

Under the shadow of Vista Bridge

BY DUSTIN DANDLIKER
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

When the MAX speeds through the Vista Bridge tunnel into downtown, I always get the impression of travelling through a wormhole in space-time. I imagine myself going to a far-away place. I imagine being reborn. The train breaks through the darkness into bright light and trees. But then there's the shadow of Vista Bridge, vaulted and Gothic, looking down.



A crooked path forward

By Dustin Dandliker

This series is a first-hand account of the struggles and successes of overcoming trauma, mental illness, addiction, homelessness and more.

My first glimpse of it feels bittersweet. In the span of seven years (2004-2011), 13 people died of suicide by jumping from Vista Bridge. Another person commits suicide every 40 seconds worldwide, which means by the time you're done reading this article another person will have taken their own life. However, when I see the barrier fences, I am reminded there is hope. I know there is hope because I have survived the spectre of suicidal thoughts and two attempts.

At 15, I spent the summer snorting methamphetamine. When school started, I quit meth and underwent agonizing withdrawal. I thought the only solution to my pain was death.

I spiralled into such profound depression I began to experience psychotic symptoms. In bed one night, I was flooded with thoughts of all the terrible things I did in my short life. I became convinced all virtue was beaten out of me and the only justice – my only reprieve – was death.

I sought any alternative but a suicidal obsession constantly haunted me. I dropped out of school. I got the notion in my head that if OJ Simpson was found not guilty, I wouldn't do it. I thought of calling a stranger from a payphone and confessing my wrongdoing. Finally, one day I sat on my hands, rocking back and forth, staring at the door until Dad came home. As he

