

The Third Presence **By Frank Cavano**

It was not supposed to have happened in the first place. One week had now passed since the tragic loss of his daughter, Julie. Dressing for work this morning, Jonathan, a tear-stained automaton, moved from one task to another until he was “ready” to face his first day back at work since the accident. The steps on the stairway made no discernible sound as he pounded them on his way down to the first floor where he kissed Rachel quickly and headed for the garage. What words could possibly suffice in the face of her loss, their loss?

Arriving at work, he climbed the twenty-two steps to his second floor psychotherapy suite just as he had done it hundreds of times before. This time, however, his body seemed to gain weight with each step and he was uncharacteristically out of breath when he unlocked the door to his office. Shedding his winter coat, he pulled the charts of all of his patients due for sessions that morning. Jack, the first patient he would see since the accident, should be flying up the stairs shortly.

Now, sitting at his desk, Jonathan’s mind wandered back and forth between the details of the last session with Jack as found in his notes and the last moments he had spent with Julie. Noting the relentless power of this inner turmoil, Jonathan knew that he would have difficulty focusing on Jack’s problems today. He must tell Jack at the outset that he would try to be attentive and helpful but if his emotions made that impossible he would ask to end the session and reschedule. Of course, he would not charge for the session however long it had lasted before the termination.

It was at this point in time that something very peculiar transpired. Jack was a large and vigorous man whose arrival for his early morning appointment was usually heralded by a rapid and very noisy climbing of the twenty-two steps. Now, however, Jonathan heard but a measured, occasional and very faint squeak from the old wooden stairway leading up to the suite. Certain that this was not Jack arriving, he continued to watch his thoughts flee from Julie to Rachel to work and back again. Then, to his surprise, he heard the creaking of the door that opened into his suite and the waiting room. Jonathan inched his way into the waiting room where he noticed that Jack was, indeed, peering with great care and caution through the door his over-sized hands were holding ajar.

“Doc, you’re here!” “Yes, Jack, I’m here.” “I didn’t think you would be here, doc.” “I mean, I mean----you took the big hit, doc, and----.” Jonathan motioned for Jack to come back to his office. Once inside, Jonathan explained that he was feeling very raw and emotional. He would do the best he could but if either of them felt that the session was not working it should be scheduled for a later date. “You don’t understand, doc.” “I come to see you with a couple of minor problems and you take the big hit.” “And still you’re here----you’re here for me, for me.” “Your presence here today is telling me all I have ever needed to know-----that I am worthy, that I am-----loveable.” Jack then stated

that he did not need to come again for treatment. Wondering if Jack might be experiencing a “flight into health” under these unusual circumstances, Jonathan suggested he continue in treatment a bit longer. Jack would not agree to continue the weekly sessions, however. Jonathan thought of pushing the issue but, noting the peacefulness in Jack’s face as well as Jack’s new found ability to give from the heart, settled for an appointment in four weeks to re-assess the need for treatment. At that evaluation it became clear that Jack’s improvement had been sustained. In fact, in a matter of a few weeks, Jack had repaired an important relationship which had been deteriorating for some time. At work, he had abandoned the role of chronic complainer and was now seen as a positive influence on his fellow employees.

As for Jonathan, it would take a little time to understand all that had transpired in that single session on that unique and painful day. Eventually, it became clear to him that his own healing from the loss of Julie had begun on that very day. He also learned that, in every therapy session, there is a third presence in the room invited in by the mutual caring and concern and compassion of therapist for patient and patient for therapist. True, Jonathan never abandoned his role or responsibilities as therapist. But it is equally true that, from that point onward, he realized that therapy passed through him and was not of him. The real and only therapist, the third presence, by whatever name one wished to call it, would offer healing to both patient and therapist as the need dictated. Jonathan would take this new understanding to work with him every day for the remainder of his career as a therapist. Many would comment that a state of relative peacefulness attended both Jonathan and his patients over the years that followed.