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YOUR VOICE

What changed my mind about going to school reunions

By David McGrath

After reading the invitation to my Evergreen Park High School reunion, I forwarded it to my wife for laughs, just before deleting it.

The prospect of attending a gathering of senior citizens whose faces evoke only unpleasant flashbacks from the 1960s seemed like torture to me.

Marianne tried gentle persuasion. “Isn’t there anyone you’d like to see?” she asked.

Well, OK, there’s Jerry Kamper, but we became good friends long after high school. And maybe Joyce Russell, one of the two girls back then I was not afraid to talk to. The other, Lynn Seermon, was already a mature adult when the rest of us were still idiots.

But too many other memories from my time at E.P., I’d just as soon forget.

Like how I never set foot in the cafeteria. My excuse was the bland food; the truth was my painfully acute shyness. Instead, I hoofed it to the diner at 95th and Kedzie every day and had a “home dog” and fries alone at the counter.

Or the Barry Goldwater fans in coach Dykstra’s civics class who derided my defense of the Democratic Party during a debate, and for the rest of the semester, jeered, “For the people ... the people,” whenever I was called on.

Or the mortifying response I gave my young German teacher, whom I had a crush on, when she asked why I wasn’t



The author in his senior picture, taken in 1967. **EVERGREEN PARK HIGH SCHOOL**

keeping up with the vocabulary lessons. Still too cringey to reveal.

Or bullies ceaselessly tormenting freshmen, such as the one who was trashing a poor kid’s locker at the end of the school day. When I tried to step in, the bully challenged me to fight in front of a swelling crowd of onlookers. I had little choice, and the entire blood-lusting horde followed us outside to the CSX railroad tracks, where after one or two wild punches, we ended up in the mud, in a clinch, till we both grunted assent to a draw.

So, given a choice between attending a school reunion and passing a kidney stone, I’d opt for the latter. At least I wouldn’t have to dress up.

But a funny thing happened since the arrival of that invitation: I went to another reunion in May for a different school that I attended before transferring to E.P.

Again, I absolutely hated the idea. But Marianne somehow talked me into it (don’t ask), and I bit the bullet and showed up at the Oakbrook Embassy Suites hotel.

I had equally dreaded seeing these other former classmates, since I was even more puerile at age 14 and 15. I vaguely remember having said and done cruel or ignorant things to people who I prayed would not show up at the hotel.

I was wrong; they were there. But I was also wrong about everything else: They either didn’t remember or just didn’t care about my defensive, smart-alecky responses back then, or my social dysfunction.

“That message you wrote on the mirror in the bathroom,” Tom said, “was the funniest thing I ever saw.”

“You were one of the brains,” Steve said. And that’s how the evening ensued. Everyone was kind. Charming, even. I listened with fascination to their life stories. And they asked me about mine.

When Marianne called, since I’d asked her to ring my cellphone as a pretense for leaving early, I told her I was having a wonderful time.

“You’re saying that because there are people nearby?” she asked.

No, I protested. The reunion was remarkable, and I would explain it all tomorrow. Don’t wait up, I told her.

The next morning, I did not change my mind, wishing I had spent more of my life with the convivial, authentic and generous group of classmates from 55 years ago.

After I asked Marianne for the check-book so that I could send for my ticket for the E.P. reunion scheduled for Sept. 24, she asked what, exactly, reversed my opinion: Had the people at the previous night’s reunion changed that much from when they were high schoolers?

She made a good point. They were all pretty much the same people I knew as teenagers, only with gray hair and stringy necks, like Danny, whose nickname had been “Motormouth,” or Mike, quiet and inscrutable, still reminding me of Gary Cooper.

But we were now able to appreciate each other for our differences, eccentricities, talents, passions and each person’s endearing human touch.

Because there is one big difference between then and now — the one biochemical element of elephantine significance inside everyone who goes to high school, from the bullies and brains and greasers, to the stars, the mean girls and the nerds, but which is now conspicuously and thankfully absent: fear.

Unrelenting, life-dominating *fear* of adulthood, self-image, peer pressure, the opposite sex, the future and, heaven forbid, of wearing the wrong shoes.

Fear, without which we are finally free to be ourselves.

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