

Reunion Update



W. Michael Park

wednesday -copley square hotel

I booked here a while back as i had wanted to stay at the Copley. It was the wrong Copley as I had wanted the Fairmont. The room we originally got was dark and narrow -large I'm sure for 1891 but not the space I had become used to in the Marriotts and Intercontinentals. A quick visit to the front desk repaired this and we were re-situated in a more spacious room on the corner of the building. We lunch at the closest Korean restaurant recommended by Google. Basically, I just do what my iPhone tells me to do. Evening was topped off with a very nice Thai dinner with Jennifer's college friend Sten and her husband George who was down seeing their oldest off to a post-grad Europe trip. Wish I was going.

thursday -cocktail party

We had the whole day, and we went to the ICA -Institute for Contemporary design, which was on the waterfront. There was a Sheppard Fairey exhibit that was phenomenal. He did the viral Obama Hope poster, which was inspiring during the past

campaign. Seen in the context of his body of work, particularly the Obey Giant series, it gives one pause to blindly fork over one's loyalty. Not that I was a lemming, I only contributed when Michelle Obama emailed -I really didn't like David Plouffe's or even Barack Obama's missives -found them yammering and boring, respectively. We went back to the hotel to re-energize, dressed up and went to Harvard via the T. It was a very nice ride and brought back memories. I wish we had public transportation in Des Moines



as extensive. We walked through the yard to check out the remnants of graduation. I hoisted up Graham so that he could rub John Harvard's shoe for good luck. We then dropped him off at the Montessori school which was commissioned for child care during the reunion. Several spunky teens were present to entertain G, although with his Nintendo DS, I suspect we could have safely left him at the hotel which is what our parents would have done.

The cocktails were held at the Weld Boat House which is the station for the Radcliffe crew team. The upstairs had a meeting room and balcony which served as a picturesque collegiate setting for the mixer. A live jazz trio played. The open bar was manned by undergrads who were fairly new to mixology -I had to talk the young stripling through the mixing of a proper Manhattan as if I were guiding him through surgery over the phone.

We met several very nice people with whom I spent four years, but have utterly no memory of. One was a researcher at Children's Hospital working

in stem cell research of kidney disease -the words, "Cellular tissue regeneration" in his Bavarian accent echoed a bit of Frankenstein. His wife, Natasha, was charming and they made a gracious pair. The connection I had with this proto-Nobelist was his friend who lived with my friends in Pennypacker. He was a six foot five, bearded German giant who concentrated (Harvard speak for major) in philosophy with a penchant for equally large Teutonic maidens who cut their toenails in their underwear in the common room (snap, snap). I recall this being the complete opposite of erotic.

I also met an unpublished novelist (aren't we all?), a pediatrician, and a couple of financiers who inhabited London -one of which had gone native and, so I was told, spoke with a plummy accent when among his Angles and Saxons. I also ran into the guys who had lived across the hall, both unchanged and well preserved. Both were very

happy and were living in Europe, each married to charming women I reassured my wife while recalibrating her gaydar.

The food was palatable for Harvard food, and the clam chowder was authentic. Talk revolved around classmates who weren't coming -John Yoo, purported war criminal, fall guy, and scapegoat for America, and others who were published and appalling. My suitemates who did show up included Matt, a former Microsoftie who had written Access (the database program that no one knows how to use but is glad to have on their desktop) and Rushika, a class marshall who would be hosting a fundraiser for Paul Thissen, another classmate who was running for governor of Minnesota (his logo looked suspiciously like someone else who keeps emailing me for money despite having won *his* election). I figure I'll contribute because if I get a speeding ticket on the way to the Mall of America, I'll know who to call.

The evening passed gracefully, and we went to pick up G who was at this point strung out on s'mores, apple juice, and gummi bears. Sleep came nicely in our comfortable little overpriced room.

friday meeting dave and jon

We made arrangements to meet Dave and Jon the next day in Harvard Square in front of the Au Bon Pain. Going there, it seemed that nothing had changed in two decades -the same religious fanatics and skate punks were there as if they were employed by Cambridge to loiter around the T station. The Out of Town News which became obsolete as a purveyor of shocking pornography and Finnish cooking magazines when the internet arrived, was still there, a final stalwart standing last in a list of institutions too quirky and not incorporated enough to survive the neon glare of the new Harvard Square. The porn just failed to shock in the era of two girls with one cup, and the gourmet Finn died last year.



