

ENCOUNTERS

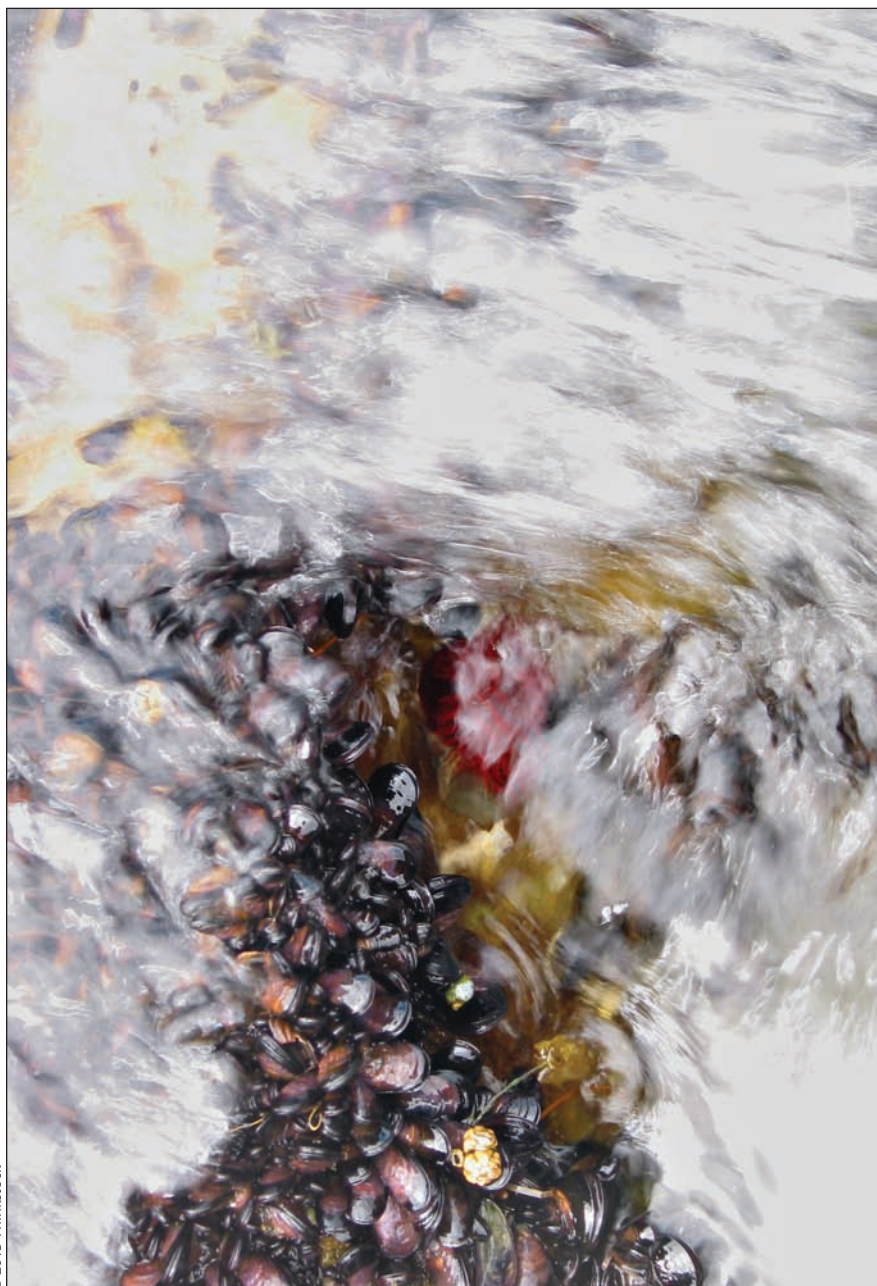
Rising tide

It's the first week of my elective with Bill and the Mobile Street Health Unit, the van that circulates the city providing accessible health care to underserved and insecurely housed patients in the community. We visited three local shelters, two of which I didn't know were there; they blended into the cityscape, invisible. We had one home visit, in which the patient left his house in his bare feet and pajama pants to come sit in the van. Bill's cell phone is constantly ringing, sometimes the instant he puts it away. "This is Bill-the-nurse," he always answers, all one word, like "the nurse" is part of his name, intrinsically part of his identity.

And now it's evening and we're at a local church hall, where about 150 people line up every night for supper. Tonight they're being pelted with water, rain whipping at them horizontally like spray from the ocean, while they wait on the sidewalk in the dark. Bill has arranged to meet several patients here. As we walk past the line on the way in, some call out their current health issues to him. "I need a new cane," one elderly man states, while a woman wearing an apron over a winter jacket pulls up her eyelid to reveal a swollen, yellowish mass.

