

One Man's 50th Reunion

Where to begin? My wife Nancy and I left here at 0800 Thursday morning and had smooth sailing for most of the trip to New Haven, arriving and checking in at The Study (our hotel) around noon. Went almost immediately to Mory's where the undefeated freshmen football team was having a pre-reunion lunch, and walked into the Captain's Room upstairs to see Henry (Dog) Higdon, Ian Robertson, Jay Huffard, and a host of happy men, many of them with their wives and/or "nieces" all with drinks in their hands and chatting away as if it were a training lunch (but for the drinks and the ladies). We made our way around the rooms (there were three), said "hi" and shook hands all around, then settled in for lunch. Bill Hildebrand, with whom I'd played hockey, and his wife Susan sat across from us, as did Tim O'Connell. Everywhere you looked, there was someone fun to be with, and lunch was just what we ordered. As others straggled in and made the rounds, we realized what a great event this was, and a lovely way to start things off.

After "special awards" had been made (an honorary membership in the "special teams unit" to Guy Struve, a football to be signed by all players and a set of plastic hands to the man who'd set this luncheon up, "Hands of Steel" Ian Robertson), we heard from Tom Beckett, the Director of Athletics, and Tony Reno, the Head Football Coach, articulate men exuding all the best qualities of leadership. The bash broke up around 2:30, and we headed to Davenport to register for the reunion, then to Sprague Hall to see "the class movie."

I remembered Sprague Hall, vaguely, as being the place where we were welcomed to Yale as incoming freshman by Whitney Griswold (?) back in September of 1959, and perhaps where Kingman Brewster made his final (to us) baccalaureate address. But I couldn't remember ever being there for a class (or musical presentation) during my four years at Yale. That phenomenon repeated itself several times over the weekend, walking into a building and not remembering ever being in it (like the library), then suddenly remembering that I'd taken a whole year's course in the room we sat down in (e.g. Brad Westerfield's International Relations course Sophomore year). At Sprague, we learned about the statistical facts of our class after 50 years—how many were liberals (most), retired (not that many because most enjoy what they are doing), religious (very few), spiritual (a lot more), veterans (42%!!!), and much much more. Lots of laughs throughout Jerome Johnston's excellent Power-point presentation, as well.

Then the centerpiece of the weekend, I thought— Rick Okie's ('74) superb 1½ hour movie about our class, a documentary insightful, historical, and, basically, brilliant. Excerpts from close-up interviews with over a hundred classmates appeared between slides and photos and film clips of historical significance. We lived fifty years in the span of an hour and a half. Absolutely brilliant. And we have the DVD of it to show our families. Thanks, Rick. Thanks, Guy.

From there, we adjourned to what I refer to as “The Tent,” in Davenport, where we could find cool drinks, libations of all kinds, and generally excellent food, all in the comfort of 90+ degree heat. (And that's all I'll say about the heat, other than to add that going to the classrooms for faculty lectures, presentations, and class panel discussions became the air-conditioned antidote for a super-hot weekend of intellectual stimulation.) Dinner and drinks with old friends was a perfect way to end the day. The cigars came out after our spouses had retired for the night, and I particularly enjoyed catching up with Gates Gill, Dick Moser, and Charley Cheney. Airborne!

I was up early for some spook business Friday-- one of the highlights of the weekend but I can't talk about it—and met Nancy back at The Study so we could visit the Yale Art Museum when it opened. There we wandered around for 2+ hours, taking in the incredible exhibits there— from Assyrian chariot bas-reliefs to Babylonian lions to Greek sculpture to Modern American Art to my favorite, pre-1900 American Art, highlighted by the Trumbull exhibition (donated by the artist in 1831), which featured oil paintings you've all seen of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Death of Doctor Warren at Bunker Hill, General Green accepting Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga, Washington accepting the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown, and others. In many rooms, experts from the Museum staff were present to answer questions, and they were busy as the place was crowded with reunion attendees. One of the most interesting exhibitions for me, almost bringing tears to my eyes, was a dig outside some Roman military camp in Syria or Iran, with actual murals and wall paintings that had been lovingly preserved by the archeologists who had brought them back to Yale. The site had been occupied for roughly three hundred years, from before Christ to AD 300, and featured early Christian frescoes and reliefs. Then there was the Wood Sculptures Room. Simply amazing stuff. The two top floors of the Museum had been totally renovated by building another floor on top of the existing one, and the new place had an aura that's unmatched. Go there if you can!

Then it was back to The Tent for lunch, after which we sat through two and a half hours of class panel discussions. There were a dozen or so offerings, but I had been high-jacked for the Vietnam panel and obliged to contribute to that, along with Wick Murray (USAF and historian nonpareil), Paul Field (USMC), Doug Allen (anti-war philosophy professor), and Mike LaFond (Army infantry officer). The presentations and comments were as diversified and disparate as our political philosophies had been back in the '60's, and my sense was that the only common theme in the discussion was a dissatisfaction (if not disgust) with how our government had handled things (and are still handling things). Enough.

