Thirty Years After

The author's high school reunion brought a flood of memories—most of them good—and one important lesson.

BY PETER GOLDEN

THE ANCIENT GREEKS CONSIDERED nostalgia a disease, "the homecoming pain," and a fast check for synonyms—regret, suffering, angst—is enough to make you start popping Prozac® like M&M's.

Worse are those who see it as a cheap emotion, like the late, great rocker Frank Zappa, who observed that the world might end not in fire and ice but in paperwork and nostalgia.

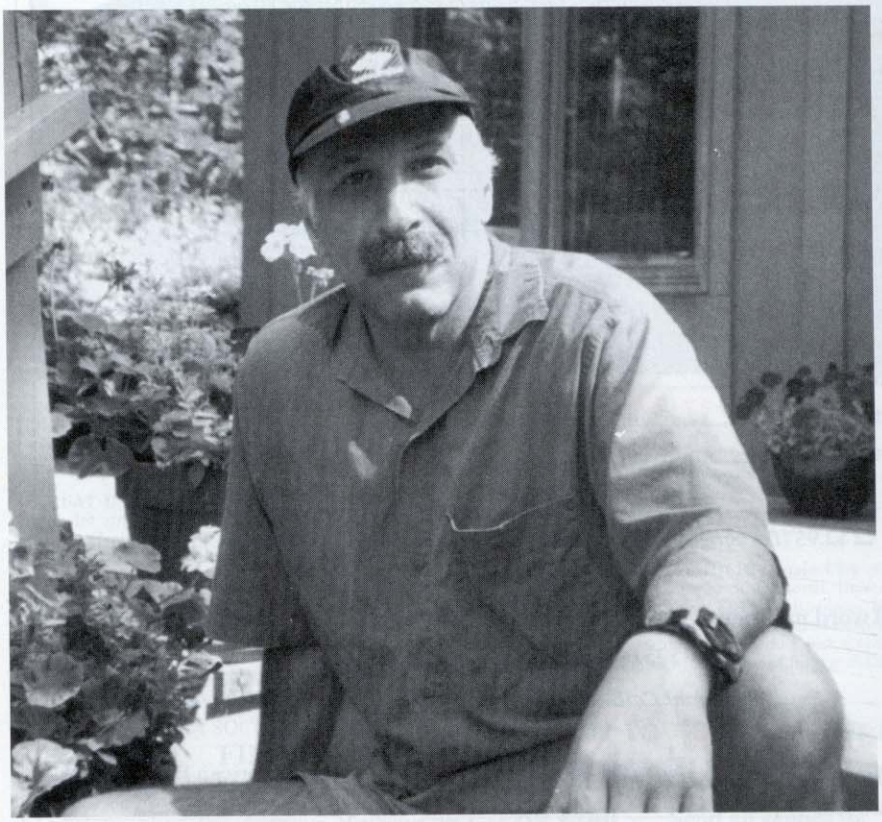
Of course, I was aware of all that on the Saturday night in April when the Columbia High School class of 1971 held its 30th reunion at the Westin Morristown. Yet my expectations were high. What healthy, middle-aged male who grows more hair out of his ears than on his head can't be forgiven for wishing that the teenage beauty who broke his heart is now overweight and waiting tables at IHOP in orthopedic sneakers instead of teaching TaeBo classes and married to a handsome Silicon Valley billionaire who pilots his own Gulfstream?

Regrettably, karma is not that precise.

More than 250 of my erstwhile classmates—all of us born in mid-baby boom, the pride of postwar New Jersey's suburban glory—showed up for the reunion.

As far as the two-cent wistfulness goes, I'm proud to report that none of us wore DayGlo® paint on our cheeks or love beads around our necks, though a deejay did play hits from the 1960s. But with the lively din of talk and laughter, and considering that my perceptions were tarnished by either the martinis or the olives—I had too many of both—the songs might as well have been that Spears-Backstreet noise my son drives me crazy with.

First thing you notice after 30 years: People don't look as they're supposed to—not even you. I was standing in front of a fellow with whom I went to school from kindergarten through twelfth grade, and he was no more recognizable to me than the wanted posters on the post office wall. Fortunately, Joe Busichio and Janet Heinle were at the Westin, and since they appeared to have stepped unaltered from the 1971 yearbook, I knew I was in the right hotel.



