

I just got back two weeks ago from my fiftieth high school reunion --which makes me feel incredibly old--and yet, strangely, very new and starting out afresh. I'm still working out what that means—I think I'll be unpacking everything that happened to me there for a long time to come. But in the meantime, the way these things do when something big happens in your life, I find that almost everything I see and hear “grabs” me and resonates with what I experienced there. For example, Richard's preaching last week on “The City of God” as described in the Book of Revelation. Almost everything in his sermon resonated deeply with me—beginning with the quirky fact that we actually referred to our school, C.E. Byrd High (at that time the biggest high school in the state of Louisiana) as “the City of Byrd”. It's still called that. The Principal is the Mayor, and so on. Until I went back to Shreveport, the idea that the “City of Byrd”, with its obsession with school spirit and Triple A sports, might bear any resemblance to the City of God, would have seemed outrageous. Now, I'm not so sure.

From the moment I got there and felt the soft, warm air on my skin, I could sense myself opening to something new and unpredictable. I began to take in on some level that I was going to be part of something much bigger than I am; something I had held lightly and taken for granted. Not only the incredible variety of people who showed up, from every walk of life from the top to the bottom of the economic ladder, but something deeper; something that held us together in spite of all the things I'd loved about my upbringing but had come to feel ashamed of: the moral blindness of the segregated world I'd grown up in, the general backwardness of the South. or so I'd thought.

On the second morning of the retreat, about a hundred of us (more than two hundred had showed up for the reunion itself, out of the nearly 700 who had graduated) gathered *together* for a memorial service for

classmates who had died (there was a shocking number of them), and the president of our class gave a thoughtful talk on where we'd started out, and how far we had come. As he put it, when we graduated in the class of 1960, full of optimism and ambition, imagining clear sailing, we could have no way of knowing that what lay ahead of us was the decade of the Sixties! with the Vietnam War, the assassination of JFK and Martin Luther King, the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, and on and on. We were silent and respectful, remembering the people we had been all those years ago.

Then we walked across the street from the church where we'd had the service to the high school itself. With the exception of a couple of new adjuncts at the rear, the building itself was almost uncannily untouched: a great big, handsome red brick building with flags flying. It was a high school from Central Casting. I had passed it a thousand times since the day I'd graduated, but I'd never been back inside. From the minute I walked up the steps and walked through the big doors at the side into the vast corridors beyond, *everything was exactly the same*. The same classrooms—they've even kept the old blackboards in some of them, just as historical objects, alongside the computer screens; the same office where we waited in line to get our classes changed; the same framed pictures of the Presidents of the Student body--only I'm glad to say that now quite a few of them are black. I wandered the halls as if in a trance, having known them over the years as the blueprint of a recurring dream: the same four floors of identical corridors, the same stairwells leading infinitely up and down. Through it all, I was aware of something vague but immense that was gathered around me. And it had to do not only with the pull of memory, but with some indefinable other, something I was beginning to recognize as important and good.

Mircea Eliade, the famous historian of religion, wrote this about what I believe I was experiencing. He calls it *sacred time*:

“...sacred time is unbroken. You return to events and places only to find that you are taking up where you left off. The in-between time has been folded together. Not only does one say, *I've been here before*, but one realizes that something has been kept in trust for one. There is a hidden continuity at work.”

This quote had come up on my computer sometime during the first few days after I got back--and once again, it seemed meant for me. I thought about the fantastic passage from Book of Revelation, and the one we read today. Just as our own dreams are made up of real and familiar images, but out of place, juxtaposed differently, so after experiencing this great religious vision, we are left with a sense of, *What was that?* Is it a description of Heaven, as many believe; and if so, what are we to do with it? Is it just a beautiful and somewhat alarming dream, this holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, with its crystal river and its leaves that are for the healing of nations, or is there something in it that is meant to be of use to us; to guide us in our daily, tangible lives?

The image of the City of Byrd kept coming back to me. Could this foursquare brick building, this hive of activity, of adolescent joys and miseries—be part of that greater city; connected in some way?

