

Third Man Syndrome

Survivors in the throes of survival ordeals sometimes report the presence of a second, third or fourth person who appears and gives encouragement and direction in times of dire need. Survivors often credit this presence with their survival.

Is it a psychological or physiological coping mechanism? Is it a spiritual experience such as a spirit guide or a guardian angel? We would love to hear your opinion in the comments section.

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Warriors of plains tribes reported entering a dream state during the sun dance. The particulars of the sun dance vary from tribe to tribe, but for some it is a grueling ritual where following a fast from food and water for days, bits of flesh are torn from the body and the participant dances to a drum in full sun, exposed to the weather, suspended by rawhide thongs pierced through the skin of the chest until the participant enters a trance-like state and experiences a vision. (Wikipedia, Sun Dance, 2023) This begs the question if the third man syndrome or a similar state can it be encouraged or provoked?

Known Cases of Third Man Syndrome

Third man syndrome has been experienced by climbers, shipwreck survivors, polar explorers, scientists, a NASA astronaut, aviator Charles Lindbergh, the first person to solo circumnavigate the earth by sea, and a 9-11 survivor. The

Third Man Factor, published in 2009 by John Geiger, documents scores of Third Man incidents. In 2010, Geiger was elected President of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, and he was appointed CEO of the organization in 2013. (Wikipedia, John Geiger (author), 2013) Together, these individuals make a credible, and fairly large, group of witnesses. Notably, a number of the survivors who have experienced third man syndrome are atheists.

Ernest Shackleton, Tom Crean and Frank Worsley trekked across the mountains and glaciers of South Georgia Island in route to the whaling station at Stromness Bay. After two months of slow going through ice, the Endurance became stuck in the pack ice on February 22, 1915. Seven months later, the ship was crushed, forcing the men and dogs onto the pack ice where they survived another six months as the ice flow travel north. Upon trekking to the edge of the flow, they set sail in lifeboats for Elephant Island some 100 nautical miles away. There, the crew camped, and Shackleton and five others embarked on a difficult 800-mile journey by boat to King Haakon Bay of South Georgia Island before the arduous 36-hour trek to the whaling across frozen mountainous terrain station pushed Shackleton, Crean, and Worsley to the limits of their endurance. (Wikipedia, Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, 2024)

Shackleton and Worsley wrote about the trek and both men reported the impression that there were four men in their party during the trek instead of three. It is noteworthy that more than one member of the party appears to have had experienced the additional presence. After Shackleton and Worsley wrote about their experience, many more people spoke of it. (Wikipedia, Third man factor, 2024)

For Ron DiFrancesco who experienced third man syndrome on 9-11, it took the form of a man who spoke to him. He was on the 84th floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center.

Following the impact of the second aircraft, he repeatedly searched for an exit but couldn't find one. On the verge of giving up, he sensed a presence he described as an angel, who called to him in an unfamiliar voice. (Darby, 2023) DiFrancesco claimed that as he lay prone to avoid smoke and fire, the entity took him by the hand and led him safely out of the building. (NPR, Guardian Angels or the "Third Man Factor?", 2009)

"‘Someone told me to get up.’ Someone, he said, ‘called me.’ The voice, which was male, but did not belong to one of the people in the stairwell was insistent: ‘Get up!’ It addressed DiFrancesco by his first name, and gave him encouragement: ‘It was, ‘Hey! You can do this.’ But it was more than a voice; there was also a vivid sense of a physical presence,”

“He had the sensation that ‘somebody lifted me up.’ He felt that he was being guided: ‘I was led to the stairs. I don’t think something grabbed my hand, but I was definitely led.’”

John Geiger “The Third Man Factor: Surviving the Impossible.”

James Seigney, PhD experienced it in a remote area of the Canadian Rockies. An avalanche carried him 2,000 feet down a mountain, breaking his back in two places, injuring his knees, and causing internal bleeding. Resigned to his fate, Seigney curled up in the snow to die. Then he felt someone behind him who spoke to him. “No, you can’t give up. You have to live.” He said, “It was right over my right shoulder, it was like if I would sneak up to you and put my nose a quarter of an inch from your neck. It was that kind of physical sensation.”

Seigney is a scientist who distains organized religion and claimed he couldn't speak of his experience without crying for years afterward. (Blake, 2009)

In 1933, Frank Smythe nearly became the first man to reach the summit of Mount Everest. The rest of his party aborted the

difficult attempt due to difficult weather conditions and the lack of oxygen in the thin air. Determined to reach his goal, Smythe continued and made it within 1,000' of the summit. In his diary, he recorded:

"All the time that I was climbing alone, I had a strong feeling that I was accompanied by a second person. The feeling was so strong that it completely eliminated all loneliness I might otherwise have felt,"

NPR, Guardian Angels or the "Third Man Factor?", 2009

Smythe was so convinced that his guide was a real person that he attempted to share some mint cake with him only to realize that no one was there after he turned around. (Dunhill, 2023)

In 1985, mountain climber Joe Simpson was climbing the west face of Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes when he fell off an ice cliff, breaking his right leg and crushing his tibia into his knee joint. As his climbing partner, Simon Yates, lowered him down the mountain, controlling his rate of descent with a delay plate, he lost one of the Prusik loops he was using to descend the rope due to loss of dexterity caused by frostbite. After approximately an hour and a half, unable to communicate, without any fixed anchors, and with his own stance collapsing, Yates cut the rope, not knowing how far Simpson was from the bottom. Simpson fell down the cliff and into a deep crevasse.

When Yates descended the mountain, he could see that Simpson had likely fallen into the crevasse. Calling out to Simpson and hearing no reply, Yates concluded that Simpson had been killed in the fall and returned to base camp.

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In his 1988 book *Touching the Void*, Simpson wrote that “a voice” offered encouragement and direction as he climbed out of the crevasse, hopped and crawled 5 miles back to base camp over three days with little water and no food, navigating a glacier littered with crevasses. Simpson reached base camp hours before Yates and a third party member who had waited at base camp were to depart. The fact that Simpson survived is regarded as extraordinary. (Wikipedia, *Touching Void* (book), 2024)

The bicameral mentality hypothesis was introduced by Julian Jaynes in 1976 in his book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. He postulated that the cognitive functions of the minds of our ancestors were divided between two parts: one part of the brain which “speaks”, and another part which “listens and obeys” and that the eventual dissolution of this division resulted in human consciousness. Whether one agrees with Jaynes or not, the idea that the third man syndrome could be rooted in the bicameral nature of the human mind may be worthy of consideration. (Wikipedia, *Bicameral Mentality*, 2024)

“If we understand that the Third Man Factor is a part of us, the way adrenaline is ... then we can start to access it more easily,” Geiger writes. “It’s not a hallucination in the sense that hallucinations are disordering. This is a very helpful and orderly guide.” (NPR, *Guardian Angels or The Third Man Factor?*, 2009)

Is the third man factor an evolutionary adaptation, “the unraveling of the mind” (as Peter Hillary ascribes), “the psyche rising to the occasion”, a coping mechanism, an example of the bicameral mentality hypothesis in action, imaginary friends, the intervention of spirits, or guardian angels in action? (McGregor, 2012) No one seems to know the Third Man Factor is, even though it is undeniable that it has saved lives. What do you think it is?