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The LIFE & DEATH of a SCIENTOLOGIST

After 13 Years and Thousands Of Dollars, Lisa McPherson Finally Went 'Clear'. Then She Went Insane.

By Richard Leiby

CLEARWATER, Florida. "I am L. Ron Hubbard," the woman on the hotel room bed announced in a robotic voice. "I created time 3 billion years ago." She rambled on and on, every outburst dutifully scribbled down by those assigned to watch her.

"I can't confront force . . . I need my auditor . . . I want to take a toothbrush and brush the floor until I have a cognition."

The jargon of Scientology was instantly familiar to anyone who entered that room in the Fort Harrison Hotel, part of an elite training center and retreat established here by Hubbard, the science fiction writer and self-styled religious leader. It was also obvious to her fellow Scientologists that Lisa McPherson had cracked up.

"Out of control," one wrote.

Beginning Nov. 18, 1995, Scientology staffers - following Hubbard's regimen for dealing with psychotic members - kept McPherson isolated in that room 24 hours a day, refusing to speak to her, trying to force-feed her, plying her with vitamins and herbal concoctions and injecting her with sedatives, according to several accounts that are now part of court records. She furiously resisted: She pounded the walls, tried to escape, attacked a staffer with a potted plant. In her delirium, records say, she defecated on herself and drank her own urine.

Within 17 days, McPherson - who'd spent most of her adult life and tens of thousands of dollars as a devotee of Hubbard's teachings - would be dead. The once-voluptuous 36-year-old - she stood 5 feet 9 and wore a size 12 dress - lost an estimated 40 to 50 pounds during the ordeal, dropping to 108, her bruised body pocked by insect bites and scabs.

She was never seen by a licensed physician during that time. An autopsy attributed her death to a blood clot that developed due to "severe dehydration" and "bed rest."

Last month, after more than two years of investigation, the state attorney here filed two felony counts against the Scientology organization, alleging abuse or neglect of a disabled adult and the practice of medicine without a license. (No individuals were charged; to obtain their testimony, all Scientology witnesses were given immunity by prosecutors.)

The church has pleaded not guilty. Mike Rinder, senior spokesman for Scientology, would not respond to any questions about McPherson, but issued a statement calling the "circumstances" of her death "unfortunate," and contending that the church had no "intent to do any harm" to its devotee. Church lawyers would not comment.

Meanwhile, McPherson's aunt has filed a wrongful death suit against the church, saying McPherson suffered "extreme torture" as "a prisoner of Scientology." Church officials have said they were honoring McPherson's religious preferences; Scientology vehemently denounces all forms of psychotherapy.

Since its founding 45 years ago, the Church of Scientology has endured more than its share of bad publicity, but the McPherson case puts on stark display a side of the religion far removed from the glowing testimonials it receives from Hollywood adherents like John Travolta, Tom Cruise and Isaac Hayes.

If, as Hubbard decreed, the ultimate aim of Scientology is its adherents' "total freedom" and "survival," then what went wrong in the case of Lisa McPherson?

In September 1995, Lisa McPherson proudly attested to reaching the state of "clear" at a Scientology ceremony. Within a few weeks, her mind began to unravel. After 13 years of intensive study, she was still failing as a Scientologist; indeed, she had become one of the worst kinds of problems - in church lingo, a "Potential Trouble Source Type III," or what Hubbard also called an "insane being."

Out in the real world, around non-Scientologists, McPherson was dramatically breaking down, becoming a public embarrassment. Scientologists weren't supposed to do that.

The Founder, a flame-haired, swashbuckling figure, died in 1986, but his every utterance and writing is viewed by Scientologists as consecrated, immutable scripture. Hubbard seemed to take a dim view of those who suffered breakdowns.

"We have nothing to do with the insane whatsoever. The insane, well, they're insane!" he once declared in a rare television interview. Little could be done for psychotics. "Provide a relatively safe environment and quiet and rest and no treatment of a mental nature at all," he wrote in a 1965 policy letter.

After a minor traffic accident, McPherson stripped off her clothes and walked naked down well-traveled Belleview Boulevard. She told stunned paramedics she wasn't crazy but just wanted to get their attention: "I need help. I need to talk to someone." She spoke in a monotone, as if programmed, and said she didn't need a body to live.

It was shortly after 6 p.m. on Nov. 18, 1995. McPherson had driven her '93 Jeep Cherokee into a boat being towed on a trailer. She wasn't hurt.

The paramedics took her to nearby Morton Plant Hospital. By 6:50, a group of Scientologists had arrived. By the church's account, McPherson had phoned her friend and boss, Bennetta Slaughter. (Hospital records contain no mention of McPherson making any calls.) The Scientologists explained that a psychiatric consultation would violate McPherson's religion.

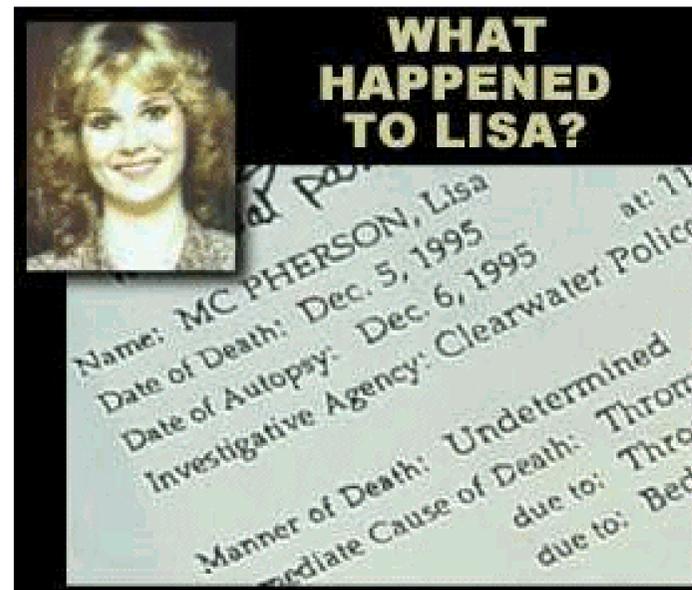
Around 8:30, she was taken to the Fort Harrison Hotel and put in Room 174. She would not leave again until the night of Dec. 5.

Scientologists loaded McPherson's nearly lifeless body into a church van. Instead of calling an ambulance or driving her to Morton Plant, five minutes away, she was taken 45 minutes north to Columbia/HCA New Port Richey Hospital.

Her watchers had decided it would be best if McPherson were treated by a Scientology doctor. He pronounced her dead on arrival.

On Aug. 6, 1996, eight months after she died, the church mailed Lisa McPherson a statement showing a credit of \$3,000. Her next course, called "OT Debug Service," was paid for and waiting.

Published by critics of the Church of Scientology in the UK. We can be found by searching the Internet for our Web Sites or through the Internet newsgroup alt.religion.scientology.



We remember Lisa McPherson