The wrought iron tables in front of the Au Bon Pain still seated the Chess Master, who would play you for a few bucks, to be returned if you won, lessons for 5 bucks. He is a former Physics grad student who walked away from the lecture halls to sit down in the square and challenge tourists, undergrads, and children to aggressive speed chess. No quarter is ever given, even to the most charming of tykes. He did much better than the other former Harvard physics grad student, Ted Kaczinsky, known by his comic book alias, the Unabomber.

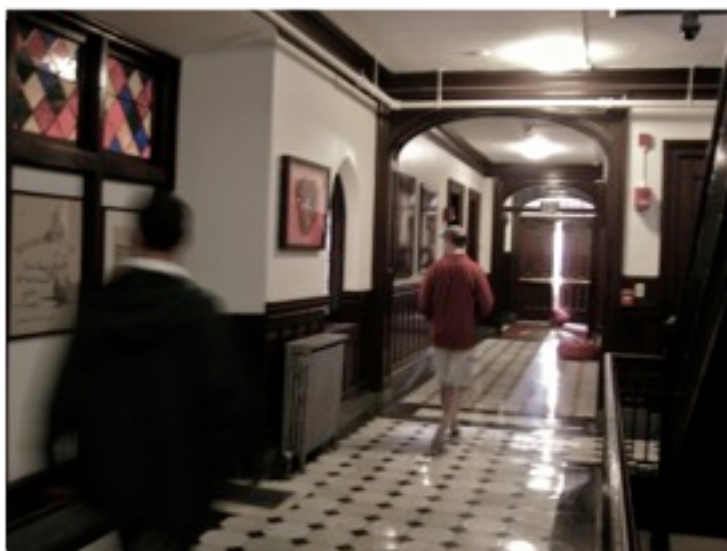
Dave and Jon arrived on time having

driven up from New York. They both are solid, serious men with families and careers, so it seems, but I also know better. We try to get into Bartley's for lunch, but the line is long, so we duck into Yenching, a small Chinese place that has the honor of being the oldest Chinese establishment in Harvard Square, being founded by one of the chefs to the last emperor of China. We start gossiping which is basically what reunions are about, aside from the bragging, drinking, flirting, and lying.



Dave, who went to high school with our infamous classmate, John Yoo, recently spoke to him to give him his support in his most recent endeavors which included a writing gig with the Philadelphia Enquirer, avoiding trips to Spain where they have a warrant out for him, and avoiding Berkeley where he's the only conservative voice in a place where free market socialists are considered right wing fascists. We all agree that he's blown his chances at a Supreme Court nomination, but feel all the negative attention is basically exactly where John wants to be. We all voice support of the freedom of speech, here here, harumph, harumph, pass the Szechuan shrimp?

Sated from the shrimp, we go on a nostalgia tour of the lecture halls and residence dorms. In Adams House, we sneak in to check out Jon's old dorm. There, a parent moving out his just graduated son, asked if we were moving in! That kind of made my day. Jen and G soon tired of this retrogradation, protested, and abandoned us for ice cream. Our trek went as far as Quincy House where we met the current House



Master in the elevator, who caught us breaking in. She gave us leave to wander a bit, but made sure we left with just ourselves. I collected Jen and G in the Square, and we went back to our hotel and take a rest.

friday night alternative venue

All of us were planning to meet outside of the sanctioned Harvard event for a night out among the core group of friends. Justin volunteered his home for cocktails. It was amazing to read Justin's email -I hadn't been in touch with him in many years, and hadn't seen him in over ten. It's unimaginable in this day when I broadcast my thoughts and whereabouts to hundreds of people through Facebook, Twitter, and my blog, but ironically, seeing my brother Justin has been such a hard thing to do because we all get buried in the processes that govern and bury our non-reunion lives.

