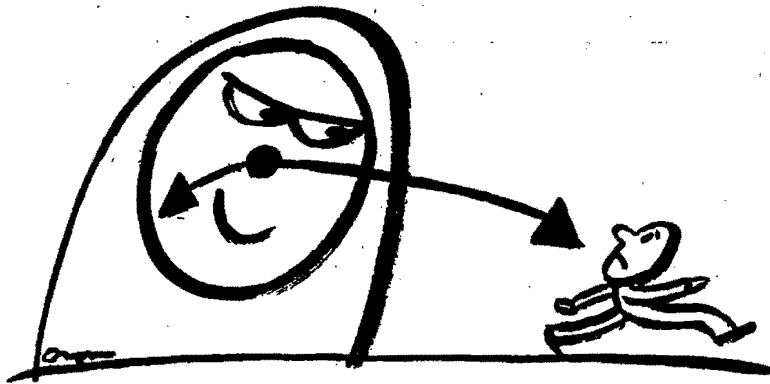


FOCUS

THE BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE • JUNE 9, 1996



ESSAY

GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS:

It's reunion time

BY CAROLYN MOORE NEWBERGER

JUNE IS THE MONTH of promises. Weddings promise love. Graduations promise accomplishment. That also makes June the month of anniversaries — accountings of the heart and wallet that make us reflect on life's uneven course.

College reunions celebrate one of those anniversaries, the day that starts one's journey into adulthood. But it is a celebration that often comes at a price, for — as thousands of reunion-goers are reminded this week — reunions have the power to challenge the very center of one's identity.

Attending a college reunion takes courage. It exposes us to what may be our worst demon: the belief that acceptance is based on how we appear, and not who we are. Our fear is that re-

College gatherings test our sense of self-worth

unions, with all their possibilities, real or imagined, for comparisons, will show us to be wanting. They will devastatingly confirm that we are flawed, undesirable and unwanted.

The good news is that reunions can also fight that demon. The experience of being joyously reunited — despite our shortcomings, despite the promises altered or unrealized — is a profound confirmation of basic human worth.

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College reunions test our sense of self-worth

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We are all composed of layers. Reunions reach down into those layers and activate many of the same feelings, often contradictory, with which we struggled during those watershed college years: Will I fit in? How do I measure up? Do I have value? Reunions evoke both joy and sadness, affirmation and anxiety as we look in the mirror of our peers and take stock of who we were and who, in midlife, we have become.

Reunions are thus about the ineluctable passage of time, with its inevitable sense of loss. Looking at the graying hair and lined faces of one's classmates drives home definitively the realization that we, too, no longer look like that young person we carry around inside.

Other losses may be summoned up as well. The college years are when young people begin to claim their lives as their own. Whereas in some families, claiming one's life through higher education is a source of collective family pride, in other families, going on to college means thinking you're better than your family. For these alumni, the pride of accomplishment gained is a simultaneous reminder of connection lost.

Whether to risk attending a reunion is a gamble alumni face every five years, as colleges send breathless letters announcing their marker reunions, with such standard billings as the "perfect weekend." (Standard responses: "Uh oh, I lost my job." "Uh oh, I'm divorced." Etc.)

The letter is also for many a sharp reminder of the loss of an earlier idealism since compromised in the quest for fame or wealth, or, simply, survival. Instead of the perfect weekend, reunions loom as the perfect reminder of the gap between what we once believed with all our hearts, and the lives we live today.

So who go to reunions, and who choose to ignore those letters? Some people don't go because they don't care or they're afraid. Many don't go because they can't afford it. Reunions are expensive, after all.

Others may fear rejection. Consider a now openly gay alumnus for whom a reunion would be another coming out. Not only might he fear rejection for his homosexuality but also for its earlier concealment.

And some alums don't go because they see no community with which they can reunite. For a Jewish student from the class of 1966, an African-American student from the class of 1976, a Viet-

namese student from the class of 1986, or a gay student of any year, reunions may bring painful memories of feeling different, alone and excluded, of years endured for the sake of dreams and opportunities. Because for all the professions of brotherhood and loyalty, each class remains forever mired in the prejudices and limitations of the day it comes to remember.

For the children of privilege who return to their Harvards and Yales, reunions can confirm their expected entrenchment in the moneyed classes. Friendships nurtured over summers on the Maine coast or winters in prep school are heartily reinforced on the college green. For alumni from more modest circumstances who have been able to fulfill the egalitarian ideal and to establish a satisfying place in American life, reunions serve as a powerful affirmation of how far they've come and of their capacity to rise above the constraints of class and race.

For some students, college was a positive experience that shaped a sense of themselves as valuable and of the world as a caring place. For them, there is true delight in reuniting with those who shared those discoveries 20 years or so ago.

As measures of personal accomplishment, reunions always produce classmates who are thinner, thicker-haired, richer or more renowned than oneself. Someone else in the class will have written the great American novel, another will be leading corporate America. As long as reunions are contests, seen and felt as comparative displays of accomplishment, someone will always lose.

What each of us has as a legacy from childhood, from those formative college years, and from all the years thereafter, is a personal sense of our own value. Reunions test and challenge that sense of value. But they also reaffirm, through the power of reconnecting who we were then with who we are now, our self-worth. So the contest is not between us and that cadre of peers who stepped into adulthood on that same June date 10, 25 or 50 years ago; the contest is within us, between the voice that says you're never good enough and the voice that says you are doing just fine.

Maybe that's why reunions get easier as the years go by. With the passing of time, we come to realize that we have become what we are going to be. With that realization comes not only acceptance but a deeper spiritual life and liberating appreciation for our own and each others' shared humanity.