

NOT TODAY
Vincent A. Caruso

It had not been a very productive day. He had taken an early shower after doing some reading following dinner. Emerging from the shower he heard the phone. His wife was watching television and had answered it. Probably their daughter calling from out of state.

His wife opened the bathroom door with the phone in her hand.

'It's the police!'

'The police?' Why would the police call him? He did know anyone in the police department. He had no outstanding citations. He had spent the day in relative obscurity as his wife had gone shopping. He was not a shopper and was content to remain at home. He had looked at a couple of taped programs, eaten lunch and in mid afternoon he had gone jogging on the ocean front.

"You better say something," his wife said.

"Hello?"

"Yes that's me. Is there something wrong, officer?"

"You need my help, with what?"

The officer went on to explain that a young man was standing at the end of the pier overlooking the ocean. Below him the water was swirling, smashing into boulders placed strategically to reduce the intensity of the waves as they crested to the beach. To jump would mean death either from the churning waters or slamming into the massive boulders.

One of the onlookers in the crowd, that had assembled to witness the outcome of the unfolding drama, mentioned to a police officer that he remembered 'reading' where a local resident had prevented a suicide by talking down a person threatening to jump from a bridge. His name and that he was a psychiatrist was relayed to the officer. The person in question was now standing buck naked in the bathroom holding the phone against his ear.

The officer resumed the conversation. "Will you come to the pier and talk to him?"

Our psychiatrist was not thrilled with the notion of trying to save someone's life. He wasn't as gung ho as he had been earlier in his life. Beside, he had indulged in a glass or two or maybe more than three fairly 'large' glasses of wine. He had been consuming more wine lately. There did not appear to be any lingering effects as it had been hours since his last glass of wine but he considered using that as a reason for refusing the officers request. It would have been easy to beg off but the officer had said something that piqued his interest.

Who could have given his name? He had no private practice. He was not seeing anyone for therapy. Three years earlier he had 'retired' from a nursing home position. The incident on the bridge had taken place 30 years prior, miles from where he now lived. Outside of his neighborhood he was not known by many residents. He never recalled telling anyone that story.

While thoughts flipped thru his mind the officer continued. "Sir, we told him that you first wanted to talk to him and he agreed to wait until you arrived".

"You did what? You told him that before checking with me? Thanks a lot!"

"The person who told us how to contact you seemed to know quite a bit about you. We were told you would come."

"Who in the world is making decisions for me-saying what I will do and not do", he responded to no one in particular. Still he had enough of an ego to 'join in the hunt' and agreed to the officer's request.

He put on his jeans, a pull over, running shoes and a ball cap. His stated mission was to try and prevent a suicide but his confidence level was low. He had already diagnosed himself as clinically depressed and in a macabre sort of way he enjoyed feeling lousy. In fact he felt justified. Earlier in the day he had taken the same route he was now traveling.

As the police led him to where he could safely talk to the young man 'someone' in the crowd touched his arm and the words "Not today!" were heard. He stopped short, looked around but no one was near him. Who had touched him? Who had spoken to him? What did the words 'not today' mean? His thoughts were interrupted by a voice piercing into the darkness of the night.

"Are you the 'shrink' who is going to change my mind about jumping?"

The one talking was about 50 feet from him with his hand on the top railing that surrounded the end of the pier. One of his feet was propped on the center railing. Any attempt to try and subdue him would not have succeeded as he would have been over the side in a second. The police had abandoned that idea.

He was fairly thin, no shirt, no shoes, cut off shorts and long blond hair. He had been crying.

"What is it that you wanted to talk to me about?" came the response from our hesitant 'shrink'".

"I just wanted to hear you tell me that I'm making a big mistake; that people will miss me; that I have a lot to live for. You know all that crap you guys say".

“I have no intentions of changing your mind”.

Our young man stared at the one uttering what he did not expect and retorted: “Aren’t you guys supposed to ‘save’ me?”

“You’ve been watching too many TV shows,” came the stoic reply.

“You would just stand there and watch me jump? Don’t you have anything to say to me?”

“What do you want me to say?” he replied calmly.

The young man’s energy was ebbing. He let go his grip on the railing and placed his foot on the pier. He began to pace next to the railing, close enough where he could quickly catapult to his death if someone tried to reach him.

“Mind if I sit down?” the ‘shrink’ requested. “Why don’t you relax and sit down as well. I told you before I have no intentions of preventing you from jumping and I mean it”.

“Thanks buddy. You don’t really give a damn about me”.

“Didn’t say that. Simply said I would not try and stop you.”

The young man never expected what he was hearing. He slumped to the pier and rested his weary body against the railing. No one spoke for several minutes.

“Do you want to know my reason for why I want to jump?”

“Not particularly!” came the reply.

“I thought you would want to know.”

“They are your reasons. Going over them won’t help. If you wanted control over your life, you now have it!”

“What do you mean by control?”

“Today you will decide whether you live or die. It’s that simple and you and only you will make the decision. That is why I am not interested in your reasons. They do not matter. What matters is you”.

Just talk, the young man reflected. He stared at the ocean thru the darkness. In the distance was the faint light of a ship. To the south he could see the rotating light of a light house. His energy level had been depleted. He was breathing slower and more rhythmically, more attuned with the sound of the sea. The moon which had decided to hide itself behind a cloud

while the scene below played itself out emerged in all its glory shedding light on the pier. The young man spoke defensively and angrily.

“I bet you never thought about killing yourself!”

How wrong he was. Earlier in the day he had gone to the same spot where the other now sat. He had looked into the swirling waters and they looked inviting. How easy it would be to slip over the side and enter an unknown world. Was it time to do so? Was his work completed? Was he ready for a new adventure? Was he willing to take that risk? No one was on the pier. He was all alone. All he had to do was put his feet on the middle railing and push himself over the top rail. So easy, so enticing.

“Nice day isn’t it” greeted him as he stood at the railing. Where did this person come from? There was no one within sight a moment ago. The stranger continued. “Beautiful view. You can see for miles. The ocean below looks a little unruly. I wouldn’t want to slip off this pier”. He had been interrupted and it was time for him to leave. He muttered to himself as he returned to the beach ‘not today’.

Sitting now on the pier looking at the young man the words ‘not today’ resounded in his mind. His breathing became intense; the perspiration enveloped his body; his breathing was hurried and shallow; his eyes burned. It finally came to him: “Not today”, he said out loud. “This ‘play’ has been about me. I have been talking to myself. I have been confronted with the challenge of making a decision as to whether I live or die.”

Grabbing onto the railings he pulled himself up to a standing position, looked over at the young man and remarked:

“I’m leaving. I meant what I said. Whether you live or die is your choice to make. I made my decision”.

“What decision did you have to make?” he cried out.

No response was made. He now was able to connect the dots. The stranger on the dock; the ‘person’ who initiated the officers’ call to him; the ‘person’ who touched him as he walked to the end of the pier remarking ‘not today’; the young man contemplating suicide were reflections of who he was and who he could still be.

As he neared the beach he glanced over his shoulder. The young man was following him or was he following himself?