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Remembering Paul

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<http://educate-yourself.org/cn/rememberingpaul26nov02.shtml>
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Holiday Greetings from the Center for an Informed America (<http://davesweb.cnhost.com/>)

Thanksgiving is upon us once again. The car is loaded up, the kids are bouncing off the walls, and we're just about ready to brave L.A. traffic as we head for Grandma's house to partake in the annual ritual of getting the extended family together for a holiday feast. Only it's not the same as it used to be.

It's not the same because Paul won't be there.

It's been more than twenty years now, but sometimes when I close my eyes I can still see that face as clearly as if it were yesterday. It is indelibly etched into my psyche.

It looked vaguely like Paul. The mortician had done the best he could to replace with putty that which had been blown away by bullets. Working from photographs, he had attempted to reconstruct the handsome

young man
that had barely begun his life.

But all that he had achieved was a macabre approximation.

The bereaved parents, my Uncle George and Aunt Mary, had requested that there be no viewing of the body. They wanted Paul remembered as he had been in life. But some family members protested that they wanted to see him one last time. They wanted to say good-bye to the personable young man in the casket.

The parents relented, allowing a limited number of close family members to view the body of the deceased. I was, for better or worse, among that group -- the group that was to learn that no amount of mortician's putty and paint can disguise what happens when multiple bullets enter the back of the head and exit through the face.

Paul's murder was never solved. To the police, he was just another drug dealer. He had something that somebody wanted -- and wanted badly enough to kill him to get it. You live by the sword, you die by the sword. And he was, I suppose, a drug dealer. But that was only one small part of who he was. He was also a son, an electrician, a father, a Navy veteran, a brother, and, to my older brothers and I, an older and much-admired cousin.

Paul was never really much for Thanksgiving and family gatherings. He was kind of the odd man out. Most of the cousins were very close in age, including my brothers and I. Paul was too old and too cool to hang out with us, and too young and too cool to hang out with the aunts and uncles.

The only ones close to his age were his sister Pam and Steve - another cousin - and Paul never really forgave Steve for the incident at a family gathering when he reluctantly agreed to let Steve ride his beloved motorcycle around the block. Steve made it back, but the bike didn't.

So Paul generally made fairly brief appearances at family get-togethers.

But when Paul died, Thanksgiving died along with him. My Uncle George and Aunt Mary sat out the first Thanksgiving after Paul died, unable to bear the thought of having everyone there but the one who was missed the most.

After that, Thanksgiving just kind of withered away. The other two branches of the family made sporadic efforts to keep it alive, but it couldn't be saved. Too much had been lost.

It began as a tradition among the two brothers, one living in Arcadia and the other in San Diego, and the younger sister living in Torrance, who all found themselves transplanted to Southern California from their native Iowa -- along with their respective offspring.

The gatherings grew over the years as first girlfriends and boyfriends, and then wives and husbands and kids, were added. It became the one time of the year, the only time of the year, when everyone came - whether due to desire or coercion - to spend the weekend with family.

But that was a long time ago.

The family has drifted apart -- the cousins, once as close as brothers, now virtual strangers.

Another family came apart that same year. They lived right next door to my family. They had moved out from Pennsylvania, and were adjusting well to their new surroundings. The daughter, Karen - literally, the girl next door - was engaged to one of my brothers. But then tragedy struck.

Teenaged son Darren was working at a local fast food outlet when he was notified that his father was in the hospital and wasn't expected to live. He quickly jumped on his motorcycle and raced towards that hospital.

He made it ... but not on his bike.

Normally a very safe rider, unlike many of the young and reckless riders that I knew in those days, Darren was focused solely on getting to the hospital in time to say good-bye to his dad. He took the turn too fast ... too sharp ... the pedal dug into the asphalt, the bike skidded out of control, and Darren went headfirst into the railroad tracks.

He never had a chance. His father, however, pulled through. His condition remained tenuous though for some time. He was in no condition to be informed that his son was in another bed in the very same hospital, dying. And so the wife and daughter had to keep up a strong front, and try to pretend that they had not just lost a son and brother, so that they might nurse a husband and father back to health, only to have to tell him that he no longer had a son.

The father eventually came home ... but it wasn't home anymore. And the father would never be the same. For evermore he would shoulder the weight of knowing that his only son, the one who was to carry on the family name, had died trying to reach his side.

The family swept up its tattered remains and headed back to Pennsylvania, desperately trying to escape the gaping wound left by the state of California.

Enjoy your time this weekend with friends and family. There's not really much else to be thankful for these days. And you never know when family could be ripped asunder.

Happy Thanksgiving to all,
Dave

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