

# Reliving Golden Days

YES, YOU CAN RELIVE THOSE THRILLING DAYS OF YESTERYEAR,  
AND THE OLDER YOU ARE THE MORE LIKELY YOU ARE TO ENJOY IT.

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(from *Psychology Today*, June 1986)

June, graduation, commencement—a time for new beginnings but also a time to look back at the way we were. And most of us get the chance to do so in the form of class reunions. These traditional gatherings of old schoolmates may seem, on the surface, to offer little more than a structured way to relive school-day antics, but we suspected that there might be much more going on. A recent high school reunion gave us, as psychologists, a good opportunity to find out why people do, or don't go back for such an encounter with their past.

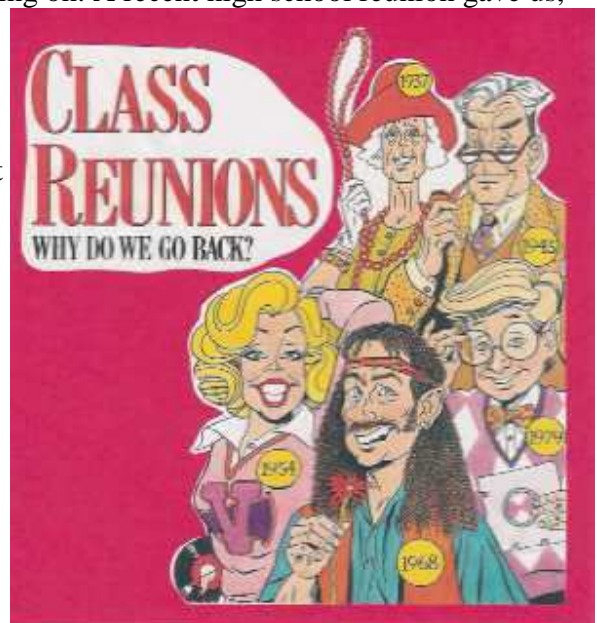
The reunion, held in a middle-class community on the East Coast, was a five-day event to which everyone who ever graduated from the school was invited. In order to find out who attends reunions, we compared the characteristics of those who returned and those who did not.

To our surprise, the two groups were almost identical with regard to age, sex, marital status and level of education. If education can be used as an indicator of success, it's apparently not true that the main reason people go to reunions is to show off how successful they have become.

There was, however, one important difference between those who attended and those who didn't. When asked about their high school days, the returnees consistently rated themselves as having been happier and more popular than did the non-returnees. One 40-year-old woman apparently spoke for many when she said, "There were a few people like myself who didn't fit in, and these people probably didn't attend the reunion either." This unhappiness apparently didn't carry over to later life. There were no differences between the groups in how happy they saw themselves at the present time.

When we asked people why they didn't attend the reunion, the most frequently mentioned reasons were lack of money or time to travel, dislike of their classmates and concern about whether their friends would come. Such comments as "No one I was close to might be there" and "What if no one remembers me?" suggest a fear of loneliness or of being left out. Some also mentioned that they did not feel good about their present lives ("I have not advanced very far" and "I'm overweight now") and preferred to stay away for this reason.

To find out why people attend the reunion, we provided a list of possible reasons and asked them to select the two that were most important. Nearly 8 out of every 10 ranked "To renew old friendships" as either first or second in importance. Some said directly that the likely presence of one special person at the reunion was their main reason for going.



The second-most important reason, cited by 3 out of 10, was to reminisce, to relive the fun and feelings that were experienced in high school. As one woman who had graduated 36 years earlier put it, "It's sort of like having the best of childhood return." Finally, 2 out of every 10 returnees came looking for changes, often in the form of comparisons: "To see how others have changed," "To talk over life's changes," "To have people see the way I have changed."

These were overall changes, but we suspected that the reasons for returning and what people did at the reunion would be strongly affected by age. To investigate this, we divided the returnees into three groups—those who had graduated approximately 10 years ago, 20 years ago and 30 or more years ago. We then compared their answers to several questions.