Change can be measured by the calendar year, by waist size, and by material possessions. The coolest barometers are the children who, by varying measures, are



simultaneously offshoots, parental works in progress, and self-authored. We all agreed that we were much better now than we we were twenty years prior. Waist size, hairline, vision prescription, and white hair, these are the receipts for our mortality. From left to right in the picture above are me, Jon, Justin, Mark, David, and Ben. Mike and Sandy join us later with their brood and we had a great time. This was the core moment of the reunion for me in the happy home of Justin and Stacy. We should have done it ten years ago, but of course, we didn't have the means or the time. Now, it's mostly time we lack.

We take off for Redbones, a rib joint in Davis Square. It was a place that most of us discovered after college, in that time when adulthood was engaged, deferred, or denied, through underpaid jobs, graduate school, or taking time off in varying combinations. They smoke their ribs and offer more or less authentic Southern tidbits like cornmeal battered fried catfish and hushpuppies. I yelled out, "Let's go Yankees" while baseball highlights were on, and I could hear the only non-yuppie Somervillain mutter behind me,



"you got a death wish?" only it sounded like "you godda debt wish?" I savored the threat like a shot of rare whiskey. I don't remember much else other than being happily boozed up among my brothers, just happy to be there.

We somehow make it to Kirkland House for the Masala Night mixer. The open bar, the tinkling jazz, and the yammering crowds. I lose my brothers, and I feel really lost. The faces, some recognizable but distorted, stretched, and inflated, didn't please me and frankly scared me. Conversations were mostly recitations of resumés -most of the noise could be dampened if we just wore wooden planks on our chest adorned with the crests of graduate schools attended, Google map views of where we lived, photos of spouses, children, dogs, corporate logos, and pictures of ourselves at our favorite activities. For example, here would be a family portrait from that plank.



I never understood networking -an arcane skill that comes to me with great difficulty because I have a very poor memory for names and faces. Food I remember fondly and well, but random people, not so much. If that name came with a disease -yes, it sticks, but how many people with whothellareyou-itis can I stuff in to the craw of my over booked mind? "So this is why I never went to business school," I thought. Like on the first night, I end up chatting with a pediatrician -our class is rife with little-human doctors for some reason, and I feel happy

in their company because only they know what a vascular surgeon is -everyone else assumes I'm a cardiologist or a heart surgeon, and I stop correcting them. Midnight approaches, and I miss my family.

I stumble out of Kirkland house after having a twenty minute conversation with someone who knew my name, remembered where I lived during college, and even remembered that I grew up in Florida. I was too appalled by my dementia to ask her for her name. I suspected that she knew that I had forgotten her, whomever she was, and to punish me, began to cruelly play me like a fish on a line, exhausting me with clues but no answer to the riddle, "who am I?" "I'm so sorry," I wanted to say, "please stop... You're not in my iPhone..."

Despite being June, it was yet cool in Cambridge, and the bracing air, the exhalations of Puritan ghosts, slapped me awake as I walked up JFK to Harvard Square. A line of taxis waited for me, but I meandered into the T station. Red line to Park Street, change to the Green line to Copley. Hunched over, memories did come back of long past trips over the Charles River. Back at the hotel, my family slept, and so did I. I felt the beginnings of a bad cold, and I looked forward to going home.

saturday barbecue

We made it out of the hotel with great difficulty as we were all feeling a bit low from a cold. We heard reports that Massachusetts was having a spike in H1N1 influenza activity -but aside from the cough and nasal mucus production, we had no fevers. We decided to go to the midday activity by T -I wanted my son to see the Boston skyline as the T crossed over the Charles between the MGH and Kendall Square stops. He wasn't too impressed, having seen recently New York and Chicago, but Boston's clusters of skyscrapers soaring above low rise apartments along Back Bay, all of this reflected in the waters of the Charles, signaled to me during my time in Boston, romance, sophistication, and the future.



The barbecue was a chaotic mess. Signing in was easy enough, but I'm pretty sure if you showed up off the Square with the appropriate middle class attire, you could eat your hot dog, chat a bit, and take in a few

beers, without any particular notice. The child care area was in the Phillips Brooks area, but with no signing in or out, it was a free for all. Again, any one with a 5-10 year old needing about 4 hours of free time could have come down to the Yard and deposited their child and probably find them a few hours later. If you were looking to add to your child bride collection, you could wander in and shop. The impossibly young coeds with braces assured us that the kids were being well looked after, but it was apparent this was just the official party line.

