

Jack McKinney, M.Div., Ph.D.

3412 Hillsborough Street
Raleigh, NC 27607
(919) 803-1369

Jack@mckinneycounseling.org
www.mckinneycounseling.org

McKinney Counseling and Consulting

Pastoral Counseling for Individuals and Couples / Pastoral Consulting for Clergy and Churches

The Stare

But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about!” At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. ... And he went out and wept bitterly.

The knock came at 10:45 p.m. I knew immediately who it was. The soft knocking always came late, sometimes near midnight. My wife and children were sound asleep, but as usual I was just gearing up for a late night of television, or reading, or anything else that would allow me to decompress from a long day at church. The knock, however, reminded me that the minister’s job is never done, especially if he lives next door to the church.

Russell was back. I stood on the porch in my bare feet wishing I had remembered to buy some slippers. Russell always chose cool nights to appear, nights when the concrete eventually turned my feet numb. I shifted my weight back in forth in a strange dance that I reserved for these late-night encounters. I found the usual emotions welling up inside of me. Resentment that my privacy had been invaded again. Frustration that the same scenario had to be played out one more time. Depression that I was clearly not helping this lost soul.

Russell was an alcoholic. On this evening, like all the rest, his breath was weighted with the smell of cheap liquor. He was frequently homeless, depending on his level of sobriety. His carpentry skills allowed him to rent a room occasionally, but then the lure of the bottle would become too strong and he would find himself on the streets once more. These were the times Russell came to see me. He was a semi-regular at the lunch program my church ran for the homeless and underemployed. Through his lunch visits he figured out that I lived next door. Thus began our nocturnal meetings.

But even though the circumstances of this visit matched the others, there was something unusual this night. There was a level of desperation that I had not seen before. Russell was always a mixture of defiance and remorse during his drunken monologues, but I had never felt threatened. This time was different. There was less remorse and more demand. He insisted on help immediately. My customary offer to meet with him in the morning, an offer he usually agreed to but never kept, was batted aside with rage. He demanded help now, not in the morning, and he insisted that I provide it. After suggesting several possibilities with no success, I could feel

Russell losing his fragile grip on control. He finally blurted out, “You better call 911 right now or I’m going to kill myself!”

It had never occurred to me that a person I was trying to help might ask me to call the police. That notion felt like failure and betrayal wrapped together. I tried to talk Russell out of the idea, but once the words had escaped his lips he seemed energized by the thought. “Call 911 or I’m walking away and killing myself tonight. I’ve got a gun and I’ll do it!” I’m not sure if it was fear, or the belief that he might carry through with it, or just my frozen feet, but I walked back in the house and dialed the three digits.

Within minutes the police were outside my house. Two squad cars pulled up with lights flashing. I immediately regretted the call. The direct manner of the officers threw me off stride. They were in Russell’s face, speaking loudly and gruffly, insisting that he confirm his earlier threats. Russell also seemed disoriented. I tried to explain to the officers that the call had not been my idea as a way of reminding Russell who was responsible for this ugliness. No one seemed interested in such minutiae.

Finally, the lead officer took me inside the house to ask for more details while the others dealt with Russell. I described the history of my relationship with Russell and fumbled through another attempt to explain why I had made the phone call. The large policeman finally sensed my struggle. He perceived that I felt like I had failed my mandate to help the helpless. The officer assured me that Russell would be going to a psychiatric hospital for twenty-four hours which was probably what Russell wanted in the first place. It would be warm, he would have a room and food, and he could dry out under the eye of people trained to evaluate such cases. With this reassurance I felt myself relax. Perhaps the call was the right thing. Maybe it was what Russell wanted. It certainly seemed like the safest thing for all involved.

We stepped back onto the porch, and to my surprise, the large officer demanded that Russell turn around. As Russell slowly twisted the flash of silver caught my eye as handcuffs swiftly snapped onto his wrists. I tried to voice my outrage but the words caught in my throat. Two officers took Russell by the arms and began to lead him away. He turned his head and looked at me. His eyes seethed with anger and betrayal. I went inside and wept bitterly.