"Renewing friendships" was a more important reason for the oldest group (84 percent rated this first or second) than it was for the middle group, 61 percent for the youngest).

The individual comments of those who graduated 30 or more years ago supported this finding. Many talked about the importance of "keeping track" of classmates so they might spend more time with them as retirement approached. Others, increasingly conscious of their own mortality, mentioned specifically that the reunion gave them an opportunity to grieve over lost classmates.

People in the oldest group also stressed the pleasure of returning to familiar places. Much more than the younger people, they wanted to see old neighborhoods, revisit the home they grew up in and look for physical changes in the town. One 68-year-old woman acknowledged, "Going back and seeing my actual physical roots gives me so much comfort." Many of the older people also expressed a feeling seldom mentioned by the others, a sense of loyalty and appreciation to the community, the teachers and those who organized the reunion.

While the most frequent activity among returnees of all ages was "remembering when," reminiscing was especially popular for the oldest people. They also spent less time talking about career-related topics and sharing thoughts about other classmates than did the younger people.

Those in the youngest group, who were approaching 30, were especially interested in looking for changes and in comparing themselves with other returnees. Knowing all that had happened to them in the previous decade, they apparently felt a need to compare themselves with others and have others "see me as I am now."

When we reviewed the individual's comments made by people in the three age groups, we found many more comparative statements among the youngest returnees. One 28-year-old married woman described her expectations: "I didn't know how I would measure up against everyone else's accomplishments. I expected the whole event to be very 'surface' with everyone hung up on financial/career accomplishments as opposed to more personal feelings." She added, "I'm mad at myself for being so hesitant and self-conscious about who I am and where I am now."

Another recent graduate put it this way: "I hoped that I would find out what others were doing so that I could compare my progress with others of my graduating class. ...I didn't expect so many people to be so successful or as successful as I am." There was also a sense of cynicism expressed by this young group. We found such statements as "What I expected in reality was that people would bullshit about themselves and their jobs." And "I expected people to be fake—to put a smile on their face and tell you they had been thinking about you."

Classmates in the middle age group, 20 years out of high school, seemed especially interested in using the reunion arena for interpersonal experimentation or risk-taking. As one 37-year-old man explained, "I want to spend a little more time with people I knew but wasn't close to." Another man was very explicit: "I hope to dance with some of the women who I wouldn't have thought of asking out in high school." One woman hoped that "my high school crush would find me terribly exciting, wildly sophisticated and far different from my high school days and that we would have an encounter."

Others made a point of expressing their lack of interest in making comparisons. One 38-year-old woman said, "I do not compare myself with others in terms of occupations, appearance and family success. ...it doesn't matter if they view me as successful or not." Another said, "I am content with my own life and want to show it to others. ...I'm tired of constantly admiring others' lives." A third woman commented, "I feel less pressure to lose weight. It's not that important anymore."

In responding to a survey question on expectations, some felt that going back would be comforting. As one 38-year-old expressed it: "The most basic feeling I expect to get is one of reassurance ...reassurance at seeing the faces, knowing that people are still alive, still carrying on their lives. There is a comforting feeling to coming back together again." But this middle group was not without its sense of apprehension. One man acknowledged, "I hope they view me as successful," and one woman bluntly exclaimed, "I fear that no one will remember me."

How much time people spent at the reunion and who they spent it with was also affected by age. The

oldest people generally stayed the longest, but overall, about 25 percent of the returnees stayed for the full five days. Not surprisingly, most people spent the majority of their time with close friends and acquaintances and only about 6 percent with others. Generally, reunions are just that, a "reunion" with old friends rather than an opportunity for new relationships. The people most likely to make new contacts, we found, were those in the oldest group, particularly the women.

While age made a difference in many things, it didn't change the desire to look one's best. One out of four people in every age group admitted making special preparations for the reunion, ranging from systematically attempting to modify their appearance (going on a diet, starting an exercise program) to purchasing special clothing. One woman even scheduled eye surgery to avoid wearing her old "Coke bottle" glasses to the reunion.

