

## Curtis Prout, MD, Morale Doctor

By Julia C. Spring

The only part of my body Dr. Prout ever examined was my ears. He pierced them rapidly, quoting Blake: “Neither mortal hand nor EYE [right ear] can frame thy fearful symmeTRY [left ear].” He made me laugh and also made me feel that before long I would be a young woman back out in the world, maybe even dating again.

Two months before the ear-piercing, in January 1967, when I arrived at Stillman Infirmary, Harvard University, he was one of the many doctors and other staff who came to introduce themselves and assess my condition. He was the only person who actually eased his middle-aged, tall—6'5”—frame into an arm chair and talked with me casually for fifteen minutes or so.

I had just been transferred from Misericordia Hospital in the Bronx after a T11-L1 spinal cord injury in an October car accident, followed by emergency laminectomy and fusion. Until early January I had been in a full body cast, 25 pounds worth. Now I wore a Taylor brace with a Knight extension (complete with pink garters) though I was not yet walking. At least I could finally wipe myself.

Stillman and its staff were wonderful. At that time the infirmary had a full-service inpatient unit where sometimes students were transported directly from hospital recovery rooms. The head of physical therapy, who usually dealt with more minor ambulatory conditions, said he would arrange his schedule to spend three or four hours with me daily. If I needed something—the one electric hospital bed on the unit, for example—it appeared.

It also felt luxurious. The food was good (hot was hot and cold was cold). Nobody seemed to limit the number of my visitors or how long they stayed. I was awakened daily not by vitals and crashing bedpans but by an aide quietly opening the curtains sometime after 7am.

Even in that setting, Dr. Prout was special. I began to think of him as my morale doctor, though I don't think I ever said it out loud.

The move from the Bronx to Cambridge had been largely for my morale, in my view. A week earlier the Misericordia doctors had said I could start getting upright, then walking; a senior radiologist reviewed my x-rays and decided I couldn't for at least a few more weeks. My mood was lower than any time since the accident, although I kept at my physical therapy.

Long before the internet and cell phones, my mother managed to get the chief Misericordia neurosurgical resident on the line with the surgeon who headed orthopedics at both Mass

General and Stillman. The latter convinced the former that I would get all the rehab I needed in the infirmary.

We hoped that a new evaluation would let me get on my feet sooner. It was also vitally important to me that I would see my friends from the Harvard/Radcliffe class of '67 often, because the infirmary was right in the middle of the Square.

Two days later, my mother and I were whisked north by ambulance at a speed that might have caused another accident.

I don't think Dr. Prout, who was the medical director of the infirmary, said why he was there, other than to greet me on my first day. But I was impressed by his sitting down, how relaxed he seemed, that he stayed awhile talking with me--not that I remember what we talked about. He began to come every day, letting me know ahead of time when he would not be able to.

Before long he told me that while in college he had been hospitalized for four months with osteomyelitis of the skull which had left a deep scar, a vertical furrow, running down the middle of his forehead. As a result he had gone into medicine, primary care, and had a particular interest in young people enduring lengthy hospitalization.

On his daily visit he sat down for fifteen minutes or so, and talked with me about whatever I wanted. He became very important to me--not quite a transference relationship, but headed that direction. Although Dr. Prout wasn't a psychiatrist, he certainly was the person I discussed all sorts of things with, including my changed relationships with family and friends, and, of course, what it was like to be inside a total institution (two of them) for so long. Sometimes we just joked around. I wasn't ready to acknowledge that I would never be my former normal self again, but he would have been open to talking about that too.

I once went into a panic when a nurse mentioned a scar on my back that hadn't previously been described to me. I was sure my repaired spine was coming apart. The nursing station called Dr. Prout who came right away. He talked me through it, calmed me down.

After I was trudging along he took me to visit another of his patients, a graduate student with lupus. The minute I four-point-gaited into her room I felt I shouldn't be there because she was very ill and likely to have many relapses over her lifetime. At that time I planned to eventually walk full speed, so our situations seemed very different beyond the fact of our long hospitalizations. Looking back I realize that because I never did walk normally again and have had increasing disability as I have gotten older, maybe Dr. Prout realized our long-term similarity more than I did.

The main thing I remember about my talks with him was the feeling of comfort and acknowledgment, of still being a whole person despite the trauma I had been and was still going through.

Excited as I was to leave Stillman in April, it was emotionally very complicated going from the protected environment of the infirmary to the socially and physically demanding one of dorm and classes. Sometimes I even wanted to return for a night or two just to relax and reduce the number of decisions I had to make, the amount of stimulation a day included.

During this period I visited Dr. Prout a few times in his office, mostly to feel his understanding and acceptance of me as I tenuously began to re-enter college life. Then I got myself more-or-less adapted and never saw him again, no longer needed him. I'm not sure I ever thanked him though he lived till his mid-nineties. I am sure I never told him I called him my morale doctor. It strikes me now that he probably knew.

Many mornings I think of Dr. Prout when I put on my earrings and go out to meet the day.

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**Julia C. Spring is a lawyer and social worker specializing in mental health and adult guardianship law who taught many students in both fields. When her professional articles began yearning toward the personal, she began to write short memoir pieces, including about her experience of spinal cord injury at age 20 and her two years' volunteering at Uganda's national psychiatric hospital soon thereafter. A number have been published in journals including Blood and Thunder, The Corn Belt Almanac, Red Fez, Touch and Persimmon Tree. Her essay "Curtis Prout, MD" was chosen as a top essay in the Intima's 2018 Compassion in Healthcare Essay Contest in partnership with the Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare - [theschwartzcenter.org](http://theschwartzcenter.org) and judged by Haider Warraich, MD, author of *Modern Death: How Medicine Changed the End of Life*.**