

Reunions: A Glimpse Ahead, as Well as Behind

My dinner partner to the left was almost completely deaf and every few minutes opened with the same conversational gambit. "I was in the Battle of the Bulge, but I can't talk about it," he kept shouting. The dinner partner on my right, mercifully, was my father, who spoke in lower tones and was not using the occasion to review his own similarly traumatic memories of World War II.

There were, however, many other reminiscences. The event was my dad's 60th college reunion, and I was his date for the weekend. My father was in the Class of 1946; I graduated 32 years later, in 1978.

It's a special bond to have—something we share outside of the family connection. Of course, I've attended my own reunions over the years, too—as a newlywed for my fifth, pregnant for my 10th, with toddlers in tow for my 15th. When I celebrated my 25th, I left the teenagers at home, focusing instead on reconnecting with old friends and especially taking pleasure in making new connections with people I hadn't spent much time with as a student.

I can't imagine my dad having much fun if he had come to my reunions. But when my father first invited me to accompany him to his 50th 10 years ago, I was delighted. I see my dad frequently enough but rarely get him one on one.

As an additional benefit, I earned bonus points from my mother, whose idea of a good time does not include traveling to the Berkshires to a college she didn't attend and talking to wives she insists are all named Buffy and Muffy and Kitty. (This is actually not true, but I did meet men in my father's class who were referred to as Stinky, Chappy and The Judge.)

Anyway, the 50th was a lot of fun, except that my dad insisted on introducing me to all his classmates as his "trophy wife." Once we nipped

that mortifying joke in the bud, the rest of the weekend proceeded smoothly. The Class of '46 was an interesting one. My father arrived on campus in the summer of 1942 at the age of 17. He attended classes for only one semester before enlisting in the Army. Dad returned to Williamstown to resume his education in 1946, after the war ended. Many of his classmates also served, and some never made it back. My father actually graduated in 1949, but he and many of his classmates retain their original class identity with pride.

My dad's 60th reunion reminded me that in some ways we attended the same school; in others, a vastly different institution. We sang the same dopey football songs, lived in the same dormitories, enjoyed the same beautiful campus and even overlapped on a few professors who started out as teachers in the 1940s and were nearing the end of their careers when I was in college.

But the differences mark the changing times. The student body in my father's day was male, nearly all white, largely Christian and populated heavily by prep school boys. (Having twice experienced today's college application scene with my own children, it shocked me to hear several of my dad's classmates explain how they got accepted at Williams: "My headmaster asked my father where he wanted me to go and then called the director of admissions to tell him I was coming.")

I was in the fourth freshman class that included women. By then, there was a well-organized Black Student Union but few Latinos, and nobody was "out" as gay. A few years after graduation, some of our classmates would start dying of a mysterious virus that was not yet called AIDS. This year's reunion events included receptions for the Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgendered Alumni Network as well as for Alumni of Color, along with Shabbat services and various other activities that mirror a little

better what the country and the College look like today. At a reunion seminar on "today's admissions picture at Williams," we were told that the incoming freshman class is roughly 28 percent "Americans of color." An additional 8 percent are international students.

But reunions are reunions, and they have their own familiar rhythms. At the annual meeting, reuniting classes are seated by age. Those past their 50th reunion class are up front. Classes from the 1940s were surprisingly well represented. A fair share wore hearing aids and carried canes; there was some joking about how hard the repeated standing and sitting were on the knee and hip replacements.

The 50th reunion class looked dapper in their 1956 straw boaters. Farther back in the auditorium, the 25th reunion class had only a scattering of gray hair and balding pates. Toward the back, the youngest classes cradled babies and shushed toddlers.

While a large contingent of the Class of 2001 attended their fifth reunion, only a handful had woken up in time to attend the meeting, leading the College president to joke that their reunion gift should have been an alarm clock.

In a way it was like sitting in the middle of a real-life actuary table, seeing the age you once were in the people behind you and where you are heading up front. Looking over at my father that morning, I felt the time to be especially precious. The meeting ended with singing: "The Mountains! The Mountains! We greet them with a song!" We both still remembered the words. And the mountains were one thing at college that time hadn't changed.

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