

Eulogy for Paul Shuman-Moore
Steve Moore – April 21, 2007

How do you remember a 19 year old who ends his own life? I want to think of the boy I watched grow up: bright, funny, curious, thoughtful - but mostly - self-assured.

I remember his kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Rhodes, told us: “Paul knows who he is.”

I remember when he was just a few years old and barely able to walk and talk. He’d walk around a room full of adults and confidently introduce himself and talk to them. We called it Paul working the room.

And he was cute. I remember when I was in the hallway of his grade school a few months into kindergarten and one of the young female teachers told me: “You know – when he grows up, I’m going to marry him.”

People were attracted to Paul. I doubt that there is a single person in the world who can say they disliked him. He was easy going, modest, and willing to talk to anyone – and regardless of who they were – he approached every person as an equal.

He had a sly, ironic, offbeat sense of humor. His computer hard drive is full of downloaded comedy bits that range from Monty Python to Tenacious D and Sara Silverman.

But he also had a serious, contemplative side. He was a deep thinker and a gifted writer. I’d like to read a snippet from his last email to us. This was Paul’s response to Betsy’s suggestion that he consider writing music reviews as a career – something that would let him use both his love of music and his writing talent. Here is what he said – and remember - this is just an email he dashed off to mom:

“I still think it's very difficult for any self-respecting musician to be a music journalist. There are too many intangible qualities, and in the end, the music always speaks for itself better than words can. Very few people can write well about music, and even then, it's never as substantial as the actual art.”

Paul loved music. It was his passion. He listened to it - he played it - he lived it. He had downloaded what looked like every song ever recorded. I was seriously concerned that thanks to Paul we’d be a target of a lawsuit brought for illegal copyright infringement. When we gave his computer to the Chicago police to help their investigation into his disappearance, we had to get them to promise that they wouldn’t turn it over to the Recording Industry Association of America.

His taste was evolving so quickly, you couldn’t tell where it was going next. Like most kids, he first listened to classic rock and then alternative rock. But he took off on a jazz odyssey – going from Coltrane – to Mingus and then moving on to free jazz – Sun Ra and modern groups I’ve never heard of. Then, back to rock, he started listening to

experimental music and even a thing called Noise. And then he started experimenting with circuit bending – about as esoteric and weird as music gets. He would take a musical toy, open it up and by fooling around with the circuitry, get odd sounds. I'm told he played a concert at Grinnell using just a guitar pickup attached to a spring.

You might say yuck. But the important thing is that he was willing to go out on his own - to experiment – to see if something worked - to follow his own muse. Think about the courage it took to do that in front of a crowd.

A couple days ago, Betsy, Nora and I went out to Grinnell, along with my brother Terry and our friend Ann. The Grinnell teacher who had Paul in a course called Weird Music, who also directed Paul in the school orchestra and who was his academic advisor - told us that Paul had the rare combination of boldness and creativity. He also said that Paul had an innate understanding of the spirit in music. He told us the story of the time the orchestra was playing a Mahler symphony. At the end, as the orchestra was playing the final, triumphant movement – Paul impulsively raised his fist and started pumping it up and down.

We spoke that night with more than a dozen of Paul's friends and his boldness kept coming out in the stories they told about him. Paul had no fear. He didn't care what others thought about him. He just went out and did what he thought was right.

He had so much to offer the world. He was already starting to do so. With friends, he started a club in his high school to raise awareness of sweatshops. As a result, he stopped buying new clothes and only went to used clothing stores. And he came home with vast quantities of the most awful used clothing. When Betsy and Nora took Paul to Grinnell last August, Betsy insisted on stopping at a store to buy him new socks and underwear, telling him there are limits to used clothing. To his credit Paul agreed. But while they were in the store, he started trying on new pants. Afterwards, he told Betsy how great it was to try on clothes that had labels that said the size.

He had many other socially conscious activities. He read to young children in a program sponsored by the Chicago Public Library. He volunteered at Voices in the Wilderness – an international aid organization. He volunteered to work in the youth program at Centro Romero, an organization helping immigrants from Central America.

And he didn't just contribute to the world by volunteering for organized groups. It was the way he lived his life. He only drove a car when he absolutely had to. Last summer, he'd go to concerts in Wicker Park by bicycle – which sounds okay. But that meant he was riding his bike home at 1 a.m. through some iffy neighborhoods. Betsy never slept until he got home from one of those.