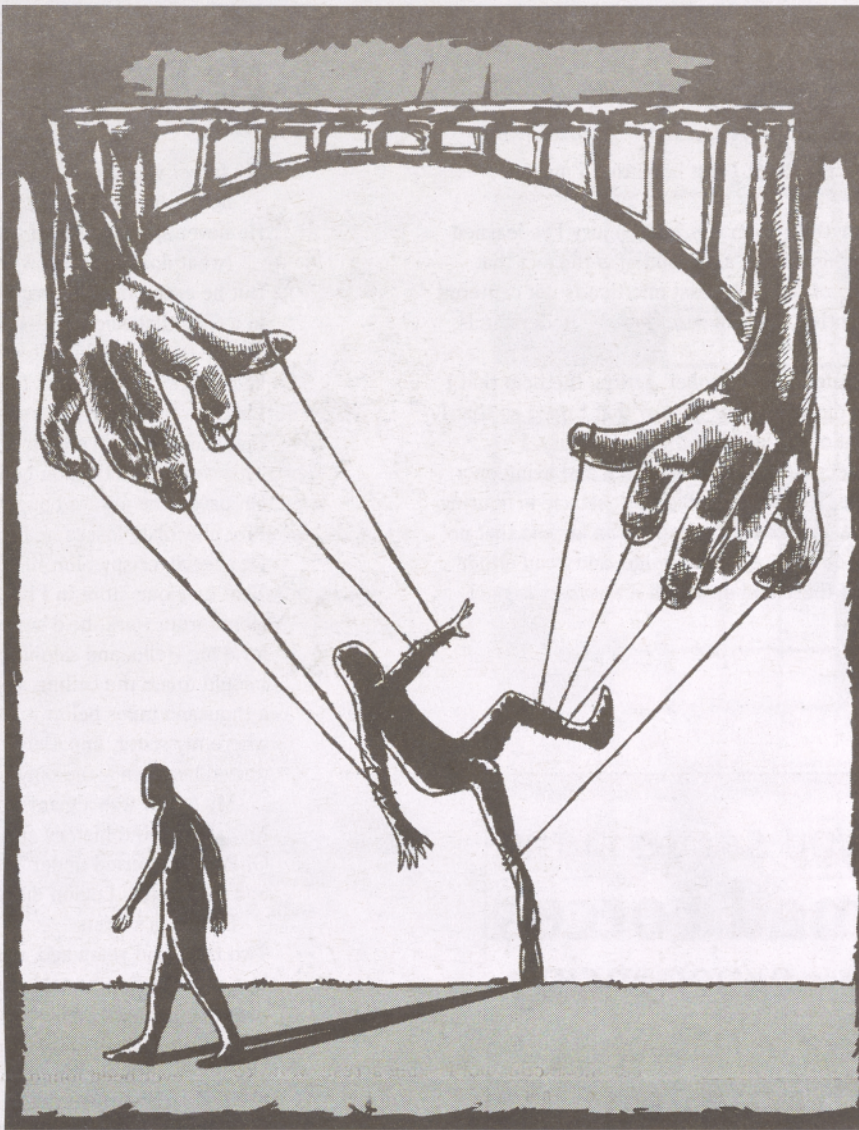


ILLUSTRATION BY KAT DAVIS

came in the door, I gritted my teeth and bawled but the words wouldn't come out. I was locked in my body.

That night, I stole some liquid cold medicine and a box of extra strength sleeping pills at the store. I was so exhausted from insomnia that I thought, "If this kills me, at least I'll finally get some rest." My pulse slowed to about 60 beats per minute and I panicked. I spent half the night pacing my room and doing jumping jacks. I laid down to sleep when the sun rose. I'm not sure I was actually at risk of death but I got as far as trying.

Later, I learned from college psychology courses what combination of over-the-counter medications were lethal. After my marriage fell apart, I drove up to Skyline cemetery and went through a "practice run." I only had soda but knew when I did the real thing I would need liquor. I had a couple more close calls. I drove drunk down I-84 at midnight at 80 miles an hour, took off my seatbelt, closed my eyes and held my breath. My first time homeless, my pastor paid for a two-night motel stay to get me out of the cold. I filled the tub with water, thinking I could drown myself if the pain got the better of me.

Proper access to mental health care ultimately saved my life. According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, there is a physical difference in the structure and function of a suicidal person's brain. Since getting sober and taking anti-depressant medication, I have been free from suicidal thoughts for over a

year. I have an internal compass and the means to cope with my occasional symptoms of anxiety, depression and PTSD.

In addition to mental health care services, family and community support are essential to my recovery. I am fortunate to have a dedicated, responsible father who's the only person that stuck with me since birth. Without him, I would have been dead before my 18th birthday.

And without my recovery community, I would still be stuck in the slow suicide of addiction. Sober alcoholics are a phone call away 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. They not only showed me how to get clean, they showed me how to really live.

Finally, culturally and spiritually relevant resources are a larger network of support, hope and meaning. My church helped me find housing, connected me with doctors and counsellors and constantly urged me out of myself to see the bigger picture. There is nothing more meaningful than helping someone going through similar struggles. There is nothing more powerful than compassion.

No matter how dark or narrow the way forward seems, there are bright and beautiful days ahead. You'll see the pain was worthwhile only after you've endured it. And you are not alone.

Get help 24 hours a day. Call 503-972-3456 or Text "help" to 741-741

Spend or Share

by Stephen "Doc" Holladay

Life is never about spending time
To spend is gone
I prefer to share mine.

Spending is using and using all up
Sharing is the fabric memories are made of.

You can spend your life
But oh, what a waste
Sharing gives life a much better taste.

A life well spent is still not a share
To spend is for nothing
Share is to care.

So in life you can spend or share time
I'll never again spend.
I prefer to share mine.

Tempests

by Daniel Cox

My love has burdened many
Turmoil and strife have followed me
Like a storm.

I seek the one who can
Break the rage of the tempests
One who can calm the madness.
For that I look within.

What is Home?

by J. Juno

Home is a house
but home is also a cardboard box

Home is an apartment
but home is also an alcove

Home is a condo
but home is also a mat on the floor

Home is a cottage
but home is also a tent

Home can be a choice
but sometimes
A home is not a choice
but a trap