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His story was summarised in an extended article in the leading Canadian newspaper - *Globe and Mail*  
<http://v1.theglobeandmail.com/breakdown/>.

This article is a piece **Peter** presented to nursing students at the *University of New Brunswick*. He has generously granted us full permission to post this lecture on the Tidal site.

## THROUGH THE GLASS

### *PERCEPTION AND REALITY CONFUSED*

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Someone close to me told me a story about a friend of hers.

Her friend had had a couple of really bad setbacks in her life.

Real ones, hard ones, external forces had come to pass that her internal defenses couldn't cope with and she needed a few days in the Psych ward.

Just to get her bearings.

During one of these days, one of the patients approached her and said as he was pointing to the ground "See my nice Tricycle" and although she didn't see it herself, she said something to the effect that it was a nice tricycle.

The man said "do you know what I'm going to do with that Tricycle?"

"I'm going to ride that tricycle all day?"

"Do you know why?" he inquired.

"Why?" she asked.

"Just to piss off those people behind that glass!" meaning the Nurses.

All that would be noted about this particular person that day would be his excursion on his trike.

There would be notations for the next nurse and for the Dr. to see that Patient X was behaving in a most peculiar way. It would be there for Grand Rounds and around and around it would go.

They would never know why he was riding his Tricycle because they were either too lazy or too uneducated or too uncaring to ask.

Don't tell me they were too busy. I will not accept that.

That is a shame both for him and for those nurses. He probably had a very interesting story to tell and they weren't around to hear it. It's an absolute tragedy. I, personally, would have like to have heard it.

## **TODAY'S JOURNEY**

I was asked to come here because I was in the Globe and Mail. Your instructor's friend was a babysitter to my niece and nephew. That babysitter, Sherri, looked out for my kids as well on occasion.

I don't like to talk about this anymore but people are still getting it wrong or ignoring it so I feel I have to speak out again.

Since I was in the Globe and Mail, many people have died. More lives have been destroyed.

I still don't understand it. How could this glitch in people's mind want them to end their life? How can the darkness swallow an individual so that drugs or booze is the only way to dull their pain?

More important, how can we as a society keep letting it happen?

That's why I hate to talk about this anymore. It shouldn't be my problem, yet sometimes I feel it is. Unfortunately, that problem ate up most of my existence and hurt a number of people that I was closest to.

I didn't really want to do the Globe and Mail because talking about these intensely personal things is sometimes hard.

I had been asked to speak at a luncheon for the Schizophrenia Society shortly after New Years in 2008. I accepted.

I had thought that there would be a few people there and although I didn't know what I was going to say, but I was going to try and be honest. My mother asked me if I wanted her to go. I didn't want her to hear it.

I just wanted to go in say my piece and get out.

It turned out that the mayor was there, the local Member of Parliament, the local MLA's and a host of other dignitaries were there. I didn't know it, but the local press was there as well.

I opened my mouth and just spoke. Sometimes, when I was in court, I did the same thing and whatever needed to be said got said.

There was a lady who came up to me afterward and she shook my hand and said "Thank you, for whatever that was...."; I'll never forget the look on her face.

I thought that would be the end of it. Turned out she was the local press and an article appeared in the Miramichi Paper. I believe she was on leave from the paper within months and to my knowledge never returned. She might have had her own issues. I don't know for sure.

A number of people saw the article and it was passed onto the editor of the Globe and Mail by my sister who was a friend of his.

They were thinking about a series on Mental Health Issues and wondered if I would be interested in being interviewed.

I had thought that some in my family had discussed it and decided it would be a good idea and even though I really didn't want to go through those feelings again, I sent a cheerful email to my sister saying "I would be glad to help."

I thought it would be a 2 inch by three inch piece and again I would be done with it.

Turned out to be quite a cluster fuck that, in my mind, resulted in the death of my best friend and the alienation of some in my family, all of it my fault.

Shortly after the Globe article, I was hospitalized again.

I was very manic and I managed to damage and even sever some of the wonderful relationships that I had. Each bout of mania makes your world smaller and smaller. When everything is normal in your mind, you still get dismissed as people remember the odd or awful things that you may have done or said.

The Globe article came out on June 21 but my best friend had died on June 1, after I had been interviewed.

I was so wrapped up in doing this article and my crusade for mental health and saving a foundering not for profit organization that I hadn't seen him in weeks.

Then he was dead, another in too long a list for me. I felt responsible for it, in many ways I still do.

