What I Learned at My 50th High School Reunion

(by Joe McKeever)

We graduated in May of 1958. We were all so glad for that long-anticipated event to arrive. Once it was over we quickly scattered in our own directions without a thought to the fact that we were seeing some of our classmates for the last time. We had no way of knowing that in a few short years several of our classmates would be gone or that by the 50th anniversary of our graduation, over one third of our members would no longer be living.

There is a reason only older people attend class reunions. They know.

The recent graduates are still in college somewhere or serving Uncle Sam or trying to get established in low-paying jobs and can't afford the trip back home. But mostly they don't come to reunions because they haven't figured it out yet.

They think they have forever. They think of the rest of us as oldsters, like ancient relics of a previous civilization that has no bearing on the world they live in today. They have no idea that the time between now and their fiftieth will seem like weeks. They will still be looking upon themselves as the younger generation when suddenly their twentieth reunion will be announced in the newspapers.

If they're like me, the twentieth will be the first reunion they attend. And if they're really like me, they will open the door and look in that room, taking in all the bald heads and unfamiliar faces, and decide this can't be my class and walk on down the hall looking for the real class. They will soon realize there is no one else in the building and that this is their class.

That's the moment when they start to grow up.

Their real education begins then. Everything up to that moment has been prep school. Today is the first day of class. This school does not let out for the rest of their lives.

As I see it, here are the lessons they begin to learn and the lessons that were firmly entrenched by the time of our fiftieth reunion.

1) Old friendships are pure gold.

Lynn Pope and I shared one of those old-fashioned double desks at Poplar Springs Elementary in the school term of 1951-52. A two-room affair run by a husband and wife, three grades in each room, this school had changed very little from the days my mother attended its predecessor a mile down the highway. Next year, Lynn and I moved on to Double Springs for junior high. He is the sole classmate with whom I shared seven years of schooling.

We thought of Double Springs as "town." We were rural and most of the others in the class were "town," as though of another species. The truth is most of our class members were bused in from outlying areas of the county the same way we were. There were 100 of us at the start of the seventh grade. Six years later, we were just over 50 strong, the 50th graduating class of that school.

If you can imagine having one fifty or more brothers and sisters, that was us. We did just exactly what siblings do too -- we fought and argued, we laughed and went on trips and played games, we teased and cried and worked alongside each other. Over the years, we came to learn that these are the dearest people on the earth.

2) People are precious.

A Catholic priest said something at a funeral in my town not long ago. I jotted it down and have quoted it ever since. "At the end of your life, the only things that will matter are faith, family, and friends." Amen!

When Winona Guthrie died some 25 years ago, even though we were never what you would call close friends, I made the drive to Birmingham for her funeral. I just thought someone from her high school class ought to be there. I was the only one, as I recall. To my surprise, her mother said, "She often spoke of you." I was touched, and so glad I had come.

3) Life is short.

Out of all the teachers who invested their lives in us, only two attended our 50th reunion. Loyce Whitson and Cleta Steele (can't recall her "new" last

name) taught us science and proper English usage. Or tried to. Mostly, what I recall is how much they treasured us. Not an easy task, granted. They saw through the swagger and bluster, the shallowness and immaturity, and loved us the way we were.

Eighteen of our class have died. Donald Howell--we called him "Doodle"--was the life of any party and kept us all in stitches. In the senior annual where group photos of various clubs are found, Doodle is the one surreptitiously giving the finger to the photographer. He was the first to go, speeding in his old '56 Ford, hitting a patch of gravel and losing control. Ila Faye Richardson was the last, so far. Quiet, shy, and sweet. In recent years, she sent Christmas cards to class members from her home in Indiana. I didn't know she had died until I went to the class reunion.

4) There's a lot to be said for stability.

My friend Bryan Harris attended more than forty schools, as his family moved around Texas. My three Metairie grandchildren live in the only house they've ever known, but they have attended three elementary schools, and four, if we count the time their mother home-schooled them. But, from the 7th through the 12th grades, my education took place in one building with some of the same teachers all the way through.

At the time we probably thought it was boring, attending the same school all the time. Some of it was, but that's good, too. There's a lot to be said for sameness.

5) The high school you is not the real you.

You're still in embryo in high school; in spite of the drivers license and your afternoon job and the responsibilities you are beginning to assume. The senior pictures are not the real you. Those are the pre-you. You're still becoming who you will be. You were--and still are, incidentally--a work in progress.

Harold Brownlow was a goof-off in high school. Tall and slim and handsome-

-over the years, every time Louis L'Amour would describe his hero in a western novel, to my mind he was talking about Harold. Brownlow was popular with the girls, cool in every way a high school boy wants to be cool, and completely uninterested in anything happening in the classroom. The first reunion he attended was the fiftieth. He flew in from Indonesia. Still tall, still slim, and now sporting a white beard down to his chest. What had he been doing all those years? Working in agriculture development all over the world. He became somebody who did something significant with his life. Congratulations, friend.

Pity the person who gets "frozen" in high school and never grows beyond it.

