

Remembering Paul



Richard Gull (left) and Paul Kinion, at Paul's home in Palos Verdes, in 1998.

A Retired Philosopher Says Goodbye to his Best Friend of 54 Years

By Richard Gull

My friend Paul died of liver failure last November. We had been friends for 54 years. I moved to Burlington, Iowa from Chicago with my family when I was 16. Paul and I became friends almost immediately in that summer of '55. Paul and his family had come to Burlington a few years earlier from St. Louis. We were both kids who had been displaced from a big city and had a shared and, we thought, superior cosmopolitan attitude toward small town Burlington. We both listened to blues radio from Louisiana and sent away for boxes of 45s by the likes of Muddy Waters, Little Willie John, and Joe Turner. Paul was very cool. He was handsome. He had a distinctive dancing style made all the more impressive by his large body which he moved gracefully. He had an infectious laugh and, how shall I put it, a Rabelaisian (which means lustily humorous) sense of fun. He had a steady girlfriend and their

relationship was, how shall I put it, more advanced than anything I had yet encountered personally.

Paul had been a Golden Gloves boxer and could throw impressive punches with his large hands. Before I arrived in town he, unfortunately, received a broken jaw in the ring from a local fighter named Cowboy Carlson. That incident was part of the folklore of Burlington High School. But Paul was never a bully. On the contrary, at times he himself suffered racial insults because of his dark skin color inherited from his Cherokee mother. Once a motorcycle gang leader tried to push Paul around. Students gathered in a vacant lot to watch the confrontation. A few punches were thrown and the motorcycle tough guy came away with a bloodied face. To me it was something right out of *Rebel Without a Cause*.

Paul's family lived in the upper floor of a large house with a view of the Mississippi. We spent much time there hanging out. I remember going over there late on the night I lost my virginity and telling Paul the details.

Since I've known Paul I have always felt that, wherever Paul lived, from that humble room with a view of the Mississippi to his house in Palos Verdes with a view of the Pacific, I was welcomed with generosity. This was the Big Daddy aspect of Paul. His home was gathering place for old friends. After college and law school, when he had some money, his home was always a place where I felt taken care of with food, drink, and Dionysian laughter.

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Paul and Richard at Santa Monica Beach, in 1984.

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Paul was the hope for success in his working class family. He was a serious student. He had confidence. In college, where we took many classes together, he asked questions of his professors and easily got to know them personally. That same confidence made him a good defense attorney. Paul majored in philosophy as an undergraduate and I majored in economics. Then, ironically, he got a law degree and I got a Ph.D. in philosophy. He often sent me articles about philosophers and wanted to know what I thought. I once asked him whether he thought I would have made a good lawyer. He said he thought I would have made a good appellate judge. This meant, I think, that he considered himself more streetwise in court than I could have been. I still feel underestimated on that score but, like I said, the guy had confidence.



Paul with his three children Doug, Greg, and Laurie, in 1964, in Iowa City, Iowa. At the time, Paul was in Law School.

I was best man at Paul's and Pat's wedding in '62. If Paul was Big Daddy, Pat was his Big Mamma counterpart. It cannot always have been easy being married to such a large personality for 47 years. They raised three children together. But Pat was strong and understated.



Paul with his granddaughter, in Palos Verdes, five years ago.

Paul and I shared a passion for certain films, especially westerns, and lines from them became recurring references in our conversations. Of course, there was the classic “We don't need no stinking badges” (from *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*). But, more obscurely, there was Brando sticking an insect into a sleeping Randy Quaid's open mouth in *The Missouri Breaks*. Quaid wakes up startled while Brando is now pretending to sleep. Then Brando pretends to be awakened by Quaid's noise and says

“What the hell's goin' on? I'm tryin' to get some sleep.” It is a silly, childish prank but the subtext is sinister: Brando is toying with a guy he's been hired to hunt down and kill. Sometimes, out of nowhere, Paul would say, imitating Brando, “What the hell's goin' on?” It was an example of his absurdist sense of humor and also part of a private language we shared. Paul watched *The Wild Bunch* almost every year, and so did I. When Sam Peckinpah died in 1984, he sent me an obituary.

