

Honoring Paul Kurtz (1925-2012)
Robert B. Tapp

Writing in past tense about Paul Kurtz comes painfully and unexpectedly. He and I were born the same year and had often said that since our “saint” John Dewey made it to 94, modern medicine would take us to 104. But my colleague, mentor, and friend is no longer here.

Like most of our peers, we grew up surrounded by traditional religions. Like a few, experiences in a war along with the opening of horizons at the university helped us liberate ourselves. (For many, such childhood religious scarring persists for a lifetime). Paul was rare in that he soon outgrew that scarring and early began thinking universally, even planetarily. Pragmatist mentors such as Sidney Hook helped us become “premature anti-communists.”

Were I to choose two words to describe Paul, they would be Creative and Prolific. My own academic career was accompanied by time spent with Unitarians and Universalists as they were creating their new merged denomination. Our hope had been that it would continue in the direction of being a science-based ethical community retaining some religious practices very selectively and carefully.

My frustrated seminary teaching ceased about the same time that Paul left the American Humanist Association. His creativity and activist needs led to the establishment of organization after organization expanding skepticism, freethinking, and humanism. More than any academic I have ever encountered, he could envision, amass funds, and lead both intellectually and organizationally. In 1973, I chaired a

symposium on his Humanist Manifesto II at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting.

The political successes of reactionary and fundamentalist religions in the ensuing years induced many of us (Ethical Culturists, Unitarian Universalists, Humanistic Jews, members from several competing humanist groups) to create the North American Committee for Humanism. In 1982, 45 of us came together to found this new organization that created The Humanist Institute. We had concurred that by training tomorrow's leaders together, they would better understand their common heritage and also better realize the frailties of marginal organizations.

The Institute's adjunct faculty produced *Humanism Today*, an annual journal devoted to such topics as multiculturalism, ecohumanism, democracy, biomedical ethics, postmodernism. Paul was a leading contributor in these meetings and even had his Prometheus Books publish the final four issues of the journal as hardcover books (a generous subsidy). That Institute survives -- even though several of the organizations subsequently built their own training institutions.

Paul had a breadth of vision that few of us could match. He knew our history well and yet he was continually developing new directions. He was a key founder of organized skepticism. He was able to flesh out a secular humanism that made the initially derogatory use of that term by fundamentalists seem simply ignorant. He brought the best of academy philosophy back in the everyday world. He pioneered online conferences and podcasts. He established centers around the world, even in totalitarian societies, so we could both share our humanism and learn new things from differing cultures.

Most recently, forced once again to build a new organization, Paul maintained his broad and multi-leveled vision. While a resurgent Religious Right has predictably produced a New Atheism (many of whose themes and promoters emerged from Kurtz nourishing), Paul kept insisting that our major task is to articulate and promulgate critical thinking based on serious historical knowledge via serious education. His “eupraxophy” may never become a household word, but the enduring happiness generated by rational ethics and philosophizing is tangible. Any progress in human cultural evolution must be in this direction. As he reminded us in so many ways, however, the future is unknown. There are no cosmic plans and no cosmic guarantor(s).

Paul, we still need you -- and your large legacy now lives in us.