

2011 Essay The Reunion – A Self-Centered Reflection

Later, it became clear to me. I had been more interested in who they had been than who they had become.

We had attended North High School in Des Moines, Iowa, from 1969 until 1971. This was supposedly the Age of Aquarius: drugs, free sex, anti-war demonstrations, and young men being drafted to die in Vietnam. The race riots of 1968 were thru, Kennedy and King had been recently assassinated, and the music from Woodstock was just coming out on recordings. According to history, we went to high school during a time of turmoil. We didn't recognize this at the time. We were just living in innocence. No free sex, no drugs, and I can't remember anybody from school being drafted, let alone killed in Vietnam. I do remember the football team singing the song "War" (famously sung at Woodstock) during bus trips.

I was talking to my best friend in high school at our 40th high school reunion. As much as possible for me, I had shared my hopes, dreams, and experiences with him for those three glorious years. I can remember him describing his career as he changed from being an accountant, to a salesman of annuities, to a nurse in a mental hospital. (I was always interested in what others had done with their careers because that is an important part of what a man "is".) I can clearly remember talking about his 1967-1/2, fastback mustang, about football, about girlfriends, and parties. I remember his joy at throwing punches at Hoover students in the NHS lobby after a North-Hoover basketball game. I can remember retelling the story of him winning the draft number lottery. His birthday was the first pulled out of the big glass bowl during the televised event in late, 1971. His mother got him a medical deferment. According to a doctor who was a friend of his mother, the guy who had played football and worked out with me for three years all of a sudden was incapacitated by allergies.

I can remember all of the kind of stuff I was interested in, but, shamefully, I can't even remember if he had kids.

My high school experience was pre-ordained in 4th grade. Until then, I was happily ensconced with friends I had known since kindergarten, who I went to cub scouts with, and who I played little league baseball with. At Monroe Elementary school, I was chubby and the kind of kid who went to the school library after school to find another book to read. The teachers all knew me and my older sister. Until the middle of the 4th grade, I was happily making my way. What happened to me later in 4th grade significantly changed my life and made me miserable for the next five years. Only when I got to North HS, did I find myself again.

It started with a battery of tests. First, a hearing test proved I had good hearing and this was the only test that did not change me. Second, a vision test proved I was already nearsighted, and glasses helped me see the blackboard but put me into the small and very uncool group of "four eyes." Third, a speech pathologist confirmed what everybody else knew. I had a severe speech defect. This started five years of speech therapy. Fourth, they somehow determined I had an inclination for music so I started a nine year study of the violin. The last two tests actually made a huge and positive difference in my life. After years of speech and solo violin contests, I lost all fear of speaking and performing in front of others. (Just ask my wife, after a few beers, I always perform for the crowd.)

The fifth test was well intentioned, but, I suffered from the results for over 5 years until I was a sophomore at North high school. The fifth test was an intelligence test. I was never very good at figuring out physical things, so I remember putting plenty of round pegs in square holes. But, I was extremely analytical and years ahead of my peers in reading and math skills. They thought I was so intelligent, they invited me (this means they invited my parents since they were the ones who put me in the program) to participate in an experimental, accelerated, learning program. The brilliant educators in the Des Moines school system thought it would be a good idea to have some “smart” kids take 5th and 6th grade at Franklin Junior High School (7th-9th grade at that time). I was the only one from Monroe “invited” to the program. Thus, a chubby, near sighted, violin playing kid, who had a very hard time speaking and being understood by others, went to 5th grade where he knew absolutely no one, was classmates with others he only interfaced with at school, and could be bullied by ninth graders in the full chokehold of adolescence. . Think of a Ralphie from “The Christmas Story” dealing with much older kids than he did in the movie, only with dark hair and no friends. The 25 or so children in this program were the only “class” to go through this painful “experiment”.

