

# Pride and prejudice transformed

*Deborah Grassman, ARNP*

They were strangers, until fate made them roommates on the VA hospice unit. The chasm that separated them was much greater than the six feet between their beds.

Louis was a quiet, gentle man. Not quite 100 pounds, his body was contorted like a pretzel. A spinal cord compression left him paralyzed, and he was also blind. Yet, Louis emanated serenity. He had a wonderful sense of humor. Through the rigors of his care, Louis maintained a youthful giggle that provoked lightheartedness. He also exuded gratitude. He was grateful to be alive, grateful to receive care, grateful to soon be going home to "my Lord." As an elder in his church, Louis was well known and well

loved in the black community. Now, his family brought church to him: hymns, communion, Scripture, and prayer. When his family was unable to visit, staff members played "Bible on Tape" or Mahalia Jackson's gospel CDs for him. Whenever Louis spoke, his face lit up and everyone in his presence was drawn to holiness—everyone, that is, except for his roommate.

Jim was a rough, gruff ex-Marine sergeant. He had little tolerance for anyone else's ways. Married four times, he claimed that all his wives had been "stupid." He was estranged from his children. After 30 years, a son, Tom, returned to see his dying father. Not having seen him since he was 11 years old, Tom wanted one last chance to know his dad. Jim frequently hurled mean and hateful invectives Tom's way.

Yet, Tom remained undaunted and stayed faithfully by his father's side.

Jim had been left bigoted by a racial incident that occurred when he was in the Marine Corps. As a result, he had little use for a blind, paralyzed black roommate. Not one to keep opinions to himself, Jim asked for a room change. Concerned about Jim's effect on his roommate, Louis was consulted. But, Louis was not fazed by Jim's mean-spirited assaults. Used to bigotry all his life, Louis said he was unaffected by Jim's ill temper, and he laughed with understanding at the proposed room change. The room remained unchanged.

Over the ensuing weeks, Louis's serenity and holiness slowly infiltrated Jim's side of the room. Jim complained less

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about having Louis as a roommate. Gradually, Jim started seeking the peace that Louis possessed. In the middle of one lonely night, Jim called to Louis,

"You awake, Louis?"

"Yep," came the response.

"How about a prayer?" Jim asked quietly.

Obligingly, with his usual conviction, Louis prayed. Jim seemed to surrender some of his anger and bitterness. He seemed more mellow, and his temper erupted only occasionally.

Louis and Jim began sharing other things, too. When Louis's family brought communion, Jim had communion, too. When Jim went home with Tom on the weekends, he would bring back food to share with Louis. When Tom made breakfast on the unit for Jim, Jim wanted Louis included.

When Tom fixed breakfast the next week, Jim invited all of the patients on the hospice unit. The sounds of Mahalia Jackson and the smell of bacon drew everyone to the satisfying meal. Soon, the weekly event outgrew Tom's capabilities, and volunteers, the hospice chaplain, and physicians were recruited to cook, sing, and pray. Word of mouth spread, and new faces appeared each week to share in the good food and fellowship. In fact, this spurred a tradition that continues to thrive eight years later.

Over the ensuing month, Louis and Jim's relationship deepened to friendship. Possibly for the first time, Jim began caring for someone other than himself. When Louis needed something, Jim was there to get it. At night, Jim would pull the curtain between them. Conversation drifted over the curtain

at all hours. A synchrony emerged that sustained the two men in friendship. One morning, as the sun was rising, Louis called out to Jim, "You awake?"

"Yeah. What do you need, Louis?"

Louis did not respond. Jim pulled the curtain back. Louis lay there with his hand outstretched toward Jim. "I'm dying, Jim. The Lord is here for me."

"I'll get someone," Jim said and hurried from the room. Jim returned with the housekeeper. Louis smiled when they returned. The three joined hands and Jim asked the housekeeper to pray. When they opened their eyes after the prayer, Louis had died.

Jim was heartbroken. To no one in particular, Jim said, "Tell him I'll be joining him soon." Jim was given time alone with Louis, but at last it was time to prepare Louis's body for the morgue. Jim's fierce loyalty would not allow him to leave Louis. "I'm staying right here with him. I'm not going to abandon him now."

Louis's body was placed on a morgue cart. Jim lingered at the doorway, stiffly saluting as Louis's body rolled past him. "There goes my best friend," he said, tears streaming down his face as the cart clattered down the hall. "Who would have ever thought . . ." he said, his voice trailing off with the memory of their meeting.

Jim was inconsolable. "How could Louis leave me?" he moaned despairingly. Over the next few days, Jim reverted to his former gruff and demanding self. Nothing satisfied him—including his new roommate. No matter

what his roommate said or did, it was wrong. It was not Louis. To help Jim focus on his grief, the roommate was moved and the bed kept empty. The empty bed reached unspoken places in the depth of Jim's soul, until the Jim that Louis had so lovingly coaxed from hiding gradually reemerged.

His functional decline now reversed, Jim was discharged to the long-term care facility of the medical center. Each week, though, Jim came for breakfast on the hospice unit—usually with a few new buddies. Making new friends was no longer difficult for Jim. Caring for other people was no longer foreign. Black or white, rich or poor, Jim befriended everyone. He also became the father Tom always wanted.

It was about a year later that Jim was readmitted to the hospice unit for end-of-life care. With Tom at his side, Jim died peacefully. It had been a year of kinship, a year of camaraderie, a year of discovering the meaning of fatherhood, a year of discovering life without the specter of bigotry foreshadowing perceptions. It had been a year of healing.

Jim's memorial service was an apt metaphor for his transformation. Tom requested that the hospice team perform the service under the tree where Jim and his friends smoked. One can only imagine the amusement on Jim and Louis's beatific faces as they heard their story recounted and watched the hospice team dance to Mahalia's booming voice. As Jim had said, "Who would have ever thought . . ."

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