

1. Calling for Help

At any moment of any day or night, someone is calling for help.

Someone is calling right now.

Probably he or she is far away, but if you could hear snowflakes falling one-by-one on winter fields or thunder rolling across the skies of distant cities, you would hear the call as well. You couldn't avoid hearing it.

Someone is calling for help.

Dozens of someones, probably. Maybe even hundreds or thousands.

Most of them will be all right on their own. The boy yelling from a low tree branch is only playing, imagining that the trunk is surrounded by deadly cobras. The housewife who screamed when a mouse jumped out of her cupboard is just surprised, not endangered. In a moment she will be embarrassed and hope that no one heard.

Some will be better than just all right. The young couple lost in the mountains will stop panicking, think things through, and come up with a plan that gets them back to safety. They'll learn a good lesson about planning, preparation, and staying alert, but they will also learn to have confidence in themselves and in each other. Decades from now they will tell their grandchildren about stumbling back into the lodge after midnight, cold and hungry. If you leaped to their rescue, you would take that story away from them. It would become your story then, about what a hero you are and how you saved them from certain death. It would be selfish of you to help them. It would be cruel.

Others really do need help, but they will get it with or without you. Someone is already on the way, someone who handles these situations daily and does it as well or better than you can. A lifeguard will reach that struggling swimmer in time. Those people stuck in an elevator will be moving again in a few minutes. Dozens of Moms and Dads will deal with the monsters in the closets.

But there are more. Lots more. A family is standing on a ledge that will not hold long enough for the firemen to reach them. A tourist is resisting being mugged, and a bullet has already started its short trip down the barrel of a Saturday night special. No one else can help them.

Some who don't call for help need it even more than those who do. If you could see through walls and across oceans you would find them. The trapped miners are all unconscious now as their bodies make a last-ditch attempt to conserve oxygen. The man who is freezing in his stalled car is sleeping, dreaming of a warm fire and hot coffee. He moans occasionally and smiles.

It's just as well that you don't know about these people (except perhaps as paragraphs in tomorrow morning's newspaper), because there is nothing you can do.

But if you could fly faster than rockets, if you were bulletproof and couldn't burn, if you

were stronger than the girders that hold up skyscrapers and more powerful than the wrecking balls that knock them down – then you could save them.

Some of them. Not even you can save them all.

But you can hang high in the stratosphere or stand alone on a mountaintop like Olympian Zeus. You can look down on the Earth below and pick out which of them will live and which will die.

And while you are saving your chosen ones, the others – unaware that your unanswerable judgment has already gone against them – will continue to call out hopefully, to call out your name, perhaps, if you have been so foolish as to let them give you one.

Don't be distracted by the calls of those who have already been judged and found wanting. Soon they will stop. But by then there will be others. Because the calling never stops, not for a single second. At any moment of any day or night, someone is calling for help.

How long will it be before you want to make it stop? A day? A week? A year? Longer, perhaps, if you are kind and gentle and compassionate by nature, if you feel the pain of others and take it as seriously as your own.

How long will it be before the fantasy begins to grow in your mind: To let them all think you are dead. To build a house in the underpopulated farm country. To make a special chamber in a sub-sub-basement, line it with lead too thick to see through, and buffer it with sound-absorbing materials unknown to terrestrial science. To sit alone inside it and hear nothing but your own perfect breathing and your own un-aging heart.

To know peace.

You might build it someday. Some especially painful, stressful, thankless day. You might build it for a short break. For a rest. For a vacation. You've earned it. You know you've earned it a thousand times over.

And when you have gone inside, when you have closed the door and heard the deep, all-obliterating quiet – what then?

What will it take to make you come out?