

Reflections on Paul Ruwoldt

Reader: Curt Schafer, Natalie Schafer's dad, on behalf of Natalie

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When I met Paul I was 26. I was not looking for a long-term relationship or to settle down. I enjoyed dating, but wasn't taking it seriously. I was, and now, in a more appropriate way, fiercely independent. I had never had a serious thought about my wedding, being married or having kids. In a theoretical sense I wanted these things, but sort of figured if they happened, I would be much, much older just because they weren't that important at the time and I couldn't fathom a person I would actually want to be around all the time. Then Paul came around. Paul was a constant buzz for me as he had so many wonderful aspects to him that made him into this incredible person and partner. He helped me chase my dreams. He loved his own company, but got a rush from talking, laughing and learning with others. He rode a motorcycle and took me for rides on it. He listened intently as I talked about my day, even when he was feeling horrible. He didn't bat an eye when I said I was going to Afghanistan for work. He tried making an Australian meringue-type dessert with a power tool since we didn't have any beaters. He went from hunting rabbits with ferrets to being a welder to later helping strengthen the healthcare system of sub-saharan Africa. He knew me better than I knew myself. He accepted my shortcomings wholeheartedly and was more comfortable with them than I was most times. He spent the first year of our relationship unemployed and working on his house and made it make perfect sense. He made the hardest tasks look so easy. He moved to the U.S. without knowing hardly anyone. He designated this certain step in our house as the "hugging spot", because it made us the same height and enabled perfect hugs.

I hadn't known I had wanted these things, but damn if he wasn't just the right fit for me.

I remember at the beginning of our relationship, since we were both very independent people, Paul and I always talked about how we 'wanted' to be with each other, rather than 'needed' to be with each other. But, man how we needed each other during this fight last year. It was a luxury to think that we could tackle life alone. Oscar Wilde said, "The consciousness of loving and being loved brings a warmth and richness to life that nothing else can bring." Paul's love for me showed me that nothing could be further from this truth.

I know that this gathering is about celebrating Paul, but I believe it is also about all of us grieving. I want to share two things with you that help bring me comfort and consolation during this time.

First, Paul was very much at peace with his own death. He came to terms with this early on as we stared down the bleak statistics and this unforgivable disease. His thought was that he was 42, not 21, and had led a good life. He crammed a lot of living in those years. He had no regrets on the choices and paths of his life – he did not do things just because he was supposed to or when he was supposed to. He had a strong inner self and learned from an early age to have confidence in that and follow it. His calm acceptance, grace and humor gave the two of us the strength we needed this past year. However, we did not do it alone. Every email, every hug, every sentiment, every smile from each of you helped him create a peaceful sanctuary to retreat to and refuel. I can not thank you all enough for that.

Second, there was an experience Paul had in July that, we believe, helped him catch a glimpse of the peace he and all of us would experience one day. The day Paul had his brain surgery last July, the surgeon met me afterwards in the waiting room to debrief me on the operation. He told me when I visited Paul in the Neuro Intensive Care Unit that Paul would be completely out of it and probably not even remember that I had stopped by. I prepared myself for this, but was surprised to find Paul alert and beaming. He could hardly contain himself to tell me about the experience he had had coming out of anesthesia. He said he was outside of his body and was sort of looking at his entire life. He said he felt an incredible peace, that he had absolutely no worries and that every decision, person, place, experience in his life made perfect sense. There was no anxiety, no future thinking, everything was totally peaceful. He was so frustrated that he couldn't explain this better in words. But it's hard to imagine any earthly person being able to be even close to feeling what it would be like to have no worries, no cares and to be at total peace and be able to describe that with our man-made language. This experience brought both of us much comfort. I hope it makes sense enough to provide some to all of you as you remember Paul and as you reflect on your own lives.