While Jennifer was off providing childcare to G, I sat chewing on some more ribs washed down with beer, continuing the conversations that started twenty years ago,

rejoined last night at Redbones. Justin had the same look that I had -of indigestion, a liver being turned to foie gras, and a slight fever. He wisely left. Under such conditions, there is no time to really reconnect. I found that I'm already connected to the people I had always been connected to, and while it was very nice to see someone from your Ec 10 section who made it all the way to vice president in a corporation run by an army of vice presidents, it wasn't much fun. We were all Facebooking in person at tremendous time and expense when we could have all stayed at home, in our slippers and underwear, typing and chewing on beef jerky.



Status update: Great to be at reunion.

Status update: Check out Evan's book? Link() I think it's autobiographical.

Status update: Photos of Vacation in Macchu Picchu.

Status update: FB App: Three degrees of separation from Joel Goetz!

Status update: I finally made partner, but it's no big deal.

Status update: Just got laid off but now have time to finally write that book.

Status update: Guess who came out?

Status update: Are you where wanted to be twenty years ago?

There is a bittersweet, Hotel California atmosphere to the convened group. The congestion in my sinuses renders me not only half deaf, but after a few conversations, mostly mute. I just wanted to close my eyes and complete the Helen Keller (Radcliffe, 1904) act. An ex-girlfriend of my friend who was seated to my right sat down to my left. She pecked me on the cheek and asked me how I was -I never got an iota of this much love from her during college -mostly exasperation at the existence of people my friend might be interested other than her. She chatters away, but is mostly speaking through me at my buddy, and I try not to eavesdrop. I can hear my breathing better than her relentless update from 1989 to 2009, which is a relief. I chew on a bite of now cold





overcooked chicken to hear the slosh of mastication and the back and forth of the mucus walled up in my face. I wanted a triple Bourbon, neat with a splash of spring water, not this flat beer slowly warming in the sun. The ME REPORT continued, and I smiled and nodded in cadence as I glance at the classmate at the other table who is a reporter on CNN. She's stunning and used to date a roommate who now admits she was so out of his league, it was basically miraculous. I think we're near 1998 when my buddy stands up and declares he has to drive back to New York to take his sons to baseball. I stand up, give him a hug, back off, and give the couple that never was some breathing room to acknowledge each other's existence.

I, for one, could reassure Jennifer that none of my ex-girlfriends were there, with child on their lap expecting some apology. In some weird woman-empathic way, she'll ask, "what was wrong with her that you didn't marry her?"

I'd reply, "Uhhhhh...so I could marry you?" She'd then say, "You probably devastated her by dating her for so long." Blinking, I'd say, "I think she's long forgotten about it. I can assure you I have."

I discover I can walk, and I meander through the people reciting and confessing, some quite pleased they haven't been caught yet, some looking like nervous freshmen about to pee their pants. We haven't changed all that much. I finally find Jennifer rapt in conversation with another freshman year roommate of mine -he's a Boston native who hated Boston and only tolerates Seattle but loves his children. I listen, and I see that he is a man who has grown adding complex layers to the brilliant Boston public school kid at the core. I think Jennifer wants to marry him.

We get up and do a little more wandering. I run into friends so close but terribly neglected that I feel at this point it would be a bit of an insult to try to catch up in a few minutes at this tawdry affair. I say hi, make sure their contact is up to date on my iPhone, and move on, neglecting them some more. I'll email later. We run into Sung Yun who I think figured me out from the moment she met me during the Early Action Acceptance Weekend -a weekend visit during the spring of senior year in high school for the overly bookish, stressed out, erstwhile creme de la creme of American youth, winners of the golden Wonka ticket of early acceptance to Harvard.

"You were overdressed, a bit self-absorbed, but completely confident -I don't know why... but you gave off that impression. And you haven't changed a bit."

I smiled, patted her child, and mumbled something. The beer, the sun, and swine flu were getting to me. I grabbed my family and we fled.

epilogue

Iowa is my home, and G, Jen, and I feel very comfortable tending to our apocalypse garden, completely out of the bicoastal loop. Happiness is in front of me on a buffet line out here. You pile up what you like, and you can come back for seconds. Bury me here one day.

