern Virginia Medical School and did both his general psychiatry residency and forensic fellowship at Brown University.

Can you tell us about how you became a forensic psychiatrist?

I majored in philosophy and classical guitar performance. I loved both, but once I finished college, I realized that I didn't have a clear career path in either of those directions. Sort of by chance I got a job with a community mental health center in Massachusetts, working with largely homeless clients that had serious mental illnesses. I was their representative payee, I was taking them to their appointments, I was helping them find housing and I really loved it. I became very interested in the pathology, very interested in the team approach, very interested in the public sector nature of it. I really liked that it required a team and in the fact that this was a very underserved population that didn't really get a lot of attention from society.

What do you think people with a background in the humanities, like philosophy or music, bring to the field?

Music has been a huge part of my life since I was very young, and music helps me access parts of myself that I'm otherwise unable to get in touch with. And I think that is something extraordinarily important for anyone we're working with to find for themselves, whether that's somebody who is struggling with schizophrenia and is trying to find some kind of way to express what they're having a hard time expressing because they have disorganized thoughts, [or someone] who has significant major depression but is an amazing artist and that's just like the one thing that's keeping him going right now.

My experience of that makes it very important for me to talk about it with other people. What is it that helps you access those parts of yourself that we have a hard time talking about? What is it that helps you really get in touch with your soul, or whatever you call it and makes you feel fully like yourself? Because I think that applies to everything that we do across the whole of psychiatry and even the whole of medicine.

For philosophy, by chance I focused on ethics and morality and I don't have some, you know, grand eloquent answer other than it was extraordinarily helpful for me to get exposed to how we can approach really difficult questions that are always going to arise when you have humans living in community together.

As we all know, in forensic psychiatry, we are always running into really, really difficult ethical questions, especially when it comes to things like the individual rights of a person, and substituting the judgment of a state or a court for that person. We're all always faced with these questions and, at the end of the day, having at least has some training and some of the rudimentary language in how to approach these questions [has made it] a little easier, or at least a little more palatable, to talk through these things and to help others talk through these things.

What are some of the more common errors in reasoning through these moral dilemmas that you see trainees make, or even potentially colleagues modelling for trainees?

Psychiatry has, historically, been a very controversial field. And so I think there are a lot of things that we still are reckoning with in, in terms of that history. For the last several decades we've been constantly confronted, or even attacked, for various things – the ways that we practice, the things that we think, the ways that we think things should be.

So I think we find ourselves on the defensive a lot. Whether we are feeling it every day or not, it's there somewhere in our minds, whether conscious or subconscious. And out of that, I think there's this tendency to take any idea that could be considered a challenge to the way we should think or the way that we typically think, and want to fight it, and fight it very hard.

I think that the most critical mistake that we often make, and I'm definitely guilty of this myself, is immediately going on the defensive and failing to fully reason through what seems like an idea we should dismiss out of hand. Getting back to your original question, the most common error I see is, "We're going to start at what the outcome is going to be for us. This is where we're going to land. Now let's figure out how we're going to reason through this so that we arrive at that outcome." As opposed to, "Alright,

let's consider all the ways we could think about this and see where we end up.” I think we really need to get used to wrestling with ideas in a way that maybe gets past the defensiveness a bit.

Last question, do you have a favorite science fiction or fantasy universe?
Oh boy, that maybe the most difficult question you've asked. I would have to say Terry Pratchett’s Disc World.

If you were going to be a character in Disc World, which character would you be?
I honestly don't know. I don't know enough about it to be able to align myself with a character. I know that I would be in that world, more than any of the more mainstream type of worlds.