I've run into a lot of people over the years who say they don't go back to their high school reunions because "I'm not the same person I was then." I tell them, "No one is. We've all changed. Go back and let them see what a super person you are. Surprise your teachers. Show that girl who rejected you what a foolish thing she did!"

6) To your class, you'll always look like you did a half-century ago.

I said to the wife of one of the alums, "I know you look around at all these 68-year-olds and think how old we look, but the truth is, you're the only one who sees that. The rest of us see each other as teenagers when we played Elvis records in the school gym for a sock hop, and cheered the football team and went on field trips. To us, everyone in this room is a teenager."

7) By now, you are beyond showing off. You no longer have anything to prove.

Before leaving home for the reunion, I put my car in the shop and asked the mechanic to check it out thoroughly. It's a 2005 Camry with 105,000 miles on it and has never given me a bit of trouble. But I knew it was past time for a complete checkup. Then I rented a car. When the rental guy drove it around front, it turned out to be a BMW "sport station" with 700 miles. We're talking new and we're talking impressive. I joked that anyone going to his high school reunion needs to rent a BMW to show off a little.

The fact is, no one even sees what kind of car you drive to these things. And I

guarantee you, no one cares. Cadillac Escalade or 1949 pickup truck. No one cares. That was high school stuff, trying to impress your peers with a car. No more. The guy driving the expensive car can have it rented or leased and therefore it doesn't prove a thing. The guy driving the old clunker may be showing he finds better things to do with his money than invest in cars which depreciate faster than white bread.

8) The peer pressure is gone now. Be yourself.

Our class members long ago often said or did things because of peer pressure. As we've matured, we realize that peer pressure isn't important. The most important thing is to be yourself and be comfortable with who you are.

9) These class members are pretty special people, and were then, too.

Our class talks about Andy Davis. He was a coach and English teacher for our first years, then principal for the final two or three years. A tough exterior with a gruff voice, but basically a nice guy. He was wrong on one thing I recall so well. I said to him once, "Mr. Davis, why can't our school have student body officers the way other high schools do?" It seemed a logical request. He said, "Because you all do not deserve it." I really think he saw us as the rural unsophisticated kids we were, but could not see beyond that.

After we graduated and went off to college, several of our classmates were promptly elected to student government positions. That should have told him something. He's no longer with us now, but in those days I found myself hoping the local paper--that would be the Northwest Alabamian out of Haleyville--ran those little announcements heralding our college achievements. Just so he would know.

10) It's never too late to repair a relationship, to ask for forgiveness, or to thank someone.

At our 40th class reunion, I was so pleased to see Dixie. She and her husband had driven a long distance to be there for what was her first reunion, I think. We were in a restaurant and I called her off to one side. "There's something I

need to talk to you about." She was puzzled. I said, "When we were in the seventh grade, I stole some money from you." She said, "No. Not you. Anyone on earth, but not you."

I explained how it had happened. The first few weeks of the seventh grade while I was getting my bearings, I ran with a certain older boy who failed year after year, but was still in my class. We even played hookey some afternoons. One day, he pointed out the way Dixie had left her billfold on top of her books underneath the desk. "If you will reach under there and lay the billfold on that empty desk behind her, she'll walk out and leave it. Later, I'll divide the money with you." I did it. That afternoon, he handed me three or four dollars.

I told that to Dixie and said, "You would think I would have made it up to you a long time ago, and I'm ashamed I didn't. I want you to forgive me....and I want you to take this twenty dollar bill." She said, "I don't recall any of this. Of course, I'll forgive you, but I am not taking your money!" I said, "You have to take it so I'll have peace about it." She said, "My husband and I are active in a Christian ministry, so I'll put it in that."

A couple of weeks later, I received a note from her that she had bought a half dozen Bibles with that twenty.

When you're 18 years old, anything seems possible. Maybe you'll cure cancer or write a bestseller or become a star or make a million—if only you can get into the right college.

When you're 68 years old, you've gained a certain amount of wisdom just by traveling over the bumps in the road. These are the lessons we learned from all these years, and the ones the younger folks are still hammering out.

When you're 68, you know how your life will turn out, and for so many, that

fifty years after graduation brought loss and heartbreak, illness and disabilities, but in spite of that, almost every one of the classmates I talked to said "I have been truly blessed" or a similar sentiment.

So, lastly, why is my affection for all these people so extravagant, what are some reasons nobody forgets their high school years?

This was the place I grew up.

This is my spiritual home.

This was the place where I was safe.

This is the ground where the seeds of later life got sowed.

These were the people who were the anvils upon which I forged who I was and what I would become.

These people were the loving teachers of all the really important lessons of living and of life.

To forget your high school years is to amputate a major part of you. It isn't over, of course. The members of my class, they teach me yet.

They teach me now of the importance of holding life in reverence.

They teach me the critical importance of enjoying the moment and living well in it.

They teach me the strength of humility, the futility of pride and the emptiness of achieving money and power and status at the price of soul.

And most of all, they teach me gratitude.

God bless them all.