

It's Reunion Time

by Carolyn Moore Newberger

The Boston Globe, June 9, 1996

June is the month of promises. Weddings promise love. Graduations promise accomplishment. That also makes June the month of anniversaries—accountings of the heart and wallet that inevitably remind us of the many slips “twixt cup and lip”.

College reunions celebrate one of those anniversaries, the day that starts one's journey as an adult toward one's place in the world. Mind you, the journey begins long before graduation, with the accident of birth that makes college a future possibility for some and not for others, and with whatever combination of character and circumstance that turns that possibility into reality.

In the past many colleges had religious quotas and racial exclusions. As these quotas eased in the Ivy League, for example, students from Brooklyn tenements or Nebraska farms entered alien worlds occupied by Mayflower descendants and the children of movie stars. Only recently have Americans of color become part of the mix. For a Jewish student from the class of 1966, an African American student from the class of 1976, or a Vietnamese student from the class of 1986, reunions may bring painful memories of feeling different, alone, and excluded, of college years endured for the sake of dreams and opportunities. To some extent these exclusions have changed, but for all its professions of brotherhood and loyalty, each reunion class remains forever stuck in the prejudices and limitations of the day it comes to remember.

Once on the playing field of higher education, whatever a student's origins, there is at least a potential for equality with one's peers, and when that sheepskin is passed into young hands, an internal starting gate opens and they are off.

The question, of course, is: off to what? And do people know when they have arrived? Even if we don't quite know what we're racing toward, reunions often painfully remind us that we've not arrived. Even worse, others look like they've gotten ahead.

Every five years colleges send breathless letters to their alumni announcing their marker reunions, with billings such as the “perfect weekend.” For many, however, it's the perfect time for the “Uh oh” feeling, as in: Uh oh, I've gained twenty pounds; Uh oh, I didn't write that book; Uh oh, my kid dropped out of college; Uh oh, I lost my job; Uh oh, I'm divorced. For some, that reunion letter may be as sharp a reminder of the loss of an earlier idealism that was compromised in the quest for fame or wealth, or simply for survival. Instead of the perfect weekend, reunions loom as the perfect reminder of where we believe our lives haven't measured up.

Of course, it isn't always that way. For the children of privilege who are returning to their Harvards and their Yales, reunions may be a confirmation of their expected place in the moneyed classes. Friendships nurtured in summers on the Maine Coast or winters in prep school are heartily reinforced on the college green. For alumni from more modest circumstances who have been able to fulfill the libertarian ideal and to establish a satisfying place in American life, reunions serve as a powerful affirmation of how far they've come and of their capacity to rise above the constraints of class and race.

For some students, college was a positive force that shaped a sense of themselves as valuable and of the world as a caring place. For them, the reunion may feel like a coming

home to safety and acceptance. For others, however, reunions can challenge the very center of their identities.

We are all composed of layers. Reunions reach down into those layers and pull for many of the same feelings, often contradictory, with which we struggled during those watershed college years: Will I fit in? How do I measure up? Am I lovable? Reunions evoke both joy and sadness, affirmation and anxiety as we look in the mirror of our peers and take stock of who we were and who we have become.

Reunions are thus about the ineluctable passage of time, with its inevitable sense of loss. Looking at the graying hair and lined faces of one's classmates drives home definitively the realization that we, too, no longer look like that young persona we carry around inside. Other losses may be summoned up as well. The college years are when young people begin to claim their lives as their own. Whereas in some families, claiming one's life through college is a source of collective family pride, in other families, going to college means that you think you're better than they are. For these alumni, the pride of accomplishment gained is a simultaneous reminder of connection lost.

As measures of personal accomplishment, reunions always produce classmates who are thinner, thicker-haired, richer, or more renowned than oneself. Someone else in the class will have written the great American novel, another will be leading corporate America. As long as reunions are contests, seen and felt as comparative displays of accomplishment, someone will always lose.

What each of us has as a legacy from childhood, from those formative college years, and from all the years thereafter is a personal sense of our own value. Reunions test and challenge that sense of value. But they also reaffirm, through the power of reconnecting who we were with who we are, the value that lies within ourselves. So the race is not between ourselves and that cadre of peers who opened the gate to the challenge of adult life on the same June date those ten, 25, or 50 years ago; the race is within. Maybe that's why it gets easier as the years go by. With the passing of time, all of us can better appreciate our shared ultimate humanity.