

John Paul Curtin
(1967-2012)



He reigned like a prince from that damn chair.
Not like some tyrant issuing commands-
But a presence—one might have said royal
had not so many palace occupants ruined that once fine word--
A presence powerful and yet serene,
Churning with ideas and insights, and yet listening,
Waiting to learn from others--

Showing by example how to live not just with, but through tragedy and beyond,
Quietly demonstrating day after day, year after year
how to squeeze from a huge lemon heavier than Sisyphus' rock
the joy of living, the milk of human kindness.
“Oh please! Do watch those mixed metaphors,” the English teacher in him would have cried,
firmly but supportively to all those west side students who learned from him
not just grammar and literature, but more about how to live and how to care about others:

“I will always remember his jokes and pink socks . . .”

“One of the most vibrant and joyful personalities at [the school] . . . “

“I will remember his laugh, his intellect, his enthusiasm for life and those darn sandals he wore in
the middle of winter!”

“I will miss John dearly; it's as if somebody turned out the light in my favorite room of the house,
locked the door and threw away the key . . .”

“I thank God for your life and legacy of endurance and perseverance . . .”

“I started calling him JC during his first year at St. Mel because his class was like salvation to me
. . .”

“His favorite word was "clarify" in red ink! Linton how do I know you understand this word if you
don't clarify it within your sentence?" Thank you Mr. Curtin because once you have clarity, you
are free!”

“I loved your class and the . . . warmth of your personality . . . from your whimsical socks to the
infamous Birkenstocks. Your legacy lives on . . .”

Crippled? Disabled? Not John.

Quadriplegic? Well, yes. He knew a fact when he saw one.

But he also knew how to face that awful fact and to stare it down.

Differently abled? Possibly. But differently from what? From whom?

Perhaps *enabled* says it best. Enabled in his quiet, persistent and self-effacing way
to cultivate and then to show all of us what really matters,
what makes us truly human:

a sharp, inquiring mind;
a ready welcoming of the best in all of us, a gentle coaxing of us beyond our less than best;
a love for family and friends so clear it little needed to be spoken;
a concern for the powerless, the short-changed, all the needy of the world.

But no soft, chair-bound bleeding heart he.
Only a deep indignation and withering critique awaited those
Who exploited their fellows, who failed the public trust and served themselves first.
“Don’t make me get up out of this chair,” he sometimes threatened
when we insisted it was our turn to pay the dinner tab—after I had declined his invitation
to arm wrestle for it. But joke or no—we were never really sure
that his unyielding sense of justice and fairness would not someday lift him right up from that chair.

And yet he was comfortable with his condition, more so than some of us.
A young man dozing on a bench noted our passing on the way to dinner.
Running to catch up, he inquired of John,
“Is it possible that you cannot walk?”
With only the hint of a smile John replied, acknowledging the man’s concern,
“Yes, it is possible that I cannot walk.”
“May I pray with you?”
As John nodded the young man knelt and prayed
as the unnoting Ashland Avenue traffic whizzed on by.
And I, unsure, wondered if I, the only able-bodied white male in this small gathering
should protect John from such intrusions.
Shame on me! John needed no protection. And from what?
This obviously heart felt intercession on his behalf?
And what did my supposedly able-bodied white maleness have to do with anything in this special
moment?
Clearly I still had much to learn from John.

With his chair battery well charged, his scarf around his neck against any possible chill,
His cap and a credit card in the chair’s small pouch,
He was ready to face the world to get at that fine Italian wine and fare.

But John was also human. He surely suffered mightily.
And who knows what troubling thoughts, what might-have-been’s
hovered in the darkness when sleep would not come?
Perhaps those closest to him—family and other care givers—knew.
And while such knowledge, and their helplessness in face of it, tore at their hearts,
It also told them what a man, what a fine, courageous human being this John was.

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