If I had have been around, I might have noticed that he was sick and got him to a hospital; instead he went into his room one afternoon and at the age of 30, just didn't wake up.

After the Globe article came out, there was quite response and the series ran for weeks. I got the feeling that many people approached other people in my family with tales of members of their family or their own battles with depression.

For me, I think it was different. Really weird things started happening to me. People were coming up to me with tears in their eyes and telling me stuff that they wouldn't tell their priest.

Some of them, people I didn't even know, were telling me that they were suicidal. It still sometimes happens to me. It's a more than a little freaky.

During this period of time, there was a construction site next to my bedroom that started at six in the morning and I didn't sleep for weeks. I was getting really manic, but I had to keep going. I had to save them all. I had to make up for not being there for my friend.

I was trying to keep it between the poles but I couldn't ask for help. I couldn't beg. If I did they were going to throw me in the hospital where you couldn't smoke and I would just walk up and down hall until they let me out.

I ran away to Tracadie where no one knew me and it was still happening. I made a real ass of myself in a number of areas both at home and there. I was acting very strangely but some people still came up to me with tears in their eyes.

That part wasn't delusion. It was as if I had awakened and could see the pain in their eyes more clearly than I ever had before and they could see me. Vampires recognize each other.

I saw their pain more clearly because I truly looked at my own eyes in that piece. Looking at the photo in the Globe made me look at my eyes in a way that I never had before. I also realized that others had truly seen my pain and tried their best to help me.

Being in the paper was no big deal. I was on the front page of the newspaper more than once. I was who I was. I was Peter O'Neill. Still am.

During my school career and legal career, I hoped that people thought I was crazier than a bag of hammers. I used that, I used it a lot. It insulated me.

I could get away with it because I was also “some smart.”

My mother and father were smart and they had degrees from a university.

In 1963, a year before I was born, they arrived on the Miramichi. I am pretty sure that there weren't many people with both parents that had pieces of paper from a University at that time.

That made their kids smart so....

I was only eccentric (and a drunk) up until I crashed and burned.

When I crashed and burned, I was considered manic and bipolar; I got a label. Didn't want one but they gave it to me any way.

I just wanted to be Peter O'Neill.

I have been trying to state there is a difference ever since they put that label on me.

I'm still Peter O'Neill. When I some people saw the drunkenness or the pain in my eyes, it was ok to me because I was always winning in the courtroom.

I won my first two jury trials against two of the best crown counsel in Canada.

They were puzzles, they weren't hard. I also got lucky.

I could see where the pieces of their case didn't make sense to me and I had enough raw talent to put it in terms a jury could understand.

When I had my third jury trial, it was first degree. I had already told the crown when the next murder comes up I was going to do it.

That's what I did. I did the best I could and did a good job for my client.

This time it was going to be different though. I was going to win and then after a couple weeks after the trial I was going to kill myself.

I just didn't want people to think that I killed myself because I couldn't cut it as a lawyer. I was going to be the best one, but I was still going to kill myself.

People ask “Why?”

Others that have known the pain understand. I just wanted the pain to stop. Someway or somehow it had to stop. Suicide was the only way that I could escape the “Jaws of the Black Dog.”

It's a puzzle they're not hard.

Puzzles are only hard if they have rules and time limits. I was putting rules and time limits on that puzzle. If I don't feel better by such and such a date then I'm going check out.

I'm pretty clever so I tried to figure a way out.

Not everybody can. The ones that blew their head off or hung themselves didn't figure a way out. I figured it out. That's why I'm here talking to you.

I needed figure it out for selfish reasons. I wanted to see my kids grow up. I wanted to watch them and I knew that it would hurt them deeply in a way that they would not recover from and I wasn't prepared to do that.

You have to be ruthless and honest with yourself in order to seek a solution. I had to be ruthless in all aspects of my life and during a particular period of time, I was only kind to my children. Everyone else could fall by the wayside.

The only ones that mattered were William and Sarah. You can be dishonest with others but never with yourself in order to survive.

My relationship with my children was and is solid.

Although I didn't know it at the time, my daughter, when she was five knew I was in pain and made every effort to make a fuss to stay with me at my mother's place.

When I was a little better, I noticed her, still five years old, looking out for me and in a fashion asked her if she knew that I was hurting at the time.

She just smiled and then launched into a mini version of the tantrum that she used to throw to stay with me. Then she smiled again. Then, we both laughed at the understanding.

She was five.

I am very open about my condition with my children now 12 and 11. I sometimes call myself Crazy Pete. Being called crazy is a hell of a lot nicer than being called mentally ill, at least in my book.