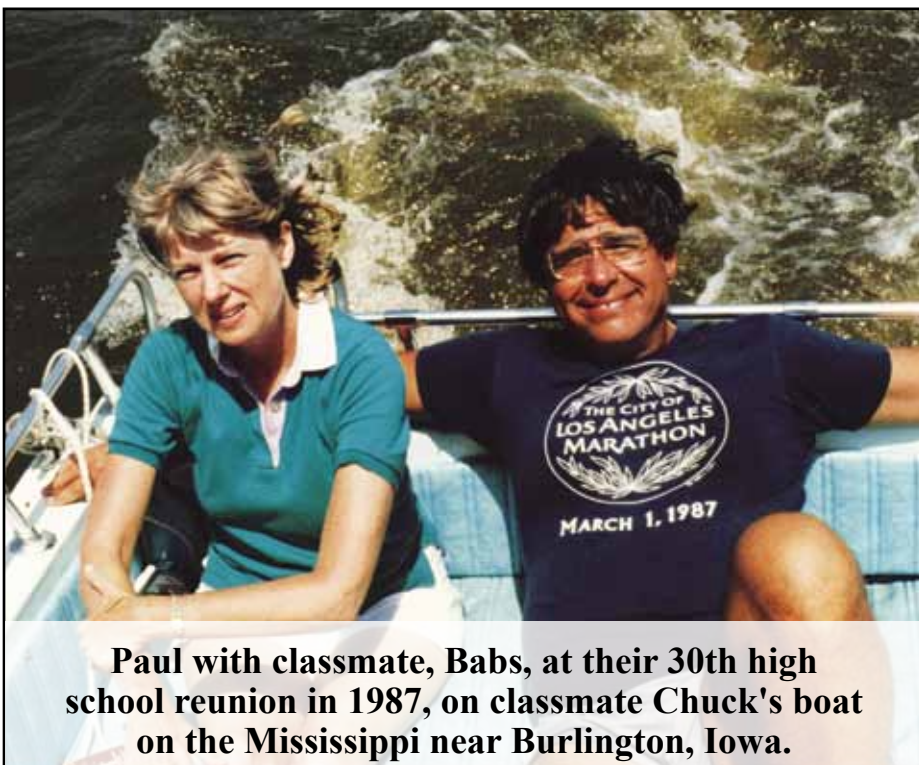
After Paul moved to southern California in the early 70s, there was a hiatus in our relationship until 1979 when I visited him in Palos Verdes for the first time. He took me twice to a club where the flashy blues saxophonist “Big J” McNeely was playing. Paul had gotten to know “Big J.” It took me back to our high school days when we danced to live blues on a riverboat that came up the Mississippi from St. Louis. Paul and I revisited the Mississippi at four class reunions over the years and spent time on the river drinking and reminiscing with our high school buddies in a classmate's boat. At the 2002 reunion Paul was selected the funniest classmate, a long overdue honor. In 2004, Paul, Pat, and I went to see my ex-wife Linda in San Diego six months before she died of cancer. When Paul called me in Ann Arbor to tell me she had died he cried uncontrollably. The man with the infectious laugh could also shed large tears.

For the past thirty years Paul and I have spoken by phone about once a month. When I wasn't home he left a message on the machine that almost always began: “Hey, Fk Stick, where the hell are ya?”**

I last saw Paul two years ago. After our 50th high school reunion in Burlington we drove to Iowa City, where my philosophy mentor Ed Allaire happened to be visiting. Paul had taken classes from Ed as an undergraduate. We all had breakfast together. I felt at the time that this was a wonderful meeting with two men who had a more sustained influence on my development than any others. I also felt that the meeting was not likely to happen ever again.

For the past thirty years Paul and I have spoken by phone about once a month. When I wasn't home he left a message on the machine that almost always began: “Hey, F**k Stick, where the hell are ya?” For a moment I felt I was sixteen again. It's going to be an adjustment getting used to a world without Paul's large presence in it.

(Richard Gull is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy from the University of Michigan. He taught at the University of Michigan-Flint from 1965 until 2007. In January of 2010, he and his now late wife, Sara Schreiber, co-authored and self-published a book about her struggle with cancer, titled Turning Darkness into Light: A Memoir.)



Paul with classmate, Babs, at their 30th high school reunion in 1987, on classmate Chuck's boat on the Mississippi near Burlington, Iowa.

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