

An open letter to teenagers

5Oct2022

Dear youngsters:

First, I hope you aren't put off at my referring to you as youngsters. I'll be 70 my next birthday and from my point of view most people I meet qualify to bear that moniker. Including your parents.

Second, please don't stop reading. I know that having exposed my age, I may well have just identified myself as a dinosaur with little of interest to offer. But you may be surprised at a couple of nuggets I've picked up along the path to ancient. So please, just read on and then judge for yourself.

Last year marked 50 years (yes, a half century; what of it?) since my high school graduation. But of course, Covid, so we put it off. Then, thanks to amazing generosity of both time and effort on the part of Jeanne and her team of organizers, this last week found us gathering in a restaurant banquet room to renew acquaintances. Since my back injury, I don't do long drives alone so my brother and I found ourselves road-tripping the 800-plus miles to attend. It was well worth the effort, both for the bro time and for the reunion.

This was a wonderful event that I hope each and all of you experience for yourselves when the time comes. And when you do, please take a page from our organizers and make it all about the people. From the time Pat and I walked in until we left, this was an evening to remember. Tables, chairs and space to mingle is all you need, so I won't provide a recap of any events. As I said, this was all about the people.

I didn't actually mingle much, owing to that bad back and an already full day of school touring and such. But I watched and noticed. And what I observed was remarkable. Shouldn't have been, I suppose. After all, these were people who a half century on took the trouble to come together and celebrate our common experience.

One guy I recalled as a competitive swimmer recounted his recent experience with Covid – 79 days in a coma and over 100 in the hospital. But he lived to bring us one of the biggest and most genuine smiles that night. And frankly, I have no wonder at how he made it through. Laps. Tom was a hard and determined worker back then and since. He was always going to be the one who survived. We just didn't know it back in 71. What we did know back then was that he was a really nice guy with an incredible work ethic. So as I say, no surprise he made it to the reunion and brought his enthusiasm along for the ride. And, no surprise, he's back training for Ironman competitions.

I wasn't close to Connie in high school. Barely knew her, truth be told. But she had that same welcoming mien for each person who approached her and I knew right away she hadn't changed.

I only knew Steve as a high school athlete but now I will remember him as a consummate actor, having attended his one man show the night before. And while I was never coached by Mr. Sweeney, I was able to spend a private moment telling him how a word of encouragement he'd given me back then proved pivotal in my life.

As I said, my brother and I attended together and we spent much of the weekend with the old music crowd – the ones who'd marched in gaudy, threadbare uniforms to decidedly non-hip music of our own

making or who steadfastly practiced instruments alone for the thousands of hours that culminated in a grand concert in the high school cafeteria.

Turns out, these were the people with whom I'd have chosen to populate my life, had I known enough to choose them. It wasn't through deep thought or careful ranking of values that we became a 'crowd' back then. Seems to me it had everything to do with being the folks who gave each other a place to stand in the uncertainties of those years. Who shared jokes and confidences and dread fears and minor triumphs. Who together braved raging hormones and the search for perspective and wisdom. (And did I mention, hormones?)

Susan and I spent an hour in the car talking nonstop, falling over each other in the attempt to catch up. The guys with whom I once cracked wise still crack me up. And true to my memories, Sally is still the nicest, kindest person you could ever want to meet. A few of us visited her and her husband as we started our drives home and I was so thrilled to see the life they've made together. And of course, Duncan can still make me laugh. I made a good choice of high school friends, if indeed it can be said to have been my choice.

I could go on but I'll just hope that you've read this far and gather my drift. (Do you still say 'gather my drift?') Anyway, here's the thing:

I won't tell you to try to choose friends you'll still value in fifty years. That would be a fool's errand with far too many variables to factor in. Instead, get to know people you like and respect. Allow each of them a place to stand near or apart from you without judgment. And perhaps just try to be the person they will want to remember. Put your shoulder to that task and when the wheel comes around, you may be surprised – as was I – at what a wonderful life you've lived.