When we met his friends at Grinnell a few days ago, almost every one had a story about some way Paul helped them. Whether it was showing them how to make a particular Frisbee throw, how to circuit bend, or making recommendations for groups to listen to, concerts to attend, movies to watch, Paul was always there to help.

He touched so many people in so many ways. You knew that whatever Paul ended up doing, it would be far from traditional. It would be selfless – it would be unusual – it would make the world a better place.

He had so much potential. That is what makes his death so painful. The world is a lesser place because it won't have the benefit of his presence. So many people would be better off if Paul was alive in the future – inspiring them, helping them, loving them.

Such a loss.

But then I think of something our friends the Torreses told us a few days ago. They reminded us that when their son Andres transferred to Paul's grade school in third grade, the first kid who talked to him was Paul. They still remember when Andres came home all excited saying that he had made a friend that day, and his name was Paul. We soon met the Torreses and became their friends. We're still friends and expect to be their friends forever.

That is the legacy of Paul that his death can never change. He brought people together. Look around you. There are hundreds of people here. Yet Betsy, Nora and I would not have known many of you if it hadn't been for Paul. So his presence on this earth had meaning. It had a direct impact on many of us, even if his life was tragically short.

That's the Paul I want to remember.

But how do you separate that Paul from his final act - his senseless decision to take his own life? Since he first went missing last September, we've tried to understand Paul. We've talked to his friends and teachers, both at Grinnell and at home. We've looked through everything he wrote. I've even read some of the books he was reading.

This was not a person in the throes of depression. He was not stressed over school or any social or personal issues. He was acting normal up until his final moments. Things were going well for him socially and academically. A couple days earlier, he was approved to host a new radio show on the college station, where he would play experimental jazz. He had a great time playing in an ultimate Frisbee tournament at Grinnell that weekend. He went to a party with the Frisbee team on Saturday night. Sunday night, he played his guitar in a small club on the campus. He was that bold, self-confident Paul – making odd sounds with his guitar and a special effects pedal. Then he watched the band that played after him. After that, he went to a party. It was a normal college kid's weekend.

And then he walked to a country club swimming pool near his dorm and methodically, deliberately drowned himself.

On Wednesday, we went to see the swimming pool where he drowned. It was a beautiful setting, less than a mile from Paul's dorm. The pool was up on a hill overlooking a beautiful, well-manicured golf course. The grass was green; the leaves were just coming

in; the sky was blue. From that height, you could see several different fairways and greens, teeming with golfers. You could see a few small, beautiful ponds. There was a high school golf team practicing, laughing just outside the swimming pool fence.

We stood there at the side of the pool, which had been drained, and took in this gorgeous setting. And we contemplated the unspeakable horror of what Paul had done to himself. And we stood there sobbing.

It makes no sense. Why? Why would this person, with a world of opportunities before him, want to take his own life? Here I want to be as clear as I can. There was nothing romantic or admirable about what Paul did. It was a stupid, impetuous act. Words can't describe how senseless this was. Why? Why would a 19-year-old with everything to live for, take his own life?

So there will always be two Pauls - the one we all knew and loved - and the one who inexplicably, inconceivably, inexcusably took his own life.

Today, the only way I can reconcile those two Pauls is through music - something that honors Paul, something that Paul would understand.

I once had the thought that when it's the turn of angels to choose which music to play in heaven, they pick Mozart. His music - the melodies, the way a piece would progress - was precise, intricate, and inspired - everything just perfect. But when the souls of humans get to choose music in heaven, they pick Beethoven. His works are full of passion and energy - things that you can only understand if you've lived on earth and experienced the joys and sorrows of life - something the angels will never comprehend.

Today, I think of the final movement of Beethoven's 9th Symphony - what we call the Ode to Joy. It starts out with the cellos playing the melody slowly, mournfully. Then the melody is played again faster, with a few more instruments. Then the melody is played a third time with the entire orchestra - a crashing, joyous, triumphant song. Those three repetitions remind me of life. We start out alone. We walk this earth with others. We die and join that final joyous chorus of souls.

We'll never know if Paul felt stuck in that first section; or thought he had enough experience with the second; or was just anxious to join the third. But we know that right now, he is boldly - joyously - passionately - triumphantly - creating music.