

Opinionator

Exclusive Online Commentary From The Times

[Dick Cavett](#) August 9, 2013, 9:00 pm [88 Comments](#)

Boola (breath) Boola

By [DICK CAVETT](#)



[Dick Cavett](#) on his career in show business, and more.

Tags:

[Colleges and Universities](#), [reunions](#), [Yale University](#)

Are you going? I'm not sure. Are you?

My friend Chris Porterfield and I had tossed that ball back and forth for weeks.

Our Yale reunion.

Was it worth the increasing-year-by-year bad news of classmates and friends who were no longer with us? And of living ones to whom time and chance had happenethed to, badly?

Of yakking, cocktail-quaffing classmates, even more boring than we remembered them?

Having endured the common but bitter shock of visual reminders of our advancing age at earlier reunions, both [high school](#) and [previous college ones](#), we'd decided and hoped that enough fun could be conjured up to rate the expense of time — and the expense — of going.

I arrived a day late. Checking into the hotel, it was nice to see in the lobby a few unrecognized classmates with their name badges on. They looked remarkably fit. In a virtual sitcom moment in the elevator, I was on the verge of congratulating two of them. They were definitely fit. They were also, alas, from an appreciably younger class, also reuniting that week.

As with the high school reunion, the apparent age range of my contemporaries was dramatic. The changes in the Yale men were predictable: balding and acquired paunch.

By definition, it was a large number of men all the same age. But it was as if a casting director had been told by, say, Steven Spielberg, "I want by tomorrow a large crowd of male extras (and their wives), some looking 10 years older than their actual age and some looking 10 years younger. And, of course, toss in a few real shipwrecks."

The other contrast was between the gym-goers and those who don't. White hair was everywhere. (Mainly on heads, a comedian might say.) Is hair turning whiter sooner these days? Even at my earlier high school reunion, to look out from the stage over the crowd was to risk snowblindness.

Oddly, since we were Americans, I saw no shocking obesity. Most looked vigorous enough, with, here and there, a few walking wounded.

Laughed myself silly at dinner with my old friend and classmate David Adnopoz. We had been a sort of team in plays, musicals and scenes we did together for acting class, and we giggled foolishly, recalling on- and offstage mishaps that had dotted our theatrical careers in those four wonderful years.

Deliciously, we recalled an event that, in an age of vastly less erotic opportunity than is readily available to today's young folks, had a whopping impact, never to be forgotten. The play was Schnitzler's "La Ronde," which consisted of a progressive series of seductions.

In one of them, a gorgeous, pulchritudinous actress, who went on to bigger things in theater and films, chose to play her scene moving about on her knees in a bed, nekkid from the waist up.

Deftly, E. (one of her initials) managed to cheat the unsuspecting folks out front of even a glimpse of her twinned treasury, but there was full view from the stage-right wings.

Somehow every male in the cast — and crew members who could leave their posts — managed to coincide nightly, crowding and pushing, in that dark stage-right wing for that scene.

I can recall nothing that has happened to me since more vividly.

Again, remember that this was the late '50s, when undergraduate male virginity not only existed but was, in appalling contrast to today, rampant. Without categorizing myself, this counted heavily in our appreciation.

I doubt that a comparable bunch of healthy young fellows of today would stand there, as we did, going quietly mad.

It must have been wicked fun for E. "Do you think E. knows that we can see her breasts every night?" one piping, beardless, callow youth asked.

"Guess," I said. Correctly.

Is it sort of sad in a way that such an adventure couldn't really happen today, now that every sexual aspect, perversion, position and practice, normal and kinky, is — in living color and sharp focus — available to young folks of all ages from the time they're able to press computer keys?

I sometimes wonder how this may have affected the collective psyche. In those "old days" was there more or less sexual health? More or fewer batty Anthony Weiners and Bob Filners? I'd love to know.

Before the farewell breakfast on the sparkling, sunny last day there was a ceremony for the dead.

A chapel-like setting, a hundred or more attending. A brochure for the occasion contained the predictable shocks. Graduation photos with, ironically, lively and grinning faces of those who had — in that dreary euphemism — "passed away" since the last reunion, five years earlier.

I opened the booklet of those who had joined the silent majority, hoping for a minimum of shock. And there was Jim.

He was one of my freshman year roommates. He'd written to me in Nebraska during the summer before Yale, announcing himself as a roommate-to-be and inviting me to his home in Bronxville for a day and night before motoring with his parents to New Haven.

(I just remembered that when Jim's telegram arrived in Lincoln, he had the same last name as a famous comedian. I hoped, in vain, that he was Jim's dad.)

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(I just remembered that when Jim's telegram arrived in Lincoln, he had the same last name as a famous comedian. I hoped, in vain, that he was Jim's dad.)

