MARIN VOICE

A suicide barrier speaks for us

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I HAVE a lasting memory of something that my wife and I saw several years ago as we drove across the Golden Gate Bridge in the wee dark hours of a foggy morning.

Still tired and groggy after a long airplane trip, neither of us mentally registered the potential significance of the dark shadow of a lone figure standing mid-span at the railing of the darkened bridge.

It was only a few days later after I read a small article in the IJ about the discovery of the body of a suicide jumper in the bay on the previous morning that we began to look back in horror.

I recall that I passed the article to my wife, "Was this ...?" I asked.

She quickly read the article and said, "The person on the bridge?" "Yes, I saw it too."

On recollect, we both had seen someone, draped in black from hood to heel, peering over the railing, looking down into the icy waters of the bay.

"Could it have been?" we both wondered.

Although I had no way of knowing the answer I visualized myself as the figure on the bridge and I theorized that the person had been contemplating a real end, a real bottom to the bottomless and interminable struggle of people who suffer with acute mental depression. I only imagined this scenario because I too have struggled with a lifetime of depression. It is only through good fortune, a lot of help from family, friends and professionals that my own relentless fight against depression never got me so close to the railing as those who have succeeded in terminating their lives because they thought it was their last and only option.

This is not to say that everyone who has leapt the 240 feet from bridge to San Francisco Bay had been suffering from depression.

But for those who did, I can only wonder if they were drawn to the bridge as I imagine they might have been: drawn by the spirit of a thousand before them who had successfully terminated the greater fall in their perpetually sinking hearts; drawn into the caring hands of those who have gone before; and drawn to a place of peace where the real falling finally ends.

All of this got me thinking about what a suicide barrier would mean to a potential suicide jumper.

A suicide barrier would exist as something far greater than the reduction, if not elimination, of suicide jumping. It would send an all-important message to the bottomed-out downhearted than merely "No Jumping."

Should those in an acute state of desperation know that leaping from the Golden Gate Bridge is not an option, the barrier would stand as a symbol of a whole society reaching out to say: "Jumping is not an option."

No one can catch the falling spirit of a depressed person. But depressed people do know when others reach out and try to ease their pain.

Speaking from personal experience, sometimes just knowing that someone

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cares is all a depressed person needs to try to take on another day, to fight the disease and then to ultimately conquer what one time would have drawn them to the railings of the bridge.

I wish I could turn back time to that foggy night so many years ago when my wits didn't catch up to me until days later when it was too late. My wife would have carefully stopped the car so I could quickly get out. While she drove to Vista Point to call for help and wait for me, I would have gone over to the person cloaked in black. I would have told them my own story. I would have told them that there are other options that are worth the fight.

But after all my pleading I would have told them that no matter what, I simply wouldn't let them jump. I would tell them that I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I stood there and watched them take their own life. Jumping is not an option.

Perhaps the suicide barrier will say what I could not.