

Descent Into Darkness

Schizophrenia strikes one in a hundred Canadians, but Bill MacPhee refused to let it take over his life by Barbara Dickson

ONE BITTER JANUARY EVENING IN 1987, 24-YEAR-OLD Bill MacPhee stepped into oncoming traffic on Highway 3 in Fort Erie, Ont., convinced he had to prove himself to God. The lights of swerving vehicles danced before him, the squealing of tires and the honking of horns fuelling his undiagnosed schizophrenia.

He stepped back on the sidewalk but a new thought popped into his head. *Bill*, his sick mind reasoned, *you don't need anything, not even the clothes on your back.* He stripped despite the sub-zero temperatures. Thankfully a startled passerby called 911 and Bill ended up in the psychiatric ward of a nearby hospital.

For Bill, that frigid night marked the beginning of a dark world filled

with paranoid delusions, hallucinations and despair.

Empty Void

Schizophrenia is a biochemical imbalance in the brain that strikes about one in a hundred Canadians. Called "youth's greatest disabler," it is usually diagnosed between the ages of 16 and 28, often before the patient has an education or work experience.

"Many people who live with schizophrenia refuse treatment because they don't believe they're sick"

Before that ill-fated night, Bill faced a bright future working as a commercial deep-sea diver. Born and raised in Fort Erie, he owned a home and had a wide circle of friends.

Bill's psychosis came on quickly, within months. Erratic sleep patterns, words floating off the pages of his Bible, strange voices in his ears—these were all signs of schizophrenia.

He felt he could read people's minds. He was convinced he was a modern-day prophet and that his thoughts and actions shaped world events. A supermarket display of oranges would send him into a panic—which brand should he choose? The stability of the world depended on his selection.

"Many people who live with schizophrenia refuse treatment because they don't believe they're sick," Bill explains. "They think doctors are trying to poison them."

Bill was fortunate. The highway episode and public nudity forced him into treatment immediately, and he agreed to take medication because he felt nothing could hurt him as God's prophet.

With rehabilitation Bill crossed the line from psychosis into reality, but his reality held profound loss. He'd lost his job, friends and home. He spent five years on his parents' couch, dreaming up ways to kill himself. At one point, he wrote a suicide note that said, "I can't stand the darkness anymore," and overdosed on sleeping pills. Luckily, his parents found him and after spending two days in a coma, he recovered.

Worst of all, he lost his faith. "If there is a loving God," he asked angrily, "why is He blessing everyone else and not me?"

"I was very depressed," he reflects. "I had an emptiness, a void in my gut that was just like a vacuum."

"There's Always a Way"

Bill's favourite adage growing up was, "If things don't change, they're going to stay the same."

"I hated my 'same' and I wanted it to change," Bill recalls.

In 1991, he remembered what his Grade 7 teacher once said about his poor penmanship: "Bill, if you don't learn how to write properly, you'll never amount to anything in life." With a will to prove he could do *something*, he called the Literacy Foundation that sent over a volunteer named Martha who helped him with penmanship exercises.

Martha was his turning point. She encouraged him to help out with her cub scout troop where he met new people. "They accepted me for who I was, not what I had."

Motivated by his new friends, Bill picked up a book entitled *101 Ways to Start a Business With Little*

or *No Capital*. What if he started a newsletter to help others cope with schizophrenia?

Suddenly he had a goal and a dream. More significantly, he had hope.

His anger toward God dissipated and he cautiously stepped out in faith. "I began to trust God to do something big in my life," he says.

"God," he prayed, "I can't do it on my own. I need You."

God answered his prayers.

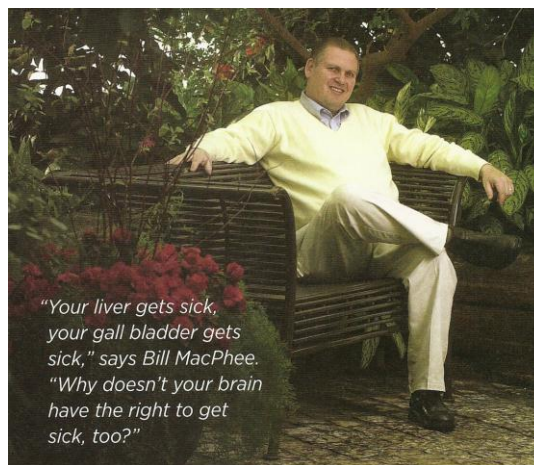
In 1994, Bill launched *Schizophrenia Digest*, its mission to educate and inspire people whose lives are forever changed by schizophrenia. It is distributed quarterly to 15,000 homes in Canada and the United States. He also publishes *Anchor*, a magazine addressing depression, and issues a bi-weekly e-magazine.

Bill is founder, publisher and CEO of Magpie Publishing and Magpie Media. He advocates for improvements in mental health care as an international motivational speaker.

"There's still a huge stigma associated with the disease," he says. "Mental illness is so far behind physical illness. Your liver gets sick, your gall bladder gets sick. Why doesn't your brain have the right to get sick, too?"

"One out of every five Canadians suffers from a mental illness," Bill continues. "Schizophrenia is just one. There's depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, anorexia and anxiety disorders, to name a few."

In hindsight, Bill admits, "God had a plan for my life. I had to go through what I had to go through, to do what I do today.



"Your liver gets sick, your gall bladder gets sick," says Bill MacPhee. "Why doesn't your brain have the right to get sick, too?"

"When I tried to take my life," he goes on, "that was Bill MacPhee crossing out his old life. What I have today is not because of what *that* Bill MacPhee did, because that life is over. Everything since my suicide attempt is what God has done for me."

Bill currently lives in Fort Erie with his wife, Aileen, who is actively involved in Bill's publishing business. They have two children—Dwight, six, and Hannah, four—and he enjoys a loving relationship with his son William, 22, from a former relationship. Bill keeps in regular contact with

Martha and they are writing his biography together.

"My life is nothing like it was years ago. I can remember thinking 'I wish I was anybody else except me,' and today I can say I wouldn't want to be anybody else."

Someday with God's help, Bill hopes to launch Magpie Broadcasting Ministries. One of its programs will be a talk show with pastors, entitled, *There's Always a Way*, which encapsulates Bill's journey with schizophrenia. "We may not see it, but God knows there's always a way." ❀

For more information on schizophrenia, contact the Canadian Psychiatric Association at www.cpa-apc.org or (613) 234-2815

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