

MIXED EMOTIONS AT A PHONE CALL

Written by Carl Wake in September 2001

The receptionist calls mid-afternoon with a situation:
A weeping woman wanting to speak with her husband.
There has been a death in the family.
She wants to tell the inmate herself.
Would I phone her back?
I agree, but know how much time this could take.
HESITATION.

The woman answers the phone
Barely able to speak through the tears.
I keep asking her simple questions
But cannot understand her answers.
EMBARRASSED

Finally, the details come out.
It was her brother who died.
She needs to speak with her husband.
She will stay by the phone while I go and get him.
COMPASSION

Who is this inmate? What is he like?
Will he "flip" in my office?
OTIS tells me nothing.
The O/M just got on that morning,
So he knows nothing.
The C/O's at first don't even know where he is.
Once found, a C/O offers to stand outside my office
While I call with the inmate.
UNEASY / FRUSTRATED / RELIEVED

He wonders why he is there
I ask if he knows this woman
I give him her name.
He says it's his wife, then calmly asks,
"Is it about my son? What's happened?"
I respect her wishes and don't tell.
We wait until we connect with her.
Those seconds are too long.
There's got to be a better way.
SADNESS / FRUSTRATION / REGRET

We connect. I confirm who it is. I pass him the phone.
The expected outpouring of anguish never comes.
He shows no emotion. He never even says, "I'm sorry."
He just sits quietly, then asks:
"Are you coming in tomorrow?
Can you come as early as possible?
Did you get your GST cheque?"
Is that all he's interested in?
DISGUST

But maybe she did not tell him yet?
Maybe we've been duped
By a wife pretending a crisis,
Just to get in a free call?
Not again! Is this the same woman
Who did this to me before?
I toy with confronting them right then and there.
ANGER

Finally, he asks, "So when did he die?"
I'm glad I waited.
RELIEF

He asks about his two brothers living in New York.
She has not heard if they are safe.
Were they killed in 9/11? I cringe inside at this.
SHOCK / COMPASSION

But still no expression or emotion
Still repeatedly pleading,
"So are you coming in tomorrow morning?"
Is he that heartless and cold?
I just want him out of my office.
MORE DISGUST

They close off.
He tells me that her brother
Was in prison out west, for murder.
Inexplicably something changed in me. Why?
QUESTIONING

I walk him back to his area.
No words of thanks.
No expression.
DISAPPOINTMENT