


June 27, 2005

THE JOURNAL REPORT: ENCORE

DOW JONES REPRINTS

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: www.djreprints.com.

- [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)
- [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Essay

'How Long Has It Been?'

Reconnecting with old friends helps us gauge what we've lost and gained in our lives

By ELLEN GRAHAM
 Special to THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
 June 27, 2005; Page R9

The other day I got a package in the mail from London containing my college American literature textbook, which had been borrowed 41 years ago by an old boyfriend, now a foreign correspondent. Clipped inside the book was a note from him on White House stationery (dated 1978, when he was covering President Carter) apologizing even then for his tardiness in returning the book.

My friend explained his gesture by saying he doesn't like "people who don't return books." But I suspect something more was afoot -- especially since I didn't want the book and pleaded with him to donate it to his neighborhood library.

THE JOURNAL REPORT



See the complete [Encore](#)² report.

The impulse to find and reconnect with old friends -- a pastime I like to call "living genealogy" -- seems to intensify with age. I have been flabbergasted by how many long-lost friends and acquaintances have tracked my husband and me down in recent years, often through the Internet: A dispatch from Iraq from the proverbial boy next door who spent his career overseas in military intelligence. A letter from a boyhood friend my husband hadn't heard from in 40 years. Even grade-school chums have checked in.

At some point in the past our lives diverged, and there is something in us that is curious about how lost friends' stories played out. Beyond that, reconnecting offers a chance to take stock and tidy up loose ends -- be it a borrowed book or a friendship-killing misunderstanding. That so many of these relationships lapsed in the first place suggests the crushing midlife distractions of work, child rearing and mobility. Now, as we ease out of career and family responsibilities, we finally have the time to resume these friendships -- or not, if it proves we don't actually like the people our old friends have become.

Catching Up

Friends who suddenly reappear remind us just how much of our life we've simply forgotten. I recently got an email from a woman wondering whether I was the Ellen Graham who had shared a Long Island beach house with her and a group of other singles back in the early 1970s. She recalled (correctly) that I'd been interested in transcendental meditation back then, and offered up details of that summer that for me had long ago blurred into the hazy mists of time. The only vivid memory I carry with me is of one housemate's single-minded determination to land a husband that summer, and the frenzied social machinations that flowed from that.

My beach-house friend admits to a photographic memory. The rest of us limp along with murky -- if not downright inaccurate -- recall of the past. A grad-school classmate I ran into at a reunion a few weeks ago claimed that I had mortified him at the last reunion by shouting out as he entered the room: "There's the guy who used to sell us all our grass."

Wrong! In the first place, I may be the only '60s-era student other than Bill Clinton who didn't inhale. Second, I have never purchased grass in my life, and had no clue that he had been the class dealer. Surely this was a case of mistaken identity. But whom

had he confused me with? It's disconcerting to realize that we all exist as semifictional characters in our friends' faulty memory banks.



PEOPLE POWER (clockwise from top) Columbia grad students protesting the Vietnam War in 1970 (the author is holding coffee cup, without a sign); a note that accompanied a recently returned college textbook; the boy next door who went into military intelligence; the author (left) and second-grade best friend Jean

When delving into the miasma of the past, then, be prepared for occasional ugly surprises. During some routine genealogical research, a man I know was browsing an online Social Security death index for people with his surname. He was stunned to come across the name of the woman with whom he'd shared a brief marriage and bitter divorce many years ago. He'd had no contact with her or her family since, and so was utterly unprepared for the truth: She had died at the age of 30 shortly after they parted, cause of death unknown. It shook him to discover that a life he had taken for granted for the past 30 years hadn't even existed.

My husband was searching his high-school alumni Web site not so long ago and idly clicked on the name of a classmate he hadn't heard of since graduation. The classmate's home page linked to a Texas prison and displayed some recent paintings he had exhibited at a show sponsored by a prisoner's rights organization.

My friends, by contrast, seem to have remained fundamentally the same. Those I gravitated to in my youth turn out as adults to be people pretty much like me -- not so surprising when you consider the common threads of our beginnings.

Quick Connection

When we were contemplating a move to Southern California some years back, I called someone I know there: Jean, my best friend from second grade, with whom I'd been exchanging Christmas cards but hadn't spoken with for maybe 50 years. We connected immediately -- without a trace of awkwardness -- and fell into a lengthy, satisfying conversation that touched on most of the deep issues of life. (Ever notice how laughter comes most easily with old friends?)

Jean warned us about the materialism that she saw in fancy suburbs south of Los Angeles (including the apologetic confession that her family had seven TV sets). I hung up feeling as though I'd just called a close friend whose values were in synch with my own. Based partly on her pungent observations, we ultimately decided against the move.

As the years unspool we move imperceptibly from one stage of life to another, hardly noticing at what point we trade the shallow concerns of youth for a mellower maturity. That's why we need occasional "Big Chill" moments with old friends, as touchstones to gauge what we've lost and gained along the way.

I had such a moment recently, at the aforementioned grad-school reunion at Columbia University. Thirty-five years had passed since 100 of us shared a brutally intense year of journalistic boot camp; some stragglers made it back for the first time last month. My classmates went on to become publishers, Pulitzer Prize winners, copy editors, politicians, playwrights, lawyers, investigative reporters and producers. But at our reunion, careers seemed almost beside the point.

Looking Ahead

We mostly talked about our lives going forward. What is not a big deal anymore: ambition, one-upmanship, status, name dropping, fame. What is a big deal now: our families and friends, aging gracefully, tamping down life's infernal "busyness," kicking up our

heels after years of duty and diligence.

Like a boisterous family assembled for a holiday dinner, we now accept and even relish each other's eccentricities. We are kinder, less self-involved. My buddy Karlyn and I shared a room on the fourth floor of a seedy hotel without an elevator. Because I'm disabled, she helped me get up the stairs, found rides for me to various events and waited patiently when I got winded. I, in turn, kept track of the purse, keys and eyeglasses she kept misplacing. At times we chuckled about becoming a couple of feisty old ladies.

Wait a minute! Wasn't it just yesterday that we were tearing around New York on assignment, staging antiwar rallies, working till all hours against deadline in the school newsroom and then heading off for beers at the bar where Dylan was always playing on the jukebox?

Some of that raw energy may have dissipated, along with the sharp-elbowed ambition. But in reunion bull sessions, it's clear we still care deeply about the quality of our work and the fate of the world our children will inherit. We are also trying our darnedest to have more fun.

To underscore that point, a distinguished newspaper editor showed us her new tattoo -- a musical note on her ankle. "My footnote," she explained with a grin.

--Ms. Graham is a writer in Virginia.

Write to Ellen Graham at encore@wsj.com³

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB111954397327867785,00.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

(1) http://online.wsj.com/page/0,,2_1160,00.html

(2) http://online.wsj.com/page/0,,2_1160,00.html

(3) <mailto:encore@wsj.com>

Copyright 2005 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.