

PUBLIC LIVES

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High school reunions

Like most people now in their mid-60s, I recently joined my high school classmates in a series of reunions to mark the golden anniversary of our high school graduation. There is something extraordinary about meeting one's classmates after fifty years. You wonder how they have changed and in what ways they have remained the same. You wonder too what vivid memories about you they have kept, if any. Compared to 25th anniversary reunions, golden gatherings are warmer and kinder. There is genuine interest in the other person and a readiness to share in his or her achievement, or misfortune. Everyone is invited to bask in the gentle glow of a shared humanity.

It is said that only one feature does not change in a person's face – the eyes. They stay the same from birth. They may be clouded with cataract, concealed behind thick lenses, or lie half-buried in wrinkled skin, but they never lose their distinctness. It is the eyes that we remember. We peer into them with the inquisitiveness of youth, hoping to recover familiar traces of a person we once knew. And almost all the time, we are rewarded by the grace of recognition.

A long-lost classmate now based in the States found my *Inquirer* email address and sent me two scanned class photos – one when we were in third year high school, taken in 1960, and another on our last year, taken in 1961. I had not seen these pictures in a very long time. And so I spent one whole evening viewing them, focusing on one face at a time, zeroing in on the eyes, guessing which name belongs to which pair, wondering what memories they hold. It is the one thing I like about the iPad. With a single simple touch of the screen you can magnify any part of a photograph, and create a new form that is entirely its own.

At one of our gatherings, I asked each one of my classmates to quickly pose for me so that I could take a solo photo of them. I then uploaded these precious images into my iPad. When later I looked into their eyes, I was gripped by the strangest sensation. I felt I was intruding into the private world of people I had known in my childhood but whose life experience in the last fifty years I was totally unaware of. Their eyes physically had not changed, but they appeared to have complex and varied stories to tell – some sad, others celebratory, some resigned, others exultant. The eyes seemed to say, “If only I could tell you my life.”

Indeed the reunion gave me a chance to listen to some of these stories, and always I felt privileged and humbled as a human being to be able to hear the summing up of a life. These are mostly narratives of perseverance in a time of scarcity and limited opportunity. Many of my classmates took the first chance to start a different life abroad by joining the US Navy after earning a few units in college. They traveled, acquired useful skills, and quit the navy after a few years to pursue their dream of a college or technical education. They married and settled in America, and they made sure that their children would reap the hard-won benefits of their arduous struggles. Their belief in the transforming power of education is almost mythical. They planned their lives so their children would have a better chance at life.

I had a classmate who was exceptional in math. She could easily have become an executive in a financial house in Manila. But, she remained in the province to help support her parents and younger siblings. She studied to be a teacher, tutoring the children of well-off families on the side. She took out a loan to take another course in accounting after graduation, even as she continued to teach. She gave up many chances to move to the big city because she could not bear the thought of leaving her parents and her brothers and sisters who were still in school. With the help of grateful students she once tutored, she rebuilt her parents' house. It was only then that she felt entitled to marry her boyfriend, who himself had struggled against all odds to become a successful lawyer. Now retired from her life-

long vocation as a public school teacher, she proudly told me about the five children they raised, all UP graduates.

Perhaps next to the eyes, it is a person's voice that doesn't change much. Listening intently to my classmates share their joys and their pains, their adventures and misadventures, in a voice I would not mistake for anyone else's was an incredible experience. It was like eavesdropping on adolescents letting their imaginations soar as they engage in animated conversation about the life they will have. They talk of a future now past, of a life now lived, and of dreams half-pursued, now realized in their children. But there is one difference, and that is the wisdom that tempers every recollection.

At our final meeting, my classmates and I fell silent in prayer to remember those who did not live long. As their names were read, I wished we had culled their youthful faces from the class album and projected them on a screen so we could hear them speak through their eyes. There is no way of appeasing this kind of sadness except to hang on to those still present. We promised to meet again every other year, even as everyone knew that for many of us this could be the last.

There's something about the high school years that lingers and gets wired into our psyche. I guess it has something to do with the fact that at that age, we are just beginning to be self-conscious, to be reflective, and to form impressions of people. And so when we meet at reunions half a century later, we marvel at how time has changed all of us, but, at the same time, we stand in awe of what it has failed to erode – the eyes, the voices, the laughter and the affection.

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