

Within Only Two Weeks

By Paul Edward Johnson

It didn't seem necessary to arrive "on time" for my old high school's 75th anniversary celebration. Many of my former high school buddies and classmates would not be there, because they had previously passed on.

So on June 17, 2017, Tracey and I arrived an hour late.

During the previous Saturday, June 10, I hunkered down in our basement, watching old movies on TV, refusing to celebrate my 76th birthday, feeling 76 birthdays are almost too many birthdays.

Southwest High School is at the top of a hill adjacent to a neighborhood in southwest Minneapolis known as Linden Hills.

To approach the school from the east on 47th Street, you must trudge up one entire block of a steep sidewalk.

To approach the school from the south, on Chowen Avenue, or on Beard Avenue, you must trudge up a much longer block of steep sidewalk.

We parked our Subaru on the Chowen Avenue hill and began our ascent toward what I anticipated to become a most memorable moment of rekindled memories. I was wearing my purple and white tennis shoes and my royal purple shirt with white buttons, feeling I was being true to my school's colors.

But upon reaching the top of the hill, upon gazing at two ancient boulders painted purple and white upon the corner of school's front lawn, and then gazing up at the block-long expanse of my old beloved high school, my heart then seemed to sink like a boulder into the pit of my stomach.

My old school had undergone an appalling architectural change. What had once upon a time been the monumental stairs leading up and into the monumental main entrance to the front of my old school building, had been demolished.

As Tracey and I walked closer, all that remained were the two tall solid-limestone balustrades, now simply archeological vestigial remains. They previously flanked the monumental stairs that once ascended to the front doors of my school sanctuary.

Instead of the monumental stairs and entrance, there's now just a tall glass wall. And extended from both sides of the glass wall, extended upon the front lawn, are two incongruous limestone balustrades that before handsomely flanked the demolished stairs.

While standing before this monstrous eyesore, I sensed how alumni approaching the school seemed to be also shocked by how the once magnificent stairs and entrance had been demolished and replaced by a glass wall.

I despondently lumbered on with Tracey toward the Beard Avenue end of the building.

The main entrance to the school now stands upon where Beard Avenue used to run between 47th and 46th Streets; Beard Avenue "cut off" by what is now the school's main entrance.

When Tracey and I entered the school building's new main entrance, I anxiously felt cut off from what I hoped would become a cherished confirmation of my memories associated with the old hallways, old classrooms, old cafeteria, old library, old auditorium, and for me, most importantly, my memories within the school's old choir room.

Upon entering, I felt we were standing inside a new airport terminal with high-above girders supporting the expansive ceiling and what seemed to be southern and northern windowed walls extending as high as three stories. To our left, what was once a brick exterior wall of my old school building, it's now become the interior wall of this seemingly soulless new-school cafeteria.

Back in 1955, when I enrolled as a freshman at Southwest High School, located about eight short blocks from Lake Harriet (they're no longer known as the Southwest Indians and are now instead known as the Southwest Lakers) the school stood facing 47th Street, upon a block between Beard Avenue and Chowen Avenue, and occupied only about 30% of the entire block of land.

While attending the high school as a freshman, the other 70% of the block had become a construction project.

The construction project was completed by the start of my sophomore year and as a result Southwest High School increased its enrollment to include seventh and eighth grade students within the new addition; plus the project added science labs and a row of rooms for woodshop, printing shop, metals shop, an art room, and also a room for mechanical and architectural drawing courses.

In the center of this structure was a new gymnasium with two adjacent small gyms and below were locker rooms for the various athletic teams.

Most important, from my perspective, was a new choir room with wall-to-wall terraces for seating 110 singers, including me. Among all the rooms within the high school, it was the choir room that I most wanted to revisit on Saturday, June 17, 2017.

But as importantly, I wished to revisit the rooms with some of my old former classmates who I hoped might be attending the school's 75th anniversary celebration.

Unfortunately, only one seemed to have shown up. And he had already done his own tour of the school.

While Tracey and I wandered about the hallways of what was the old high school building, I became increasingly disoriented and disappointed and despondent. Much of the interior of my old high school no longer seemed to be what I remembered it to have been.

The marble hallway floors and the staircases were exactly the same. Several of the classrooms seemed to have the same polished wooden floors. But that was about it. At the end of the hallways, some of my old classrooms had been ripped out and in their place were what now appeared to be lounge chairs and tables for kids to sit and lounge with their laptop computers.

And the old library on the top floor seemed to have vanished. And the old cafeteria in the basement was no longer there. And all the old lockers had been replaced by new lockers. And where we all once upon a time had enjoyed our school's dances was now a huge performance theater.

My one last hope was the choir room remained the same.

Much to my amazement it was exactly as I remembered it. Whereas the chairs were stacked up along the walls, the ascending terraces for the 110 choir members were exactly as I recalled them.