Charles Williams, the Anglican novelist and a poet, believed in what he calls “the City”, a concept that underlies all other understandings of reality and permeates his complex plots. For Williams, “the City” means—I don’t know how to say it: an interpenetration of heaven and earth, of the realm of God (Williams prefers to call it the Omnipotence, or, the Mercy, and refers to human life as being “under the Omnipotence”, or “under the Mercy”) interpenetrating the realm of Man. It is a space—an actual space, like this one--and a time—the future, the past, this moment in which they meet—where it is possible to be our best; a place and time, both specific—such as here, this morning--and

infinite, where, as one of his admirers put it, “to serve God is not duty but bliss.”

Now, I have to say that the characters in his books are often very strange, and do strange things. But however outlandish the happenings in the novels may be, they are there to demonstrate a simple but indispensable fact: the goodness and trustworthiness of the ordinary. For Williams--as, we know, for Jesus, (in whom he bases all his life and beliefs), all human life is laden with significance; all of it has value and beauty. It is in the juxtaposition of these ordinary lives and events—how they play out with each other, “under the Omnipotence”—that the connections between “the City of God” and the City of man keep making themselves visible to me.

Many of us were here on Friday for the funeral of Connie Rider, who was, I think those who knew her can agree, a most *particular* person. There was no one else quite like her--or like any of the other men and women and children who have passed through this place. Charles Williams would say, about Connie or about people you and I have loved who are no longer visibly with us—that they, and the realm in which they exist, is not so far away. In fact, not far away at all. That’s what we mean by “the communion of saints”. We live and move in the presence of those who have gone before us and of those who are still to come, because we are all made one in God; we live in the City together. [This space and this particular moment in it, is both unrepeatably and yet stretched and connected and at one with all space and time, and we are free to make of it what we will, for good or ill.]

When I was in Shreveport, on the second day of our reunion, a big group of women who feared we otherwise wouldn't have a chance to talk, went out to lunch together. And during that crowded but fun and relaxed time, I found myself laughing and talking with a woman—a girl—I hadn't really known well, back in the day, but had always admired. I was asking her,

“Why is it that I don't laugh the way I used to? When did I get to be so serious? When I was a teenager—or even through college—I used to laugh and giggle with my girlfriends until my *stomach hurt*, all the time—and about absolutely nothing! What happened to that 19 year old girl?”

My friend answered, simply, “Life happened.” Not anything wrong or disappointing—in fact, rich and rewarding. But simply the world that, in growing up, opened us up to responsibility and risk. The responsibility of work and marriage and children. The risk of love. Later, in the plane on the plane flying back to San Francisco, I read in the little essay that each of our classmates had submitted, that one of her two sons had committed suicide.

Another new friend—a man whose essay spoke of gratitude for a “forgiving wife and wonderful children” in the course of a happy but irregular life, sent out an email to the whole class list, 24 hours before the reunion, saying that he was gay. It simply wouldn't work any more, keeping secrets and holding onto the wounds and failures of a lifetime. Maybe that was what made the time we spent together so strange and wonderful. We all lived in different places, we all had aspects of ourselves that we had always chosen to “present”, but somehow, it didn't seem to matter anymore. We were all of us both ordinary and extraordinary—but mostly, as it turned out, simply ready to experience things in a different light. “See,” the Lord God in John's great Revelation proclaims, “*I am making all things new.*”

Last night this space echoed and was filled with all manner of beautiful music, but at the same time, the concert and the experience of those who were listening to it, was an *interconnection* of the original creators of the music—Beethoven and Brahms and George Gershwin-- and those individual performers who, through their particular gifts, made the experience unique. At the end of months of planning and input from “all sorts and conditions” of women and men, we got dressed up and stood and ate and drank and laughed together and listened to that beautiful music, to raise money for *a new roof*—surely amongst among the most concrete and un-dreamlike things imaginable. And generations of people—in particular the children who will gather under that roof to absorb and learn—will learn that, indeed, just as the vision as the of Revelation claims, God does make his home amongst mortals.

My dear friends, I urge you to look around you and to give thanks for this community to which, under the Mercy, you have been invited by the Holy Spirit of God. It is a community with no entry requirements except the desire to be here--to be a part of something bigger than ourselves, to gather with other human creatures to strengthen our moral lives and deepen our faith, to obey that inner longing that draws us ever closer to to the heart of God. It is an invitation that is freely offered and freely given. Surely, our response can only be to go out from this place, into the world that is in such desperate need of just this same bread of community, and extend the invitation to behold and live into the City of God.

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