

The “Third Man” Assembly –

These last few days and months have reminded us that we live in an uncertain and violent world. The attacks in Tunisia, France and Kuwait show us that even the most peaceful and beautiful places can be invaded by those wishing harm. And the problems we face are not limited to acts of humans, as the Nepali people know all too well, as they attempt to recover from two devastating earthquakes. There is little comfort to offer in the face of these horrors and atrocities. However, this morning I would like to share with you an extra-ordinary experience, known only to extra-ordinary people, usually when they are being tested to the limits of their endurance. Some of what I say is drawn from a book by John Geiger called ‘The Third Man Factor’. Let me introduce the idea with a true story, which was also a product of a terrorist atrocity.

At 9.03am on 11 September 2001, Ron DiFrancesco was at his desk on the 84th floor of the south tower of the World Trade Center in New York when the second plane hit the building.

DiFrancesco was hurled against the wall and showered with debris. The tower swayed. The floors below him were devastated by the plane’s impact. He entered stairway A, one of three emergency stairwells. Luckily, he had stumbled on the only one that offered hope of escape for people above the zone of impact. But thick smoke poured up the narrow stairway. He groped his way down and stopped at a landing on the 79th or 80th floor. Overcome by the smoke, he joined about a dozen other people, some stretched out, face down on the floor, others crouched in the corners. They were blocked from descending further by a collapsed wall. He could see panic in their eyes, and fear. Some were crying. Several began to slip into unconsciousness.

Then, something happened to DiFrancesco - he says, “Someone told me to get up.” Someone, he said, “called me.” It was a man’s voice, but did not belong to any of the people in the stairwell. It was insistent: “Get up!” It called DiFrancesco by his first name and gave him encouragement. But it was more than a voice; it was a vivid physical presence.

DiFrancesco continued to go down the stairs but soon he encountered flames. He backed away from the fire. But his “angel” urged him to carry on. He said: “It led me to a stairwell... led me to run through the fire... There was obviously somebody encouraging me. That’s not where you go, you don’t go towards the fire...” He covered his head with his forearms and continued down, now running. He believed the flames continued for three storeys. Finally, he reached a clear, lit stairwell below the fire on the 76th floor. Only then did the sense of a kindly helper disappear. “I think at that point the presence let me go,” he said.

Minutes later, he had reached the northeast exit of the building. Then the tower collapsed. The last thing he saw was a fireball as the building compressed. When he regained consciousness, he was in hospital. Ron DeFrancesco was the last person out of the south tower before it came down at 9.59am. He was one of only four people to escape the building from above the 81st floor, the centre of impact for United Airlines Flight 175.

A lot of people made split-second decisions on September 11th which determined whether they lived or died. What is different about DiFrancesco is that he is convinced he received help from an external source. “I was led to the stairs,” he said. “I don’t think something grabbed my hand, but I was definitely led.” A religious man, he attributed it to divine intervention.

DiFrancesco's encounter may sound odd, an illusion created by an overstressed mind. But the amazing thing is this: over the years, the experience has occurred again and again, to mountaineers, divers, polar explorers, prisoners of war, solo sailors, shipwreck survivors, pilots and astronauts.

All have escaped traumatic events to tell similar stories of having experienced the close presence of a companion and helper, and even of "a sort of mighty person". There is, it seems, a common experience that happens to people who confront life at its extremes, and strange as it may sound, given the hardships they endure, they experience it as something wonderful.

The most famous of these encounters is Sir Ernest Shackleton's report of an unseen presence that joined him during his escape from Antarctica after his ship, *Endurance*, had become trapped by the ice. Shackleton and his crew faced almost certain death. The situation was desperate. Knowing there was no chance of a rescue, Shackleton decided he had to go to get help. At times, on that terrible journey of nearly 700 miles across stormy seas and ice cap, Shackleton had a sense, during the worst of his struggles, that something out of the ordinary had accompanied him. He said: "...during that long and racking march over the unnamed mountains and glaciers it seemed to me often that we were four, not three." The others on the march also felt the same. Each had come to the same conclusion: that another being had been in their company.

This feeling came to be called The Third Man. Reports of it occur all over the world, under extreme conditions. The reports haven't stopped. Three recent explorers in Antarctica, Briton Robert Swan, New Zealander Peter Hillary and American Ann Bancroft, have all, at different times, experienced the Third Man during their struggles to the South Pole.

Hillary wrote at the end of his own Antarctic trip: "I know they're out there. I see them come and go."

Perhaps the earliest example of this experience is recorded in the Bible – in the Gospel of Luke, just after Jesus has been crucified, two disciples, in shock and despair at their loss, were travelling to Emmaus. Luke writes: "So it was, while they conversed and reasoned, that Jesus Himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were restrained, so that they did not know Him." Later they recognised Jesus – "Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him; and He vanished from their sight.

And they said to one another, "Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?" So they rose up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem saying, "The Lord is risen indeed"

One explanation of the experience of a Third Man is that it is caused by decay of brain functions. But in some cases the presence seems to know more than the person.

In 1932 a woman pilot, Edith Stearns, found herself off course and low on fuel. She felt her only chance to avoid crashing was to attempt a landing on a railroad track she had been following. She began her descent when a voice cried out: "No! No, Edie, don't!" She recognised the voice as belonging to an old classmate, a girl who had died in a car accident as a teenager. Startled, she climbed quickly, levelled off, and continued dead ahead. Within a few minutes, the runway came into view, and she was able to land safely.

There is definitely *something* that people are experiencing - could there be a supernatural explanation – angels or spirits? Most psychologists disagree – they say that in extreme situations the brain’s normally dominant left hemisphere releases its grip on the mind, which reduces logical, linear thinking. Meanwhile, the right hemisphere, which is involved in imaginative thinking, takes a greater role, sometimes giving advice through hallucinations.

We just don’t know, but one thing is certain: whether you believe it is an angelic helper or a product of your over-stressed brain, even in the midst of disaster, there lies within us a mysterious power than can still be called upon. In our time of deepest solitude and need, God or our own brain finds a way to reassure us that we are not alone, and that feeling often creates the difference between life and death.