

## Essay

**Those who jumped from the Twin Towers on 9/11: Suicides or not?**David Lester 

Richard Stockton College, USA

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**Abstract:** On September 11, 2001, after the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, some 200 people jumped from the upper floors of the towers to their death. This essay considers whether any were suicides and how we might explore the states of mind of those who jumped.

**Keywords:** September 11<sup>th</sup>, 9/11, Terror, World Trade Center,

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On September 11, 2001, terrorists flew two hijacked airplanes into the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York City. The two towers eventually collapsed. As of August 16, 2002, 2,726 death certificates had been filed related to the attack (Schwartz & Berenson, 2002). Of these, 2,713 died on September 11, and 13 died later; 2,103 (77%) were male and 623 female; the median age was 39, range 2-85. However, it is estimated that 2,819 people died in these attacks, a number which includes passengers on the airplanes, people in the towers, and people on the ground, but not including the 10 terrorists. All the deaths were classified as homicides by the medical examiner. Leonard (2011) noted that the Medical Examiner's office describes these individuals as *fallers* rather than *jumpers*.

Among those deaths were some by suicide - those who jumped from the WTC - and these deaths in particular raise interesting issues for those of us who study suicide. This essay will discuss these issues. The first issue concerns whether we should even study these deaths. As Flynn and Dwyer (2004) asked, would studying these deaths simply result in more pain to those who were traumatized by this attack? Is asking questions mere morbid curiosity? Yet, on the other hand, Leonard (2011) labeled these deaths as "the 9/11 victims America wants to forget." Air-brushing these deaths out of our memory is a disservice to our commitment to scientific inquiry. Leonard suggested that the avoidance of discussing these individuals is because Americans want to focus on patriotism and courage, and those who chose to jump do not epitomize this. Furthermore, many in America consider suicide to be a sin, a shameful act that will condemn you to Hell.

This dilemma is epitomized by the photograph taken by Richard Drew that was

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 David Lester, Ph.D.  
Distinguished Professor of Psychology  
The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey  
Galloway, NJ 08205-9441  
USA  
Tel: +1 609-652-4254  
Email: David.Lester@stockton.edu

published that day of a man falling vertically, one knee bent, with the striped pattern of the towers in the background. Publication of this picture, as well as live video of the falling bodies, aroused such outrage in America that the live video was stopped and the picture removed from newspaper websites, leaving it only available in other countries and in the unauthorized Internet. Yet the sight of these falling bodies saved lives. Those in the south tower saw the people falling from the north tower, and the sight of the falling people propelled them to flee even before the second airplane hit their building.

### The Numbers

Rosenthal (2013) has provided data for the attacks:

#### WTC1

Struck at 8:46 a.m. between floors 93 and 99  
1,355 civilians on floors 92-110 had no means of escape; all perished.

7,545 people below floor 92 began to evacuate; all but 107 escaped.

WTC1 Collapsed at 10: 28 a.m.

#### WTC2

Struck at 9:02 a.m. between floors 77 and 85  
At time of impact, 3,200 of the 8,600 occupants (37%) had already evacuated the building.

WTC2 collapsed at 9:59 a.m.

By 9:59 a.m. 8,000 had evacuated the building.

4,800 were below the impact floors, and all but 11 had evacuated.

637 people were at or above the impact floors (77 to 110); 18 escaped, 619 perished.

How many jumped? The *New York Times* conservatively estimated 50 and *USA Today* 200. The official report counted those caught by cameras - 104 individuals. All but three jumped from the first tower that was hit by a plane (WTC1) (Leonard, 2011). The

first jump was recorded at 8:51 a.m., four minutes after the airplane hit WTC1 and was from the 93<sup>rd</sup> floor.

### The Falling Man

Let me begin this essay with Richard Drew's picture. Drew's picture has become one of the enduring images of 9/11. Commentators have argued whether it is iconic (Kroes, 2011) or an existential symbol (Orvell, 2011), but Kroes suggested that the picture was like the flashbulb memories that we often acquire from sights that we have personally seen. Kroes noted that other artists have used that image as the stimulus for their creations, such as Don DeLillo's (2007) novel *Falling Man*, Art Spiegelman's (2004) *In the Shadow of the Towers* and Eric Fischli's bronze sculpture called *Tumbling Woman* which was removed after a week from the Rockefeller Center following protest and bomb threats.

Drew's picture is, in fact, atypical. His falling man seems calm, poised, in control, as if he is diving like a swimmer off the high board. It was not so. Drew took a sequence of photographs of him, and in the others he is like the other jumpers, flailing, twisting and turning.<sup>1</sup> Their shoes fly off, their clothes are ripped away, and those who tried to use drapes and table-cloths as parachutes have them torn out of their hands. One woman was observed modestly holding down her skirt for a brief period of time.

Why were the videos of people falling and this picture censored? Were the images too gruesome and too confrontational, or was it to protect the dignity of the jumpers and minimize the pain of the families of the jumpers? Although there is merit in the latter explanation, the horror of the imagination of those who viewed the pictures and videos is possibly the reason for the censorship in America. At

<sup>1</sup> There have been attempts to identify the man in Drew's picture, so far without a conclusive identification.

the scene, however, the trauma experienced by those who saw the twin towers collapse is outweighed by the trauma of those next to the towers as the bodies fell.

*...the loud thud of bodies hitting the ground – “it was raining bodies,” as one firefighter wailed in shock once he was safely back at his station (Kroes, p. 4).*

In videos of the scene, voices can be heard screaming “My God, Oh, .my God.” The fallers were silent, but those watching them screamed. Leonard (2011) has described the falls. The fall took about ten seconds, and the velocity perhaps 125 mph, but it could reach as high as 200 mph. One hit a fireman and killed him. Leonard says that “their bodies were not so much broken as obliterated.” One fire-fighter he talked to told him that she and others could not bear to watch. They turned away and faced a wall, but they could still hear the awful noise.

