

The FM picnic

Around 10 years ago, the Journal published an article by Richard Kupisz about life in the green zone in Baghdad. The publication of that editorial was a departure from the norm in that I tried to record some thoughts from history rather than add anything to the debate around facilities management. This editorial departs even further from the norm. As I write this editorial, the UK is in its greatest state of turmoil and crisis in my lifetime. Nothing else seems to matter. I am reminded of a family I once knew.

A family of 7 sat on the white cliffs of Dover in Kent England on a beautiful sunny day in the early summer. Mum and Dad had arranged a picnic at the end of a very difficult time for the family. The couple had four children: Carla (4), Mark (5), Jenny (7) and Harry (8). They were joined at the picnic by Dad's older brother Stephen.

Mark sat looking at the seagulls soaring from the cliffs flying free across the sea and began to wonder what life must be like when you can fly. He remembered that his Dad often told him that he could do whatever he wanted with his life and that he should not let anything stand in his way. Many of these motivational conversations with Dad had come during his sister Jenny's long illness. Jenny was now in remission, and in around 3 years, the family hoped that she would receive the all clear from her doctors. Suddenly, Mark could hold it in no longer and announced to the family that he wanted to fly from the cliff like the birds. Mum and Dad laughed, but Stephen mumbled that he thought that might not be a bad idea. Stephen was in the middle of a messy divorce and the idea of ending it all was almost appealing to him, but after a frown from Mum and Dad, he was persuaded to smile and tell Mark that maybe it wasn't such a good idea after all.

Harry had been listening with interest. Jenny had been the centre of attention for so long that he felt left out. Only Stephen ever listened to his problems, as Mum and Dad spent all their time at the hospital or looking after Carla. To pay for care for Jenny, Mum and Dad had stopped his piano lessons and almost all of his pocket money. He looked with envy at his friends in school. He was fed up with being poor. Seeing Stephen's initial reaction, Harry seized the moment to become important again and agreed with Mark. He asked Mark whether the two of them should fly. Mark was so excited that his older brother had endorsed his idea that he jumped up and down screaming "we are going to fly". Carla saw the fun and joined in.

Jenny listened intently. She had been through so much in the past few years that she wanted freedom more than anyone. She had reservations but Harry told her that he could make her some wings from her jumper and that she must have heard of the "birdman" in a place in the USA. Harry then asked Jenny whether she was stupid as well as sick at which point Jenny began to sob saying that she did want to fly and she wasn't stupid.

Dad saw that this was all getting out of hand and suggested that they have a proper discussion about the merits of jumping off the cliff. Harry objected to the use of the word jumping and insisted that the word flying be used instead. Dad agreed with a chuckle adding that they could all decide whether it was a good idea. "Can we vote on it?" said Harry. Confident that he had support from Mum and his brother and that the children would eventually trust him Dad agreed. After all, how could four children not listen to three adults?

Dad asked Harry whether he remembered what happened in the supermarket three years earlier? Harry had eaten too many sweets and had been sick. He remembered that Dad had warned him that would happen. Then Dad dropped the bombshell. Dad told the children that they couldn't fly and that they would fall to the rocks below and die. Dad asked them to trust that he was right in the supermarket and he was right now. Stephen pointed out that Dad was rarely right but reluctantly admitted he might well be right now. Harry wasn't backing down from his new position of authority over his siblings and drew confidence from Stephen's lack of enthusiasm. Stephen clearly wasn't on Dad's side. "Gotcha" thought Harry. Mum listened quietly nodding occasionally in agreement with Dad.

Dad used multiple examples of peoples' inability to fly including pointing to the fact that many people killed themselves at the cliffs deliberately. Only Harry really understood any of the points and retained his control over his siblings, but Dad thought he had done enough.

Finally, Dad clearly explained to the children what would happen if they decided to jump. We will all go towards the edge hand in hand, the edge of the cliff will begin to crumble, not long after you will see that you have made a mistake but you will then have to jump, in the air your wings will be useless and you will hit the rocks and die. Harry just said "no it won't and no we won't" indicating that Dad just wanted to scare everyone.

The family voted 4:3 to jump off the cliff.

Dad knew they couldn't really jump, but Harry had won and Stephen was taking yet another call from his difficult wife. Harry didn't really want to jump. He knew he should have voted like a grown up. He hid under a blanket. The family began to walk to the edge and the cliffs began to crumble. Harry said nothing. Jenny now realised that she had made the wrong decision. Mark and Carla still really wanted to jump. Dad faced the dilemma of destroying his family or never being trusted again.

The truth is always better than fiction.

Michael Pitt

*The Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment, University College London,
London, UK*