A few months ago, I was having an uncomfortable day. I told this to William and told him to ignore me. He said don't worry Dad; we won't call the cops on you. I almost wept.

He understood that I could have a bad day or couple of days and it wouldn't have to escalate. Troops wouldn't have to go on full alert.

When I'm in rough shape, I try stay away from them and their mother. Rough patches both high and low still happen to me but comparatively rarely now, but if I am really low, I just ride it out with the mantra "Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

If I am a little irrational, I wait and with the next rational choice, try to make it a good one.

Every single time I fall down, I have had the ability to get up. My brother told me to do that.

I should have done this speech before. But last year I couldn't.

I was essentially walking the streets. Not many microphones or lecterns there.

I was essentially homeless because I chose to live there. I spent a very short time in an Emergency Shelter in Moncton.

Then the Psych ward there and then home, always home to Station St.

I always end up home at my mother's place because as Robert Frost wrote in "Death of a Handyman".

"Home is a place, when you have to go there. / They have to take you in".

I lived in a couple of houses with some drug users as well. One place with people with needles in their arms, the whole nine yards. I hadn't ever seen anything like that before. I got punched in the face for no particular reason. It was a learning experience.

I had hoped that I would be close to 24 Sussex Drive by this time, not in places like these.

These were my choices. I ended up in Moncton because I went on a three day tear for the first time in a very very long time and couldn't face anyone afterwards. I used to drink and get drunk but didn't have the stamina for a prolonged bout.

Not a very good choice and nothing to do with being bipolar.

I made many bad choices and bad decisions that had nothing to do with any mental health issues. It was just poor judgement and selfish behaviour. In many ways, I'm not a very nice person and can be difficult to deal with.

Arrogance comes in all forms.

Some mistakes that I have made were just because I wasn't perfect. I was human with human desires and human frailties. If that's not the case, there are 6.5 Billion people on this earth just waiting to be diagnosed.

One should never let a diagnoses excuse just plain bad behaviour.

Being drunk in front of my kids, had nothing to do with being bipolar and everything to do with being an asshole.

## **CHOICES**

I've met the Dalai Lama, I've met Prime Ministers, Premiers, Senators, the whole nine yards as well... but because I had a label people thought they should or could make all my choices for me.

Eventually, I refused to let anyone make choices for me Good or Bad. I figured that I should not be the only one in Canada that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms did not apply to.

At one point the Minister of Health in the Province of New Brunswick was convinced by someone in my family to call the cops on me. He had his Executive Assistant do it. I had been released by a three person tribunal from the hospital and some didn't like it. The next few weeks were a nightmare and I was pissed.

## **JUST FOLLOWING ORDERS**

I was very angry about how I was being hounded by the police. I was always polite until one day a second police officer came to my door at the place I was renting looking for me.

An officer had just left within the past hour or so. That was the one sent by the Minister of Health.

I said that someone was just here. He said I'm part of the evening shift.

I indicated that there was no problem before and there was no problem now.

He explained that he got a call and had to come.

With my best court room voice I said You didn't have to come. You could have quit your job. You had a choice.

All you are doing is trying to round up the mental defectives and put them on a train.

I don't know if he knew this but in Nazi Germany, gas was first tested on mental patients even before the camps were built.

Following orders is the same excuse that a nurse gave me when I was in the hospital protesting not be allowed to go for a smoke. He felt bad about it he said but he was just following orders.

I only made the one real protest in the hospital. I had read “one flew over the cuckoo’s nest” so I knew the power of the staff and had up until that time never stood up for myself.

I got hauled in by the police to the hospital in January of 2008.

I was going to run for the Liberal Leadership against Michael Iggnatief and I was kind of, more than a little on purpose, freaking people out with a few phone calls.

I was upset because they were giving Billions to the Car companies and people were living on the street with nothing or in houses, living lives of quiet desperation.

No one was running against him and I needed 300 signatures and \$90 000.00 to run. I would have gotten the signatures of that I’m sure. The 90K wouldn’t have mattered because I was just trying to prove a point.

There was no money for Mental Health because GM needed it.

I figured that I would do what I was going to do, someone was going to call the cops, I was going to go through the process as outlined by the Mental Health Act and then people were going to leave me alone.

I was living with people that often didn’t have enough to eat or cigarettes, but I figured that I could write and speak as well as any and with a little publicity perhaps the focus could be put on people infrastructure instead of large corporations and banks that had taken our world the brink of economic ruin.