After 5th and 6th grade, I continued at Franklin for all of my Junior High education. I remember very, very, little about junior high because I am not interested in it. I interfaced little with my peers at school. All my friends lived in my neighborhood and went to Catholic schools. I do remember a “Ralphie” moment. On the public bus going home after school, while in 8th grade, another kid would tease me unmercifully about me carrying a violin case. This went on for weeks and I dreaded the ride home. One day, I got so mad I got off behind him at his exit. He looked surprised for a moment before I cold cocked him with no warning. I then proceeded to do the 8th grade version of kicking the crap out of him, stomping on him while he lay on the ground, crying. I never put my violin case down. After I was done with him, I walked the additional mile home. I never mentioned this to anybody at the time. I was afraid I would get in trouble and wasn't proud of what I had done. He also must have never mentioned it. I never heard about it from him or anybody else. He never spoke to me again which was my goal.

Traditionally, most kids who attended Franklin went to Roosevelt High although a few went to Hoover. Through a freakish bit of school district Gerrymandering, kids a few houses to the north and south, and just across the street from my house, were in the North High School district but I was still in the Roosevelt district. My sister went to Roosevelt. I had no desire to go to Roosevelt with the same assholes I had gone to Junior High with. I decided to sign up to go to North and they let me. As a result of my experience of five years at Franklin, I decided to start from scratch and develop new friends at North. I had only one friend I knew of going to North: Louis Danes.

Football was my entryway in to North High School. Those years, there were no biddy-ball or Junior high football programs. Only the Catholic junior highs had football. At North, every sophomore played on the sophomore team. We had our own team, our own practice, and our own little locker room: a green shed at the football field that had ice cold showers. For two weeks before school started, I got to meet and practice with 40-50 guys all entering the tenth grade. By the time we had learned how to put pads on, taken showers together, and hit each other as hard as we physically could, I was already part of a close group. By the time I started classes at a new school, I knew 50 of my peers by name and considered many of them friends.

North was fully integrated in 1969 and about 20% of our school was black. I had never met or interfaced with blacks before I started sophomore football. (Remember, I went to Monroe and Franklin; both of which did not have one black attending them at the time.) On the football field, we were equal in all aspects. We talked, we joked, and we played hard with and against each other. The brotherhood started to decrease in the shower room. There, I discovered that all of

their bodies were black, and many had an uncircumcised penis. At Franklin, which had a large Jewish population, my white shower mates all had proven their covenant with God by having their heads sticking out at the end of their little tally-wackers. Although we were close on the football field, all of our interfacing stopped shortly after showering.

Once off the football field, complete segregation started as the preferred mode for both races. We lived in separate worlds while attending the same school. We did absolutely nothing together off the football field. We didn't study together, we didn't do things together, we didn't talk to each other, and we hardly acknowledged the other's existence. Being in advanced placement classes, few even attended classes with me. This segregation has continued for the next 40 years. I can count on one hand the total number of blacks that have attended the 3-4 reunions I attended.

Even with this segregation, I don't remember racial tensions. In our senior year, a group of underclass black guys jumped Ray Lorenz and beat him so severely I think he had to be hospitalized. There was a lot of tension at that time. Not so much between the two races, but within a group of white seniors who were committed to getting even with the perpetrators. The perps were never allowed back in the school, so sweet revenge was never had (that I know of).

Football was a very important part of my high school experience. No sophomores played varsity, so, by the time we were juniors, we were fighting for a starting position. I remember earning mine with a single tackle. In practice before the season started, I was playing defensive end. Our starting senior back, Bill Rollison, took a handoff and came around my corner. I could tell that his only intention was to run me over. I accelerated towards him and we hit each other squarely head on. The crack of the collision was tremendous and the entire field screamed with delight. One of the coaches yelled "Way to stick him, Paschall!" I bounced right up, patted him on him on the butt, and said "Nice try". As we walked back to our huddles, I was determined not to show people how much I hurt. I was never challenged like that in practice again. That hit was the hardest hit we had as a team until one year later.