Bill knows most of them by name, will make time for all of them, but Jack is first. It's hard at first to peg how old he might be — he has a thick head of dark hair and is dressed in a soaked hooded sweatshirt and baggy jeans, clothes my younger brother might wear. But his face is creased and his hands are cracked and weathered. He's accompanied by another man, who sits silently by his side in the makeshift office, a sort of lounge area closed off from the bustling dining hall.

Bill looks at Jack expectantly. "So? How's it going?" The question is weighted with gravity, "it" being Jack's battle to stay clean from crack.



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"Bill, I tell you, man, there's a lot going on. I got my son staying with me now, staying at the Salvation Army, you know. Down from New Glasgow, and it's weird, you know, havin' him here, in my life. I know I haven't been there,

but I turn around and all of a sudden he's 19 years old, looks like a man. I can't believe it."

"That sounds like it must be an adjustment for you." Bill, so good, so nonjudgmental.

"And my daughter? Wants to come down to see me, you know, she's got a kid of her own. I'm just, I'm just ... my head is spinning, I want to be there for them, but, like I say, I can't do nothing for 'em if I can't take care of myself first, right? Right, Bill?"

"That shows some good insight." Bill urges him on, so encouraging.

"She looks so god damn much like Doreen, you know? Just like her, I mean, I can't even look at her ...". His voice trails off but he looks intently at

underwater, in your own little world. Silent and protected, indistinct.

"I can't help but question," Jack continues, "you know? Seein' that girl up in New Glasgow? They found her body, 19 years old, she was. And now the girl over in Shubie Park, too, can't help but wonder if that's what happened to Doreen."

He's referring to two recent murders in Nova Scotia. The women's bodies found discarded in wooded areas. No witnesses, no answers. He's leaning

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Bill who nods empathetically. It's obvious he has heard about Doreen before. She left him? I wonder. The drugs, maybe? I get my answer soon enough.

"It's a lot at once, you know, everything coming at me. Being on crack, you know, it's like you're underwater. Can't hear none of that noise around you, can't see nothin' clearly, and now it's coming at me, all at once."

Underwater. It's a good analogy, both figuratively and literally. That's why I always liked swimming, I think to myself. You can check out for a bit

forward, talking fast. "And now I'm hearin' they're missin' another one in Dartmouth too, you know?" I had noticed earlier that Bill had a photo-copied missing person poster in the van, a 19-year-old girl's picture on it. Melissa, I think.

We're silent as he scans our faces — Bill's, mine, the friend's, who stares ahead, his jaw clenched. I realize he's genuinely asking us, grasping for an answer of what happened to Doreen, for some sort of closure that's beyond the scope of what any of us can pro-

vide. I wonder how long ago Doreen disappeared, if she's the mother of the adult children he mentioned earlier, if their re-entry into his life is igniting the questions he's wrestling. If the questions were there all along, just submerged by the rising tide, only to be revealed on the raw, jagged bottom that's left exposed in the ebb.

"I see her mom all the time, too, you know, Doreen's. At the NA meetings. Always on me, she blames me, I know she does. It's heavy, you know?"

It is heavy. I can feel the weight of his emotions, his experiences and questions, can see the temptation to let go, to stop struggling, just slip back underwater, his own protected world. Jack finishes up, takes a number from Bill for an addictions services counselor. A grief counselor, Bill explains, to help "finally deal with Doreen's disappearance." They shake hands, and Jack steps back out into the whipping rain, vulnerable with no jacket. Exposed to the water.

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The author confirms that the patients in this work are fictitious, but "Bill-the-nurse" is a real person. He has given his consent for this story to be told.

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BOOKS

The doctor–person relationship

Whole Person Care: A New Paradigm for the 21st Century

Tom A. Hutchinson, editor
Springer; 2011

"It's like I wasn't even there," was the complaint of a patient whose arthritic knee had just been replaced. The operation was a complete success as evidenced by the 70-year-old woman's recent golf score. The surgeon was courteous and compassionate and their discussion was

not rushed, but still the clinical encounters left her "cold." What, if anything, was missing? And how cold did she feel after her encounters with me?

A central idea in *Whole Person Care* is that physicians are simultaneously involved in two therapeutic relationships: one with diseases and another with the patient. Treating diseases involves noting that a patient has rheumatoid hands, while healing the person requires noticing that hand used to bear a wedding ring. But *Whole Person Care* is not a collection of tips for seeing the person; it is an entreaty for

physicians to rethink what they are doing and why.

The book left the image of a Greek mosaic burned into my mind: a weary patient approaches the physician Hippocrates for treatment in the foreground, while in the background Asklepios, the god of healing, steps off his boat towards the patient. The patient's gaze is fixed on Asklepios who is centrally framed such that Hippocrates is less prominent despite being in the foreground.

The Hippocratic and Asklepiian sides of the dichotomy have comple-