I recognized that I was manic but I wasn’t breaking any laws. I may have been freaking people out but I wasn’t breaking any laws. I was living by myself. I was an adult.

I was also prepared because I had laid the legal groundwork before I was brought into the hospital. I knew it would be coming and this time I was prepared. I just didn’t know far people would go and they didn’t know how far I was willing to push it.

I may be crazy but I know a little about trial work.

I may have had a history but to me I also had a future and that future contained the dignity of me making my own choices.

I didn’t want to have anybody else to make choices for me. I would leave my children, who I love dearly, behind before I would let anyone else make choices for me.

In order to do that, they were going to have to have to TASER me. We know how that can turn out. Ask Robert Jecanski's mother.

I was prepared to get TASERED to prove that the Charter applied to me and to people like me. I was really pushing the envelope within the boundaries of the law to prove it.

Some people thought I didn't have a clue during this period of time but in order to bring me in the next time they were going to have to get physical and if that meant getting TASERED and dying, I had resigned myself to it.

I was scared but I would have proven my point. Justice applies to people with labels too.

The law states that I can only be confined to a hospital if I was a danger to myself or others. I wasn't.

I had a 12 page decision from a tribunal saying that I should be left alone and the Cops showed up the very next day going to bring me back to the hospital. A few days later my driver's license was revoked. It was a racket. I was over the top livid.

After the cops started hounding me on an hourly basis, I went into a dissociative state. Self protection I think. Everything became surreal. It was an interesting experience that I do not want to ever repeat.

It does give me an understanding of the other forms of mental health issues like schizophrenia. I heard things. Never happened before and never will again. I will never allow myself to be put under that type of stress again.

I will disappear into the night and onto the streets. It's one of the reasons I usually have my shaving kit close. It contains the necessities I might need.

The harassment eventually stopped when I threatened to sue anyone who was persecuting me. Being a lawyer, it wasn't an idle threat. I would have won damages against a Shrink in terms in terms of a constitutional tort but I digress.....

They were trying to imprison me for being erratic and "not thinking right". This is Canada and it just wasn't right. You are allowed to be crazy. Look at our Politicians.

I just wanted to be left alone. I was prepared to live on the street and die there. At least, I would be free. Real or not, I felt that the whole community was prepared to kill me with their love and concern. I struck back with venom that I'm not proud of.

Words hurt. It was the only weapon I had in my arsenal and I used them freely with a carpet bombing effect. Freedom comes at a price. Sometimes, that price is loneliness. I had also resigned myself to that.

## JUSTICE

During that time, I dreamed of Justice. It's a shape to me. It is the Just Society.

"Justice is warm spirit, born of wisdom and tolerance, present everywhere." Pierre Trudeau said this in 1972.

What of justice and compassion to the patients that you will be serving if you are going to go into the mental health field? I want you to think about that before you choose to serve those who have that particular need.

I hated almost every minute at the Miramichi Hospital. Walking up and down the hall for hours just to put in time.

In the Psych ward at the Miramichi Hospital there is, at least as I have observed it, an underground nursing system. It's a manner of communication that would be not unlike those in a prisoner of war camp or jails.

One person distracts the staff, while another tends to the needs of the patient. The needs that were going unmet by the nursing staff. It's an absolute shame that the nurses are in the same type of glassed in bubble that I have seen at the maximum security institution at Renous.

I looked after a patient's urinal five times when the nurses didn't come and help him even though he was crying out and I know that he was in pain because he was probably passing a kidney stone. I don't know I was a lawyer not a medical person.

Absolutely incredible! He was unable to move and wasn't making a lot of sense unless you actually took the time to listen and instead of keeping a close watch on him, they kept mostly behind their barrier of glass.

At the Miramichi hospital, at least at times, the patients were looking after each other for personal needs and counselling because the nurses were too busy chatting and charting and gossiping behind the glass.

There are exceptions and they did try to carry out their duties as they were instructed. Please don't get me wrong, I remember every kindness shown to me by the nurses at the Miramichi Hospital and there were many.

I spent time at the Royal Ottawa Hospital where they use the **Tidal Model**; things were very much different. The structure was different and the approach was different. The ward was run for the patients not for the convenience of the staff.

I didn't feel like a mental invalid. My opinion mattered and I felt like I was listened to. It was an incredible experience unlike anything that I had had in my journey towards recovery.

At the Miramichi Hospital, it appears they just are following orders. Some of them have real empathy and do help a great deal but it seemed that they were not allowed to put it into practice.

