

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 always comfort to offer in the face of the unknown. Ron DeFrancesco, a 42-year-old man, was one of the few people to survive the September 11 attacks. He said: "It led me to a stairwell... led me to run by somebody encouraging me. That's not where you go, you hid his head with his forearms and continued down, now continued for three storeys. Finally, he reached a clear, lit stairwell

81st 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 DeFrancesco 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.