A year later, as seniors, the first game we played was against a Mt Pleasant, Iowa team. They had a running back that had been all-state as a junior. I was playing as our right defensive tackle and he went around the outside of our left side. I watched the same scenario develop except this time it was our Rob Garver vs. the back. Garver hit him so hard the field shook, then, he picked him up and body slammed him to the ground. Garver eclipsed my hit and got the same result: that back did not try that again.

I could talk about our senior football team forever. Of our quarterback, Kelly Evans, pointing at Bud Griffith then passing him the winning touchdown over East. Of me begging Evans to give the ball to Garver during the triple option called for the last play against Hoover since Gary McClanahan and I were wiping out the defensive tackle and could blow a hole open for Garver. (Kelly kept the ball himself, and got tackled at the line of scrimmage.) Of Brent Cox getting roughed as the punter in the Hoover game, right in front of a ref, with no flag. Of the subsequent Donnybrook on the field, and the vision of Charles Dameron chasing a ref down the field, trying to kick him. (Cox and Dameron both got suspended for the rest of the season because of the fight, and our school was placed on probation.)

Later that year, our basketball team made it to the State tournament for only the second time in history. That basketball season, and the death of the head coach Jimmie Lyle because of a heart attack, dominated our year book sports section. There was no mention in the year book of me being the only North player on the first team all conference football squad and being named to an All-State team.

The closest friendships of my life (except for my wife) were developed and blossomed during high school then died shortly afterwards. Louie Danes was the closest male friend I ever had. I shared more with him in terms of feelings, hopes, and dreams, than anybody else in my life other than my wife. I still kept secrets from him that I only shared with Jeanne, but, nobody else has been as close to me throughout my life. That relationship started shortly before sophomore football practice, and ended when I went to Iowa State and he went to the U of Iowa.

Also in high school, I got close to Steve Hollingsworth and Steve Nichols. I doubt if many recognized how brilliant Hollingsworth was. He had the highest ACT test score in our class, and never discussed it with anybody. I remember once when I discovered him drunk after lunch after he had been drinking in the parking lot. In a fit of brilliance, I put him through a cold shower, and we got to our next class just a few minutes late. He promptly put his head down and slept the rest of the period. I had to wake him up and prop him as he went to his next class. What was I thinking of? We would have been in a lot less trouble if we had just skipped the rest of the day than if he had been discovered drunk. Hollingsworth didn't care what we did at the time; he was too far gone to even think.

I also had some girls at North that became close buddies. Annette Bobenhouse had the dark hair, long neck, and quiet composure of an Audrey Hepburn. She remained a friend throughout our ISU years and married a guy she met through me. April McDonald was a pretty and delightful carrot top who quietly became our valedictorian. She also spent ISU time with me. She married and moved away to live in a cabin in Montana, within a national park, and I haven't seen her in 35 years although we remain in contact. We have something in common even now: we both had a freakishly tall son. These two gals did a lot with me.

Once we went our separate ways, I basically lost contact with these friends. They fell into the contact frequency of annual Christmas cards and occasional e-mails. I did have some friends in college, but, these high school buddies were the closest I've ever allowed myself to be with others. It's not like we discarded each other, it was just a natural result of going our separate ways. As I have grown older, I have lost the energy and enthusiasm required to develop and keep close friends. It is clear I will never again have other friends like these.

As I have gotten older, Memories and Regret have become my friends. I tend to visit with them more than actual people. They are identical twins, they just have different personalities. Even though Regret can not control me, he still comes to discuss what could have been done differently. Regret sometimes brings a chill along with him. Memory seems to be a much happier friend. He seems to concentrate on things in the past that make me smile and many times warms me. Recently, I have had some disappointments with Memory: he has been making it harder for me to remember details.

Both of the twins have told me to call up Louie and ask about his family. I need to find about his kids.