The author in his 1971 graduation picture (TOP) and today.

Although hair has gone gray or gone for good, and faces and bodies grown rounder, inside these new pictures you spot old ones. But the voices, you realize, have hardly changed, and on this night they tell familiar tales, like the one about the parents who discovered a green, leafy substance hidden in a drawer and, instead of dragging their offspring to rehab, did a toke or three and were later found giggling like hebephrenics. Or the one about an elegant dinner in Manhattan held in lieu of the prom—because proms were so Establishment and ours was the era of Revolution, and where better to revolt than the Rainbow Room?

This story is accompanied by a picture: beautiful young women with long, glimmering hair, an innocent abandon in their smiles, seated around a linen-covered table. But the men, with their faux tough-guy half-grins, are something else, wearing so much paisley and plaid that even in a faded, black-and-white photo they resemble optical illusions.

I told my favorite story about my friend Bob Cohen. In our junior year we often found other things to occupy our time in

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Exit Ramp

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place of French class, and school policy required us to provide an official excuse the next day to explain our absence. Because his grandfather had recently died, Bob had one marked "funeral." He used that excuse maybe twice a month all year long. Our French teacher always read it but never said anything, probably fearing that Bob's entire family, down to his ninth cousins, had been wiped out.

Those recollections, I surmise, represent the nostalgia that Professor Zappa equated with Armageddon. Except that somewhere between the buffet and bar, conversations turned toward the present and then subtly shifted back into history.

It was then that the appeal of the reunion became clear to me, an appeal rooted not just in the giddy moments of youthful happiness recalled, but in the simple human love of stories and the desire to know how things turn out, and the wish to make them turn out right.

Initially, conversations involved husbands and wives—cheerful for the most part, with occasional grumbling about alimony and fathers who miss their every-other weekend. Next you heard about work—I love it, I hate it, blah, blah, blah. Then came tales of children, those miraculous creatures who keep us laughing by paying us back, with exorbitant interest, for our own youthful rebellion.

Later, in softer voices, came a list of those lost to cancer and suicide. Equally sad were the stories of classmates who continue to drift because of horrible luck or psychological demons they're unable to tame. Their lives, once filled with the light and air of promise, remain mired in the painful brand of hopelessness that accompanies wasted talent and broken dreams in middle age.

These conversations led to the past. A woman apologized to a man for the time, in ninth grade, when he asked her to a dance and she said no in a particularly harsh way. Not because she was malicious or disliked him but for no other reason than that she had been a shy high school freshman who didn't know how to refuse without hurting his feelings.

At a table in a corner you heard stories of abusive parents—verbally cruel, unspeakably violent—a sadness borne back then and never shared, not even between closest friends, until now.

There were sweet memories too. One of

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New Jersey MONTHLY

Exit Ramp

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them reached back to sixth grade. A woman quoted some romantic doggerel a man had once written on her grammar school valentine and told him that it had been so important to her in 1965 that she had never forgotten it. "I always wanted to tell you," she said, and, having waited 36 years to mention it, looked awfully pleased to have had the opportunity.

So that was how the evening passed, and I knew there was a poignant lesson there if I was brave enough to learn it. I suspect that long ago—on June 23, 1971, to be exact, a humid Wednesday evening at Underhill Field, when nearly 700 of us sat on folding chairs in a shimmering green sea of early-summer grass, waiting to pick up our CHS diplomas—a speaker or two doubtlessly tried to warn us.

A high school reunion provides visual proof that we move inexorably through time, and this movement, which you see reflected in the eyes of your old friends, makes you remember too many clichés you heard as a kid, but this one most of all: Appreciate today and pay attention to the people and things you love, because life gets faster every year until it appears to sail past at the speed of light, leaving you well down the road just as you are beginning to understand the journey.

And like the joyous reunion for the Columbia High School class of 1971, no matter how long you stay at the party, it all ends far too soon.

Peter Golden is a writer who lives in Albany, New York. His latest book is I Rest My Case *(Chestnut Street Press, 2000).*

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