On another sparkling, gorgeous day — all but unheard-of in New Haven, Conn. — together, Jim and I stepped through Yale's Phelps Gate and into our new life.

His parents were always friendly and very nice to me, albeit a touch anti-Semitic. Jim, too. His wealthy Bronxville lawyer father noticeably so. This fact gave birth to a frequently remembered line in my earliest nightclub act, where I talked about all this. The line: "BronxVILLE has nothing to do with 'The Bronx.' [pause] Ever."

Jim was clever and we shared the odd gift of being able to ad-lib song lyrics with correct rhyming and scansion. More of a quirk than a gift.

Once, to the tune of "Davy Crockett," he improvised on the spot a song beginning, "Davy. Dave ben Gurion / King of the Hebrew hordes." I recall fully only one couplet: "He's writing to business friends in the states / They're sending him rifles in gefilte fish crates."

A talent that might have been put to better use.

Jim came wobbling back to our room one morning freshman year, bleary from an all-nighter of booze and poker.

He had just had an epiphany, he said. "I realize, from last night, that I'm capable of something I shall never allow to happen. I shall never allow myself to get swallowed up in a swamp of irresponsible drinking, card-playing and debauchery. I shall not flunk out, sacrificing the ability to say, for the rest of my life, 'I went to Yale.'"

The "went" part became true some months later when Jim flunked out. Owing to the above-named vices.

I never saw Jim again, but got one letter some years after graduation. He was living somewhere in Europe and announced his marriage. "I've changed a lot, as evidenced by the fact that I've married a Jewish girl. Mercy! What would Mom and Dad have said about their darling boy?"

At the memorial ceremony, as the names of the departed classmates were read, anyone who wanted to stood up and spoke about them. I told Jim's story. It got laughs and a nice approving murmur about his transformation.

A row of candles were lighted one at a time as each person was dealt with and spoken of. I can't have been the only person in that room wondering which of us might be candle-represented five years from now. Time to reread Philip Larkin's masterpiece on death, the poem ["Aubade."](#)

On the last night, at the class dinner in a big tent, we dined. And the Whiffenpoofs serenaded us. Against actuarial probability perhaps, all but a couple of the original 14 members (from my class) of this great a cappella group were there.

They sang the famous song, the great pitch and harmony required for membership in that elite group — as part of which you got to tour world capitals — still intact.

Finally, we all stood, arms around waists, and all together, swaying from side to side, rendered the famous words and melody. Right from the opening line, "From the tables down at Mory's..." there was lachrymosity among grown men.

I was sorry we didn't also sing the sentimental "Bright College Years," but heard that it had been sung earlier at an event I'd missed. At the end of that old heart-tugger you take out your hankie and wave it in sync with the ultimate words, about how nought can avail "to break the freh-eh-end-ships formed ... at ... Yale." Much eye-wiping was reported.

Yes, C. Porterfield and I decided, we were glad we went.

(We also agreed, emphatically, that we would like nothing more than to enter Phelps Gate again and do those golden four years over. Right through from the beginning.)

I guess the “cast” of any large school reunion will include certain stock characters: The Class Goof, still goofy; the Disappointedly Unremembered (a little acting required here); the Class Witless “Comic”; the Class Braying Jackass, whose intense, punishing, too-close-to-face conversation feels like a high-speed dental drill on an un-deadened molar; the still-at-it, almost-ducked Class Religious Bore, still with his wretched tracts.

Oh, and the oily flatterer who causes you to be late for something while he describes and presses upon you the manuscript of the 3-pound, 400-plus-page allegorical play he has written, if that is the right word.

An item that, were there were still incinerators, would keep mine humming merrily for an evening.

Unpleasant moments are inevitable, but assuaged, in a wistful way, by things like the discovery of an opportunity missed; meeting someone delightful whom you didn't know and realize you very much wish you'd gotten to know, way back then.

Instead of some you did. Like the members, across the hall, of that certain fraternity, who somehow managed to stumble into our room, just in time to vomit.

Someone said at the close of the dinner, “We hope you'll all come back five years from now. Those who can”; looking as if he might have phrased that better.

It was early evening, getting dark, and while I stood on the Old Campus, looking up at the window of my freshman room, ruminating on ancient events there with my roommates Jim, Karl Muller and Bob Leuze, a voice startled me from behind with, “Hey, you Dick Cavett?”

I couldn't make him out very clearly in the failing light, and for whatever reason I chose to deny it.

He went on, “Then how come you look so much like him? And sound like him?”

I said I didn't know. As he began to walk away, I thought why not give the poor guy a small thrill and said, “O.K., I am Dick Cavett.”

“You wish,” he replied, moving on.

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