

Yes, you can go home again

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When you haven't seen someone for 40 years, you realize that your last memory of him, when he was 18, is what you're stuck with. You don't account for the fact that he may have grown up, had a career, a family, made a success of himself or a mess of himself, or both.

Then, when you think about it, you realize that others have done the same to you.

I had seen just a couple of my classmates from Blake School in Hopkins since graduation day in June 1972, but hadn't been to any class reunions. This year's, though -- our 40th -- seemed like the right time to reconnect.

Some of the former students from a few years ahead of me are famous. One, Mark Dayton, is governor of Minnesota. Another, Al Franken, was a comedian and is now a U.S. senator. I got to perform in some of the wacky sketches done by Franken and his cowriter, the recently departed Tom Davis, during my early high school years. But mostly the people from those years have remained as frozen in the recesses of my memory as those outdoor hockey rinks where we used to practice.

This fall, when I approached the grounds outside the Woodhill Country Club barn (the site of countless parties back in the day, none of which I attended) I tried to pick out who might look vaguely familiar. The first was Chip. Once I saw him up close, I did my computer-graphic flashback in my head and re-created what he looked like in high school. Then I remembered that I threw a touchdown pass to him in JV football. I saw Scott, who had always struck me funny. His first question to me was: "When did you have your growth spurt?"

When Dan walked up, I remembered that he took great delight in beating the crap out of me in freshman football. Tackling, blocking drills, you name it -- he crushed me. I think I can take him now, but I really don't want to.

Jim came over to say hello. My last memory of him was him running in a plastic suit in the shower room, with all of the hot water nozzles going, trying to get down to his weight for a wrestling meet that day. Another Jim was in a wheelchair. He had lost his legs in an accident.

Everyone's hair is shorter now. Some don't have any at all. Many used to wear it to their shoulders. There was even a contest that night for who had the most hair.

I won the prize for being married the longest -- 35 years.

Inside the barn, a band started playing. It was the same classmates who had a band in high school. They are even better now.

What I liked about this gathering was that there was no pretense. No one tried to impress anyone else. Some had retired; some were battling alcoholism; many had lost parents, spouses, jobs. One had sold his big house on a lake and moved to a smaller place so his adult son with Down syndrome could ride his bike to work. All were mellow. We were happy to see one another.

We talked about teachers: about Chief, who threw chalk erasers at us when we answered his questions badly. I exasperated him so much one day that he threw a brass ashtray at me. He used to pitch batting practice for the Minnesota Twins.

We talked about teachers who drank, about the one who struck us on the backs of our skulls with sizable rings for speaking German badly (that was the sole reason I studied French), and about the one who made a student wear mittens in class so he wouldn't pick his nose. We talked about the personal interest the teachers took in us. One took too much interest and is in jail on



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Jennifer Simonson, Star Tribune

charges of pedophilia.

We talked about what a remarkable place that school was, and probably still is. We talked about the parallels between that school and the one in "Dead Poets Society." But now there are girls, and the boys don't have to wear ties.

Earlier in the day, I had stopped by the house of one of my old high school teachers. He was happy to see me, and I was happy to see him. He had come to the school after completing degrees at Harvard and Columbia universities. As a 58-year-old, I was much more impressed with him than I had been as a teenager. He was the person who taught me how to smoke a cigar. I was probably 16 at the time. Every spring break he traveled with our glee club for a tour of neighboring states. He was also the organist in our uninspired chapel services. I heard several classmates ask about him by name, as in, "I wonder if he's still around." I assured them that he was, living in the same house, cutting his grass, shoveling his snow. He no longer smokes cigars.

The next day, I went to see the Twins play an afternoon game, toward the end of the season. I'm from the Harmon Killebrew era, and love remembering snowplows clearing the warning track for opening day at the old Metropolitan Stadium. But I had to admit, Target Field is a spectacular place to watch a game.

On Sunday morning, there was a reunion hockey game. This was one of the selling points for my traveling from my home in San Diego to this gathering in Minneapolis. Blake had one of the first indoor hockey arenas for a high school, and we loved it so much that we would skip classes, sneak in and play pickup games during the day, using a sponge puck so no one would get hurt. Then we'd go to our later classes full of sweat and joy. When I saw that the sponge-puck game was going to be part of the weekend, I RSVP'd and packed my skates.

It still smelled like tape and blood and old jerseys and socks and skates that needed fresh air. I remembered winning some games there, of arguing with referees, of injuries, of barfing over the sideboards during practice, of believing I'd some day make it to the North Stars, but mostly I remembered the joy. The sheer, unadulterated joy.

When the Zamboni finished laying down its new sheet of ice for us, we all piled onto the rink. No one thought to stretch. We were kids again. Skating around the perimeter with John, who has not seen me in 40 years, I saw how he had frozen me in time. When we passed the penalty box, he said, "Do you want to just go in there now, since that's where you spent most of your time in high school?"

It did remind me of my authority issues back then. After getting sent off the ice for what was no doubt a trumped-up infraction during a game, I remember having my time extended in the box for my suggesting that the referee might want to consider losing some weight. Or something to that effect. My dad had been watching in the stands. He came over behind the penalty box and told me I would help the team more if I cooled down a little. I forget what I told him, but he quickly returned to the stands and didn't come to many games after that. I hadn't thought of that incident in more than 40 years.

The game was as fun as I remembered it. We dropped the gloves a few times, grabbed at an occasional hamstring pull, tried the old moves. Jim, the guy who had lost his legs, was one of the best players in high school. He still is, and plays at ice level on a sled. He plays all over the world. After a couple of hours, one of the guys, bent over from exhaustion, begged the Zamboni driver to come back and make us leave the rink.

After the game, I sat at the Edina Country Club with Brad and Richard, two of the only guys I've stayed in touch with, and watched the Vikings on TV. Fall was in full swing, and the trees were exploding with color.

That afternoon, I headed to the airport with this dominant thought: While I had to adjust my thinking and memory of my classmates of 40 years ago, and they had to adjust their memory of me, I didn't have to do any adjusting to my memory of Minneapolis. It hadn't grown old or lost its magic. I felt like it was telling me, "You still belong here. We remember. Welcome home."

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