

1956 AND ALL THAT: A 25TH REUNION ORATION by Alex R. Seith

Recently, our Class Orator, Alex Seith, who is a member of the Chicago law firm of Lord, Bissell, and Brook, and who is active in Illinois politics, was asked to update the oration; as he will not be delivering it out loud, the reader must supply the rhetorical flourishes, the trumpet calls, and the fire and brimstone, which Alex twenty-five years ago provided so stirringly:

1956. Last year's leading ground gainer of the NFL was not yet born. Neither was the Most Valuable Player in the 1980 NBA championship. Nor was most of America's might-have-been Olympic team that did not go to the 1980 Moscow Games.

In 1956, the Beatles had yet to rise to musical fame and later disband. In 1956, a non-Yale contemporary, Elvis Presley, was only beginning a meteoric ascent that later plummeted to death.

Among the changes, much remains the same. In October 1956 an invading Soviet Army re-imposed a Communist government on a resistant Hungary just as, 23 years later, an invading Soviet Army re-inflicted a Communist regime on an unwilling Afghanistan.

In the year of our graduation, a U.S. inspired Security Council resolution prompted Israel's forced withdrawal from the Sinai just as a later U.S. inspired peace treaty has led to Israel's negotiated withdrawal from the same Sinai.

In 1956, and again a quarter century later, American armies joined allies in guarding the borders of a Germany divided between East and West and a Korea divided between North and South.

In 1956, a Presidential candidate could have his good judgment, if not his loyalty put in question for advocating a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Soviets. In 1980 Presidential candidates had their "toughness," if not their good judgment, put in doubt for endorsing a Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty with Moscow.

In our separate ways, large and small, noticed or unheralded, each of us has done something to make America what it was and what it has become since 1956. But would our doings have been any different if we had been, instead of alumni of Yale, the 1956 graduates of You-Name-It University?

A unanimous "yes" would be preposterous—and presumptuous. Preposterous because each of us experienced, and remembers, a different Yale. Some experienced primarily its satisfactions, others chiefly its frustrations. Some remember mostly the good, others mostly the bad.

A single "yes" would be presumptuous because giving Yale credit for all we have done would indulge the conceit that Yale taught us all we know. The talents each of us brought to Yale also would have been fostered at different colleges, though in different ways.

One conceit that Yale indulged, if not fostered, was that our four years in the 1950's were "a preparation for life." I do not know how many of us believed that then. But could anyone believe it now?

As a single-sex monastery of sorts, the Yale of the 1950's was certainly no preparation for what to do in marriage or what to do without it; no precursor of the demands of raising children in the 60's, the 70's and the 80's; and a scant forerunner of the daily duties of keeping ahead of the cost of living while not falling behind our rising, or declining, expectations.

Yale prepared us, or at least tried to prepare us, not for all of life, but for a part of life; mostly the life of the mind.

Even in that preparation, Yale was not unique. With other colleges, it shared a commitment to the value of learning. Like others, Yale sought to teach us how to teach ourselves. Because, what we learned was deemed less important than how to learn.

After 25 years, memories of what we learned have faded. But if our understanding of how to learn has improved, that is more than passing consolation for thicker waists and thinner hair.

In more than doubling our age have we likewise multiplied our wisdom? No equation would help with an answer. But if a quarter century of sadness and joy, setbacks and successes are the way to wisdom, then we are wiser. And also more perceptive.

That peculiar time warp which makes 25 years in the past seem shorter than 25 years in the future, gives us more than the benefit of hindsight. It enhances our foresight. On graduation day 1956 the sonorous phrase "a quarter century from now" lacked the content it has for us today. We may be no more prescient in foreseeing our lives in 2006 than we were in anticipating where and what we would be in 1981. But having lived one quarter century since graduation, we have a deeper sense of what it may be to live another.

This sense we got from having lived. The question is, did we get it any better because of having lived these 25 years as graduates of Yale?

There is the chauvinistic answer sometimes heard at alumni gatherings. It says that Yale is better because it is Yale. Pick your metaphor and, it is said, a Yale degree can do it for you: Open doors, smooth paths and grease skids. A Yale degree is supposed to confirm status for those who had it and confer status on those who did not.

Those are not empty boasts. Our Yale degrees have, to switch the image, helped us all in varying degrees. Helped us do better, if not be better; helped us look good and perhaps see well.

Yale told us to look higher and wider; to see opportunities where others would see obstacles. When Yale preached the elitism of leadership, there was justifi-

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cation for its pride. Yale's "tradition of excellence" is not just a course catalog puff piece. It is an achievement of early origin and constant renewal.

Yale told us to choose our own destinies, but ever strive for our best. If any among us has achieved the unflawed satisfaction of always doing what he wanted and

never failing to do his best, my congratulations.

But for those of us who have felt the frustrations of thwarted ambitions and the disappointment of unreached goals, Yale has been a frequent reminder, a reminder that excellence, however elusive, must always be sought if it is ever to be achieved.