I placed a chair upon the top terrace, sat upon it in the same spot I had sat and stood with my choir members when we sang and rehearsed songs together, and I damn near dropped dead had it not been for Tracey snapping photos of me.

A young man, accompanied by several others who seemed to be much younger than me, entered the room, and he said to them, "This is where I think they said the band room is."

I stood and said, "Wrong. This was and is the choir room."

A woman replied, "You mean the choral room. High schools don't have choirs. They have choruses."

Tracey and I felt we needed a stiff drink.

We had been told Williams Pub, located miles from the high school, had a room reserved for those who wished to extend the school's anniversary celebration into the evening.

As we sat at a table in the noisy pub, I lamented how almost everyone seemed to be way much too much younger than me and how I could not seem to spot a familiar face.

But huddled at a nearby table, there indeed seemed to be several elderly folks enjoying a spirited conversation.

Tracey said she wanted to step outside for a cigarette and while she was away from our table I chose to introduce myself to the old folks sitting at their table, and asked if I may join them.

After their cordial round of introductions, unheard by me in the noisy bar, I sensed they were younger than me. Oh well.

What I also sensed was the gentleman sitting across the table from me, his name tag illegible, enjoyed conversing about his high school memories and how he enjoyed sharing memories of our

former teachers. The only problem was the bar room was so damn noisy I could hardly hear *myself* speak.

But I could hear a voice speaking within me, saying to me, "This man is indeed a rare individual, perhaps a true mensch; a man with integrity and honor, an authentic human being among human beings. Someone I must somehow know."

Tracey returned and sat beside me. We agreed it was time to go before it became too dark to drive safely home in the rain.

I asked the gentleman to jot down his name for me in hopes we might again communicate. And I passed him a slip of paper with my name and phone number and email address.

Days later I received an email from him in which he expressed how he enjoyed our conversation at Williams Pub.

During our conversation at the pub, the woman sitting to my left at the table mentioned how she had been a member of the Southwest High School Choir under the direction of my former teacher Mr. O.B. Dahle.

And upon her mentioning that, the gentleman across the table burst into singing "Great Somebody."

I asked him how he knew that song.

He said that during the month of December in 1958 it was played on all the radio stations and made the Southwest High School Choir nationally famous.

She then said that although she was not in the choir in 1958 she later became a member and was responsible for the care and maintenance of the choir robes.

And then that led to her telling me she also enjoyed singing in the Plymouth Congregational Church Choir under the direction of Arthur Jennings.

I could not resist telling her I was a member of Plymouth Congregational Church when my father had sung in the same church choir under Arthur Jennings; up until he then later sang in a church choir for a Congregational church located in Edina.

At that point, the man sitting next to her asked, “Colonial Congregational Church?”

“Yes,” I said. “Dr. Arthur Rouner’s church. The church in which he married my two sisters.”

And then off we then went conversing about Dr. Rouner.

And then we all talked about the mysterious nature of coincidences, especially when it comes to contemplating how our lives and the lives of others can sometime mysteriously intersect in ways that seem to exhibit what might be called “good karma.”

After arriving home that night, while on the phone with my brother Larry, I told him how I chose to go to our old high school’s 75th celebration.

Larry hesitates to attend class reunions for reasons I need not express here. But nevertheless, I described to Larry how I enjoyed conversing with an old gentleman at Williams Pub.

And now tonight, I’m recalling how that was only just two weeks ago.

And during the past week, my email box has been jammed full of continual exchanges between Larry and the old gentleman and some of the man’s friends.

That’s why I’m choosing to write this.

I must say I have always admired people who bring people together in ways that mutually improve their well-being.

I try to emulate them; try my best to be like them.

Perhaps that all started when I met Jerry Bender in fourth grade and then continued on with him at Southwest High School.

Jerry often had a way of bringing people together in ways that benefitted them and others.

Perhaps it’s why he was elected student council president and why later in his life he enjoyed being a mediator to resolve problems between governmental leaders in Africa.

And so it was on June 17th, while conversing with the kind gentleman and his friends, I felt I must follow my hunch that he was a man to emulate, a man I must introduce to my brother, whose fundamental instinct is to also bring people together in ways that benefit them.

And now, within just only two weeks, the man and my brother Larry have discovered how they coincidentally share mutual interests through their previous friendships that they continue to cherish. Perhaps all because Tracey and I had chosen to attend that 75th anniversary celebration of the high school Larry and I were blessed to attend when we were teenagers.

Tonight, I'm hunkered down before my PC, listening to my teenage neighbors' fireworks blasting from their back yards as they celebrate this Fourth of July. And I'm wondering now if American History and Civics are still required courses where they attend high school. And do they get to sing classical spiritual music in their high school chorus?