The administration or the doctors or the nurse manager won't let them.

In an environment like that why would anyone trust?

Why should I ever say what I'm truly feeling if it is only going to buy me more time in prison?

Life sometimes is a zero sum game, or in this case Pascal's equation.

What would be the upside of being honest, if it means more days or weeks in a place with little stimuli and little social interaction with those who are supposed to help you?

After I realized that they were writing everything down, most times, I would just feel that the nurses were ratting me out. Why be honest? Say what you need to say and wait to be released.

No therapy, perhaps a trip to the grocery store to see if you can pick out the items for chilli. They let me hold the money and pay for it myself. I went there in the middle of the day with the blind occupational therapist, her guide dog and the assistant who was driving and helping the therapist.

It was a walking, talking circus and I met almost every one I knew it seemed. I held my head up; I said hello and nodded politely and I felt death would have been more welcome, but I did it, just so I could get out.

This is unfortunate because they are by and large exceptional people in the system that would be willing to do almost anything to help. Sometimes if they only knew how.

It is unfortunate that many times all they would have to do is recognize the voice and actually listen instead of being paternalistic. No head patting please.

In 2007, I approached people in the administration about the **Tidal Model** and word was they were going to adopt it. I don't know if anything has changed at all. I'd be almost too afraid to stop by and check on the progress because of the fear I have of that place; it's close to my absolute terror when I see the police.

I still have a slight panic attack and almost vomit every single time I see an officer or a police cruiser. That hasn't gone away.

I must check out the ward sometime when I again have the courage. If I only had courage.....

## **CONCLUSION**

There are 24 of you here. That's only two juries.

I could stand up here and convince you of anything.

It is a gift that I have. Gifts are sometimes strange. I think of things many times in terms of jury trials. It's my nature. I'm a scorpion when it comes to trial work; it only appeared sometimes that I was a clown.

I remember after the successful defense of Noah Augustine, Gary Miller, who I consider the best Criminal Lawyer in New Brunswick and could hold his own in Canada said to me "As black a heart as I have, I've never seen anything like that!" referring to something I had done in court.

But if you were in bad trouble and you needed help, I would call me; if you were standing over a dead body with a smoking gun in your hand and the cops come in, to me, it would be only a puzzle. I wouldn't feel the same things as others might. It's the nature of criminal defense work.

Nurses should be different though.

When you are a nurse, people are there because they need serious help. Don't EVER hide behind the glass.

If you go into nursing, I want you to take that part of your heart that they try to numb and the process where they might drill parts of your humanity out of you. Nursing is a caring profession; don't let them beat it out of you.

I know what happens, the stress that you are put under to perform and not make mistakes. That's totally understandable but don't follow blindly. Don't just follow orders. Think for yourself.

When I was asked to speak, I asked your instructor whether or not she was teaching the "**Tidal Model**" She hadn't heard of it.

Why did I know about that and she didn't? It is being used in the best teaching hospitals in Canada and in numerous places around the globe yet it is unknown in your class?

I'll do a presentation on the **Tidal Model** a little later. I've had help from a friend, *Dr. Nancy Brookes* a leading scholar in Nursing Theory and I hope it gives a different perspective from what you've learned so far.

I try to live my life as if no one is watching. It wasn't until the Globe and Mail article that I realized how closely I was being observed. It was more than a little disconcerting.

Nurses watch, but just don't do it behind the glass. Come into give pills and take notes and put in your time. (Just a job at close to \$30/hour)

It kills some of us, those of us that are being watched through the glass.

I could look around these two juries, and if I had a short period of time I could pick out the people with the pain in their eyes.

Some of you may have glanced down. Don't want anybody else to see your pain.

I'm not here to help you with Nursing. *I'm here to deliver you from silence* and following blindly. The Doctor, or the Nurse Manager is not always right. You are the ones that will be closest to the patient.

Be the advocate, don't back down when you feel that you are correct. Don't follow blindly in a system that works from the top down. At the bottom of that heap is the patient smothering, gasping sometimes desperately for breath.

I spent enough time on the other side of the glass, but there were nurses that really reached out. Three of them in particular come to mind, one in Fredericton, one in Miramichi and one in Ottawa.

Some broke the rules and invented their own. They really talked to me. Those nurses helped more than they will ever know. They listened to my story and accepted my words. They accepted my story as being important.

Each of them in their own way contributed. They treated the person, not what they considered a disease.

You get to choose what kind of a Nurse you are going to be.

Make a good choice.