

# Freedom

Category: Disability

written by Pris Campbell | October 15, 2025

As a clinical psychologist, I saw many people disabled by intense emotional problems and psychotic illnesses. All were compromised to some degree. Many of the most compromised were inpatients on psychiatric units that I ran, before such units started closing down. Many ended up on the streets. Some were lucky enough to have family take them in.

One man I worked with was different. My psychology chief at the VA knew I taught relaxation therapy and asked me to see if I could help a patient on the spinal cord unit. After he got out of the service, "Tom" had been stabbed in the neck by a robber-addict's needle. Paralyzed, he had feeling in one finger, but that arm stayed spasmed to his chest.

In the 1970s, the only mobility option in such situations was a wheelchair with a toggle stick. But even if his arm was tied down, Tom's finger would spasm, and then he would crash.

My boss said staff had tried putting him in a hot tub and massaging the arm. They'd tied the arm down at night. The psychologist on the unit had tried therapy. My chief thought there might be an anxiety component to the problem and that perhaps I could help.

I went to the unit expecting to find a dour, depressed man, but Tom laughed as he greeted me. I had done a kind of therapy involving tightening and loosening the muscles while describing a place the patient told me felt peaceful. I had never done it with someone who was paralyzed, however. But off we went.

As I was describing a cool breeze on his face as he sat by a rippling lake, and Tom began breathing deeply, suddenly his arm dropped loose at his side. He looked at it in shock, and back up it spasmed. Although I was a bit shocked, too, I told him if he could do it once he could do it again. For the next two weeks, I went down to the unit on my lunch hour, and he practiced on his own. The staff watched, open mouthed, and reinforced his progress.

One day, I was walking past the unit when a wheelchair flew past me and did a wheelie. It was Tom, with a "student driver" sign on the back of the chair. Tom laughed, did a few more wheelies, and moved on.

I heard later that by loosening that nerve, he had regained some use of his arm and hand. Disabled? Yes, he still was. But now he was free. I still think about him.

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