Kroes and Orvell contrasted the censorship in America of Drew’s photograph with the lack of censorship of Eddie Adams’s photograph of Nguyen Ngoc Loan firing a pistol shot into the head of a Vietcong operative (Nguyen Van Lem) and Nick Ut’s photograph of a young girl running naked after a napalm attack, both taken during the Vietnam War. But those photographs are of murder, not suicide, they come from a war that was very unpopular in America, and they are of Vietnamese in Vietnam, not Americans in America. Drew’s photograph of the falling man is much closer to home.

### **Are They Suicides?**

It can be argued, of course, that these jumpers were not suicides. They were trying to survive. All of the jumpers were at or above the level at which the airplanes hit the towers. Their fate was to die in the inferno that was about to engulf them. We know now that some chose certain death by

jumping rather than certain death by staying, but was suicide their intent? Those who tried to fashion parachutes out of cloth available were obviously trying to survive the jump. Others were perhaps struggling to breathe fresh air.

On the other hand, a death by fire is perhaps a manner of death we fear most. Many of us have experienced minor burns, and the pain is excruciating. The temperature in the burning towers is estimated to have reached 1,000 degrees Centigrade. The anticipation of major burns is, to me, unimaginable. Might some have jumped, knowing they would die as a result, in order to choose a less painful method death, just as some choose to take a lethal overdose rather than die from a painful, terminal illness.

Firefighters told Leonard (2011) that people rarely jump from burning buildings until they have exhausted all other options. They also told Leonard that some individuals may have been blown out of the building while others were pushed as everyone rushed toward the windows desperate for cool fresh air.

Leonard noted that some fell within seconds of one another, nine in six seconds from five adjacent windows in one case and two simultaneously from the same window in another. This suggests a role of imitation. At least four individuals were trying to climb from one window to another and lost their grip. These individuals were perhaps trying to escape, and their deaths may more accurately be classified as accidental. Leonard interviewed people in WTC2 who watched some of those who jumped. Some seemed to be blinded by smoke and unable to breathe. They would walk to the edge and fall out. Some held hands as they jumped (Flynn & Dwyer, 2004). Many hit the ground, but a few crashed onto the awning covering the circular VIP driveway, and 30 to 40 fell off the roof of the 22-floor Marriott Hotel (Cauchon & Moore, 2002). Many of those

who evacuated the towers had to walk past the shattered bodies. Eventually, in order to protect the evacuees, firefighters and police led them into an underground shopping center and under the plaza where the bodies were falling.

The transcripts of many of the calls made those in the towers before they died have been stored but, when released and made public, the statements by those about to die have been redacted and only the person they were calling (typically the dispatcher) available. Three partial transcripts from people in the tower are available (Rosenthal, 2013) because they were used in the trial of Moussaoui in 2006 to demonstrate the suffering of the victims. However, these transcripts do not go to the end of the call. For example, one transcript covers only the first five minutes of a 15-minute call.

### The Survivors

Some survivors were outraged at the suggestion that their family member might have jumped from the building. For example, when Drew's *Falling Man* was thought to have been identified, his family rejected the idea, saying that jumping would have been a betrayal. They were sure that he would have tried to come home to them, and jumping would have made that impossible. People commenting on the Internet sometimes reinforced this view by saying that those who jumped, would go to Hell (Junod, 2009). Eventually, the search for the individual in Drew's photograph turned elsewhere, but his identify remains unknown.

Others were not as upset. One man whose wife called him from the burning tower told him how scared she was. Her remains were found in the street. Her husband is not convinced that she jumped, but he is angry at those who think that jumping was a cop-out. That his wife might have jumped consoles her husband because

she exercised some control over her life and death (Leonard, 2011). Another man whose fiancé might have jumped found photographs in Richard Drew's collection that he thought was her. "It made me feel she didn't suffer and that she chose death on her terms rather than letting them burn her up" (Leonard, 2011). He did not have a body to bury, but the photograph helped him move on.

### Discussion

The informal censorship of the images of those who jumped from the World Trade Center towers and the outrage that the images aroused in Americans toward those filming and displaying the images is interesting. Eric Steel captured people jumping to their death from the Golden Gate Bridge in his movie *The Bridge* released in 2006. There was little outcry about his movie, but those suicides were personal tragedies and did not occur in the context of an attack on America. The magnitude of the slaughter at the World Trade Center was vast compared to twenty suicides each year from the Golden Gate Bridge. Furthermore, America had never been attacked by an enemy for over a hundred years. The shock of the attack and the fear that it generated in Americans was great. Removing the images of the attack helped Americans avoid confronting the reality of the attack. Yet images of the towers collapsing have not been as completely removed as those of the falling people.

At some point, a study of the complete calls made from those in the towers would be of great interest, both caller and dispatcher statements. How do people confront impending death, and how many had each of the different coping styles? Were some of them suicides, similar to those of people with terminal illnesses? Should we call them suicides? We label the dying individuals who choose to die by suicide "rational suicides," but those choices

are made over a long period of deliberation. Should we apply the same label to impulsive decisions made to acute impending-death crises?

But let not air-brush these people from our memory.

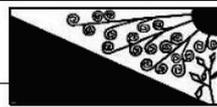
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Editorial Office  
Assoc.Prof. Dr. Nestor Kapusta  
Suicide Research Group  
Department of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy  
Medical University of Vienna  
Waehringerguertel 18-20  
1090 Vienna, Austria  
[office@suicidology-online.com](mailto:office@suicidology-online.com)  
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