About 80 percent of the people we heard from indicated that they had spent at least

## SHOULD I GO TO THE REUNION?

**O**ur findings are preliminary, but we have learned a few things about reunions that might make a difference in how you decide to respond to that next reunion notice:

- Deciding to go to that next reunion doesn't mean that you are necessarily out to prove anything. We found few differences between those who decide to go and those who do not attend. Also, interactions at reunions do not necessarily perpetuate old stereotypes of the way we were in high school.
- Don't expect that you will meet new people—it's not an oversized singles' bar. People at reunions spend little time with new acquaintances. They are very likely, on the other hand, to redefine or develop stronger and more emotionally intimate relationships with people they know from years before.
- While disappointment and disillusionment occasionally occur, the overwhelming majority of people have a marvelous time, despite initial apprehensions. More than 90 percent of our attendees would return again. So why not take the risk? The odds of having a good time are in your favor.
- Depending on your age, the reunion will have different effects. Younger people tend to have a greater sense of things changing since high school, make more comparisons, spend less time reminiscing and are slightly less positive

about the entire experience. Set realistic expectations for the reunion based on talking with people of your own age group.

• Finally, it's clear that the reunion is an important opportunity for people to reflect about themselves and to make comparisons about "how I was then" to "how I am now." The majority of people see themselves as different "now" and are pleased with the changes.

So what does "reliving the thrilling days of yesteryear" at a reunion really mean? It appears to mean renewing friendships, reminiscing with a small group of close friends and making comparisons with others. Perhaps more importantly, reunions appear to be catalysts for reflecting on our own lives and reaffirming our sense of belonging.

One of the returnees summed up matters this way in a Sunday morning sermon at the reunion: "The reunion is more than the hilarity in recalling teenage antics, more than the glow from finding we are fondly remembered by some who were important to us, more than the catching of breath when we learn of the death of a classmate, more than the nostalgia for that younger time. Something deeper is also going on. While we are catching up, while we are reporting on our lives to one another, we are also sizing up our lives, judging our lives."

some time since the reunion thinking about “how I was then” compared with “how I am now.” Unsurprisingly, since midlife is traditionally the time for people to feel a need to reconnect with their roots, this kind of reflection was most common in our middle group. As one 38 year-old woman put it, “The biggest impact of the reunion was my personal feelings of belonging. The sense of total agelessness of the high school was overwhelming. I felt quite secure in where I was from. To have the experience with so many others of all ages was one of the most comforting experiences.” A 47 year-old man put it more succinctly: “It provided a solid foundation to reflect on how my roots in this high school have prepared me for my adult life.”

Most of the comments we received from people of all ages were favorable toward the reunion. A woman who had graduated 60 years earlier observed that, “Age smooths as it wrinkles. I was greatly surprised that in spite of gray and missing hair, almost all were much the same, especially when they laughed.” A 38 year-old graduate had this to say: “Memories become reality again for a few days which then are put away as attic treasures to be discovered again, sometime on a rainy day, I suppose to comfort the present and lighten the future.”

A 56 year-old woman who held a poor opinion of her classmates while in high school, but enjoyed the reunion, admitted: “They really stayed the same; it was me and my outlook which had changed.”

When asked if they would return for another reunion, two-thirds of our respondents indicated that they definitely would. About one in four said, “It depends” and fewer than 1 in 10 gave a definite “no.” There was the same highly favorable response when we asked returnees to rate the reunion on a scale from 1 to 5. The average response was 4.5, with the oldest group rating it highest and the youngest group lowest. As one 1974 graduate saw matters, “My sense is that the reunion would be better for those who were older and had more distance from high school years.”

A 58 year-old woman seemed to agree: “I’ve been to my 10th, 30th and now the 39th and I have noticed the following: We had a great deal of affection for each other...more this time. We have ceased trying to impress each other with accomplishments like we did on the 10th and 30th and now are becoming remarkably candid and open.”

One 60 year-old man described another side of the picture: “Of course, everyone is older than you would like them to be, and this forces you to realize your own advancing age and appearance. This is the most significant reality-facing aspect of reunions, I think, and the principal reason why some don’t want to attend again.