Time for another discussion, this entitled "Why Balance the Federal Budget?" with Bill Nordhaus, Jerry Kenney, Dick Foster, and Joe Valenta, a superb presentation in the Law School's auditorium (hey, I've been here before for Brad Westerfield's class!). With a hand-out, an informative power-point presentation, and just plain simple expertise, I learned (sort of) why our economy isn't in quite as bad a shape as I'd thought it was (thanks, Bill), but only for the short term, and how important a part of it will be determined by our future health care costs (all up for grabs). Then I was brought back to earth by Joe Valenta's observation that the federal government is still borrowing 40% of everything it spends. His concern matched mine. When will the well run dry? I pray the feds address this critical issue before our grandchildren get saddled with the bill. Time will tell.

Wandering back to The Study, we tried to get into Sterling Memorial Library, but it was closed. We retired to our room for a nap (me, at least), cleaned up a bit, then ventured outside to the awe-inspiring Beinecke Plaza for drinks before our Class Dinner in The Commons, where we learned, once again, how great our class truly is, with record attendance, alumni giving, etc., etc., etc.. Henry Higdon, Guy Struve, Ian Roberson, Stan Riveles, and Michael Gates Gill, our Class Historian, gave rousing speeches before Stan passed the baton of Class Secretary to Guy. A well-deserved honor (and thankless task) for the man behind our reunion.

Back to The Tent. After walking Nancy home to The Study, I returned for a night cap and one more fine cigar with a bunch of characters I'd not caught up with since the previous evening, closing down the bar and being the last contingent to leave. Another highlight, for sure. As I looked around the table at the men still there, I noted a preponderance of football players—Lee Marsh, Judson Calkins, Ian Robertson, Dave Mawicke, Bill Kaye, Denny Landa, and others, seasoned with some extra talent in the form

of Charley Cheney and Charlie Welles. Got back around 1 a.m. and bagged out.

We enjoyed a sleep-in Saturday morning, had breakfast at the hotel, then ventured to the Sterling Memorial Library to take in our Class book exhibit, which was edifying (we've cranked out more than 100 books), then visited SSH, which I remembered as the Engineering School, to hear Professor Amy Hungerford's talk on Tom Perotta's 2004 novel, Little Children, later made into a movie starring Kate Winslet. When the Professor asked how many in the room had read the novel, most of us raised our hands. She was, I think, blown away. (We're well-trained Yalies, after all, and her lecture had been entitled the Big Blue Read, and we were supposed to come prepared.) Anyway, American lit being one of my favorite subjects, I enjoyed her talk immensely. She was great.

Back to The Study for lunch (The Tent was too hot) and to prepare for a panel discussion on Depression, for which I'd also been dragooned. Our 5th floor room in The Study had a large picture window overlooking the Yale campus, with Phi Gam and Fraternity Row in the foreground, the Harkness Bell Tower, the Payne Whitney gymnasium's massive presence across the campus, and all that brick and Gothic architecture around us, and I suddenly had an overwhelming sense of awe for our college, and started to cry. (Not uncommon for me. It's partly PTSD.) It will take some time for me to figure out exactly why, but I get a sense now that I was overwhelmed with love-- love for my wife, love for my fellow classmates and friends, and love for Yale. Not a bad place, actually. And lots of fun when I went there.

Back to reality. Nancy and I both laughed at the possibility, slim as it was, that I would break down and start crying during our depression panel. Luckily, nobody did. When we arrived at Room 200 where our panel was to meet, nobody was there. Maybe it had been cancelled, and we could go home! No. Dr. Tom Wehr, our discussion leader and the only member of the panel who knew what he was talking about, joined us, and as 2:30, the starting time, approached, so did a score of other kind folks (and I say that because they were). I learned a lot in the next hour or so-- more than I cared to, actually-- and I hope I don't have to apply it personally in the future. Ian Robertson finished the session by reading a hand-written letter from John "Tex" Younger, who'd suggested the panel in the first place, and it was a fitting finale to the hour. Tex, unfortunately, is still fighting a major bout with depression, his sixth over the years, and is somewhere in Arizona. His letter was full of encouragement and love for his classmates, and Yale, as well. I wish him a strong recovery from his illness.

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He wasn't the only member of our class who was fighting varied and sundry maladies, cancer being the most pernicious. I wish them all the very best in their individual battles with whatever they have, and a solid recovery so they can keep contributing to our country and the world.

And so, with that behind us, and my meager contribution and commitment to the reunion completed, I suggested to Nancy that we forego another evening in The Tent, pack up our belongings, and go home—a suggestion she accepted only after assuring herself that I was “really ready to go,” which I was. At our age, or my age, it's hard to keep up the rapidly killing pace we used to keep when we were undergraduates, and having garnered some modicum of wisdom since Yale, I thought discretion was the better part of valor, and we went home.

It was a special weekend, however, never to be repeated, and I can honestly say (as I always do) that it was one of the best events we've shared together, Nancy and I.

And to my erstwhile classmates, may I say that you have left the world a better place for your presence in it. Thanks, and God Bless you all!

(6/3/2013)